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We Are the Bobcats

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WE ARE THE BOBCATS

by

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B.A. May 2014, University of South Carolina

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

WE ARE THE BOBCATS

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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We are the Bobcats is a novella that follows a group of high school seniors as they undergo the loss of two of their peers. Its central themes include grief, guilt, loss, and the complications between the three in the aftermath of tragedy. The story also concerns ideas of group identity, individualism, and the disparity between external presentation and internal struggles.

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This thesis is dedicated to those who have supported me during my graduate study, including my friends, family, peers, and professors.

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CHAPTER I

PETER

The icy blue glow of screens illuminated our faces as we scrolled idly through social media, dreading the start of the new semester the next day. We should have just gone to sleep, but our bodies had long adjusted to the summer schedule of staying up into the early morning hours. Our backpacks sat scrunched and empty in corners of our rooms, yet to be packed. Tomorrow was Monday, the first day of our senior year. The thought was exciting and scary, and we flipped between our Twitter and Instagram and Reddit pages, distracting ourselves. A text message from Millie Ullman lit up our phones.

Did you see the post on Peter's Facebook?

We opened up Facebook and searched for Peter. Peter never had a lot of drama surrounding him, so we didn't often go to his social media pages as there was nothing to mine there. They were often just filled with pictures of fishing trips or his golden retriever.

RIP Peter. I'll miss you.

Benji had posted it nearly an hour ago. The texts poured in.

From Trey, *Is he dead?*

Millie asked, *What's going on?*

Hailey said, *It's got to be a joke.*

The texts shot back and forth, all questions and no answers. Finally, Trey texted, *I'm calling Benji.* Although Benji's post on Peter's Facebook wall had been startling, if Peter really had died, it made sense that Benji would know before the rest of us. His father had been a police

officer in Spring Hill for our entire lives, but usually he refused to tell Benji any details, citing respect for citizens' privacy.

We waited, our phones hot in our hands. In the meantime, we looked to social media for answers, and scrolled through our newsfeeds. Hailey had posted a string of selfies showing off a Sephora makeup haul. Some younger kids were posting end-of-summer eulogies, mourning the end of what they called "the best summer ever," although we all knew that their summers were made of the same pool parties and late night Taco Bell runs and minimum wage jobs that we had. Although we had to deal with the additional stress of the looming shadow of graduation and what our futures would look like when we left Spring Hill High School behind. There were cryptic posts of song lyrics, updates on the forthcoming Harvest Festival, and ads for colleges from all over. We scrolled past it all, hoping that the next post we saw might offer new information, but there was none to be found.

Finally, Trey texted us all. *Benji said it's true. Peter died. His dad told him just because they go to school together. That's all he knew.*

Peter was dead. Peter Bishop was dead. We had far more questions than answers, and continued texting each other through the night, getting no sleep before our first day of school the next day. Peter's profile had previously been filled with posts about fishing and stats about the Carolina Panthers and excitement over upcoming Spring Hill Bobcats football games, but overnight it had become a memorial of posts he would never read, more posts than he had ever gotten on any birthday. The messages were personal and emotional. We felt indecent reading them, as if a neighbor had forgotten to pull down their curtains at night and we could see inside. We posted our own and read every single one.

Before the accident, most of us didn't know Peter Bishop beyond a name. We had all gone to school together since the elementary years, when our biggest concerns were who to play with at recess and whose house to hang out at after school (the ones whose mothers fed us Bagel Bites and Cheerwine, urging us to eat more). Through the years, we developed many of the typical social circles, loosely formed, from athletes to overachievers to band kids. Although we could look at each other and identify groups, most of us felt like we simply floated, a part of the whole, at different times finding ourselves part of one group or another.

If any one of us were to die, would the others remember us in any significant way? We hoped so, and that made us want to remember Peter all the more. Before his passing, Peter had been little recognized, blending in among the rest of us, but death has a way of transforming a person and how other people view them.

Peter was quiet, overweight and pear-shaped. He had brown hair and brown eyes. He was just one more face filling the school hallways, a worn backpack slung over one shoulder, his gaze pointed downward at the cream-colored tile. But now he was dead, and where he had been unremarkable, he was now remarkable. Like a view through tinted sunglasses or a coat of new paint, death changed Peter and infused him with, of all things, new life. We saw him now in technicolor and he became suddenly a wellspring of possibility and potential, which increased everyone's devastation over his loss.

"He had so much going for him," our parents said to us, after we told them, spooning scrambled eggs onto our plates.

"He could have been a doctor or an entrepreneur," they said. "His mother told me he was thinking about law school."

"He could have changed the world." If only he had lived.

For our part, we wondered if he could have been a confidant, a best friend, a boyfriend of the highest order. We had let him slip from us, the one that got away. Only after his life was over did it become clear that he had been destined for greatness. Death transformed Peter into a hero and an idol.

The Monday after the accident, when his death was acknowledged in the morning announcements following reminders about the new school year (Model UN desperately needed new members and Mrs. Brown was retiring), we held a long moment of silence. After first period, we hovered in the hallways outside of classroom doors, our minds filled with memories of Peter.

“Remember when we were all at Katie’s sweet sixteen last year?” Georgia said.

“And we had to explain to Peter was a sweet sixteen was,” Tucker said, finishing the memory and almost, for a minute, smiling.

“He knew,” Katie said. “He was just teasing you guys.”

We found ourselves standing in front of Peter’s locker. It was plastered in peeling stickers, mostly of Browning deer and Bass Pro Shops. Trey picked at one of the stickers, a pink deer, out of place with the others. He ran his nail under the edge, and Millie batted his hand away.

“Leave them,” she said.

“I remember when he bought that one,” Hailey said to Trey. “You dared him to get the pink one.”

He nodded. “Peter was one for dares. Like when we dared him to eat poison ivy on that walk in the woods in Biology last year when we were studying photosynthesis.”

“He had the good sense not to go for that one,” Tucker said.

“He was smart,” Katie said.

When the first bell rang, we kept standing there, letting the other students filter around us. We only left after the second bell, guaranteeing our tardiness, but remembering Peter was worth it. Our world was darker for having lost him.

Real information about Peter had been difficult to come by. Trey Watkins, speculating for attention, made claims that grew more and more unlikely.

Holding court in the back row of Calculus II, he whispered to us as Mrs. Simpson scrawled complicated polynomials on the whiteboard, our hands struggling to keep up in our notebooks.

“Could have been a drug overdose,” Trey said, flipping a pen around his fingers like a baton, unconcerned with taking notes. “I mean, ‘going fishing’ every weekend? Maybe that was code for something.”

Trey belonged firmly in the athlete circle, although relished the label too much and that was a strike against him. His parents owned an architectural consulting firm and were often out of town, leaving him alone to meals of takeout pizza and meatball sub Hot Pockets, during which he would sit alone, watching ESPN and posting about anything at all on social media.

“There’s no way,” Benji said.

“He did go fishing,” Millie agreed. “Like a lot.”

“Shut up,” someone hissed from a few rows up.

“Or it could have been drunk driving,” Trey continued. “You saw how he was at parties.”

Peter had occasionally brought beer to hangouts. But so did we all. We ignored Trey and sketched new graphs onto our paper.

“He might not even be dead,” Trey said. “Kids get taken all the time. Human trafficking. I bet that’s it. I bet he was taken, like in that movie with Liam Nelson.”

We didn’t correct him. Could he be right? It would be horrible, but also not as horrible as it was now. It would mean that Peter wasn’t really dead.

“It’s all just a cover-up, I bet. They don’t want us to suspect anything,” Trey said, his eyes growing wide with at the thought of conspiracy.

“He’s dead,” Benji said.

We stopped our note-taking and looked at him, but he kept facing forward, copying down notes onto his graph paper.

“His parents identified the body.”

If there was a body, it was definite. It would have been nice if Benji was lying, if there was a little hope left, but he didn’t lie.

“That’s what they want you to think,” Trey said, taking a sip from a can of Red Bull stashed in his backpack..

We ignored him and looked again to the board.

While we understood and even pitied Trey, this was not the time for his energy drink-fueled tornados of nonsense. They were hard to ignore though, filling the back rows of our classes and, when we went home, our newsfeeds as we monitored Facebook and Twitter. Sometimes we couldn’t help partaking in his wild ideas, though. They provided comfort, and each night after feeling we’d caught up on the conversations and theories, we fell asleep with our phones fallen face down on our chests, our thumbs crooked from texting. No one slept soundly,

and many of us suffered dreams of chase, except this time we were the ones doing the chasing and what we sought was just ahead, right out of reach.

For all our late-night internet scouring and hypothesizing, in the end we learned the true details the old-fashioned way: from *The Spring Hill Journal*, tucked into our mailboxes or abandoned in a ditch or laying on the kitchen counter, if our parents had gone to work before we woke. The accident was front page news. Peter's face stared up at us in black and white; his yearbook photo from last year. He wore a faded polo shirt, the collar had been folded under on one side, an annoyance that surely drove his mother mad, as it would have any of ours. Peter looked distracted and bored, his eyes looking just past the camera. We realized that Peter would never have to take the senior photos, where the photographer made the seniors wear fake shirts, a plain black boatneck top with pearls for girls and a too-formal tuxedo for boys.

Below Peter's photo, the reality of what had happened was written out in the rushed prose of a reporter trying to make a deadline, perhaps excited about a big break. A car had struck Peter on his bike early Saturday morning as he headed to Boykin Pond to fish. The accident happened around six in the morning, when the sun was barely starting to rise. As far as the police had been able to tell, Peter's fishing pole fell off the back of his bike and into the road. When he went to retrieve it, the driver hadn't been able to see Peter in the dim morning light.

His death was simple and unimaginative. It was nothing like Trey Watkins's ramblings. It could have happened to any of us. We vowed never to ride a bike again in a kind of solidarity with Peter, but when our parents agreed with us that promise died as quickly as a mosquito in a bug zapper.

“I always thought it was dangerous, riding your bikes in the street like that,” our mothers said, lecturing us over meatloaf dinners. “And at all hours of the night and day. We should have known better,” they said, lamenting their parenting. “Now look what’s happened. It easily could have been you, and don’t you forget it. Oh, that poor family.”

Benji Matherson’s mother in particular caught up on the dangers of bicycles, marvelling that no one had ever noticed the potential of these death traps that the children--the *children*, by God--were permitted to ride around town as casual as anything. She called all the parents on the PTA’s phone tree and offered to pick up our bicycles in her husband’s Ford F-450 and take them to Goodwill. If one of our parents hesitated, they were served a stern talking-to on responsible parenting in the modern age and the hazards they had never had to contend with at our age. Callie Wainwright’s father was especially shamed when he dared to mention a plan to take the bikes on an upcoming family camping trip.

In the end, Mrs. Matherson completed her quest to round up our bicycles, making her way around Spring Hill one night. At first she knocked on doors, her Southern manners instructing her to engage in some polite chit chat with our parents at the door before fetching our bikes from our garages, but by the end of the night, she came and went without a sound, simply leaving a note (“Per our conversation. You’re welcome!”) and stealing away into the night with bits of our childhood.

Goodwill received a hearty donation of bikes in the coming week, so many that they couldn’t fit them in the store and instead lined them up along the sidewalk out front, advertising half off for anyone who would take one off their hands. We stared at them wistfully from the backseats of our parents’ cars as they drove past. Benji’s bike still sported the MADD sticker

that his mother had wrapped around a handlebar when he started freshman year, and eventually it wrinkled from rain and exposure, peeling away like dead skin after an angry sunburn.

It was as if Peter's death became a means to an end for them, a cautionary tale in their constant efforts to patrol us in the name of our safety. His death was more about them than it was about us or even about Peter. It bothered us that they used Peter's death as an example, but we were still navigating what this all meant and how kids like us--our parents were right in that concern--could just vanish from this earthly world.

For many of us, this was our first experience with death. It was everywhere, in our books and TV shows and music, but rarely had it touched our individual lives in that way that made us go from spectator to bereaved. A few of our grandparents had died from the usual bouts of cancer and complications from the falls that increased with age. Their funerals were formal but almost expected, and the receptions were filled with lighthearted stories and catching up between family members amidst catered platters of all things fried, from chicken to okra. Boys wore button-downs and girls wore black skirts and dressy tops, and we milled in corners, clutching paper cups of sweet tea, eventually finding our way outside to play tag or, when we got older, card games. Those funerals were sad, of course, because someone had died, but our grandparents had been old, and the ones who passed were the most elderly, with creaking knees and hunched backs, too old to play with us or to really get to know us.

The most significant death that we could remember happened when we were in sixth grade: Hailey Matthews's father. At the time, our parents did not explain to us how Hailey's father had died. They seemed almost irritated that such a situation would arise in which they were forced to consider whether their tender children were too young to think of a parent dying and the necessarily tragic circumstances under which such a thing could happen. After all,

parents were the gods of a young child's world. They were the means by which they receive sustenance and love and the logic and laws of the universe. And here a parent had died. And to us, it was all the worse, because it was unexplained.

"It was just his time," they told us. But in sixth grade we were too old for that. We pestered our parents, desperate to know what had happened. If it hadn't been so tightly kept from us, like some dark secret, we wouldn't have needed to know so badly. Since we weren't allowed to know, we had to. Finally, Lucy Woodard's mom, who wore long skirts and handmade beaded earrings and painted abstract paintings in their garage, decided that her child was strong enough to withstand the darkness of the world and told her what had happened. And, naturally, she told all of us. Hailey's father had died in a drunk driving accident, plain and simple. Though we were still young, we were familiar with the concept of drunken behavior, recalling holiday gatherings at which a strict aunt became unusually cheerful, sloshing wine from her glass, or when a grandparent grew alarmingly racist in their running commentary of our town.

Only our parents went to the funeral for Hailey's father, but they brought us along to the reception later, after they had seen Hailey beside her mother yet alone in the church, staring at her patent leather shoes. The reception was at the Matthews's house and as we arrived, we didn't know what to do with ourselves. The adults brought covered dishes and white flowers, lilies and roses, handing them to Mrs. Matthews, now a widow. After making the rounds and saying a solemn hello to their friends, they went through the buffet line and gathered plates of food gone cold, finally forming small huddles around the house in which they talked quietly and checked their watches.

As they settled, we ventured forward to get napkins full of cookies and plastic cups of lemonade, then we stood awkwardly in our own huddles, unsure if we were allowed outside or upstairs. Hailey stood besides her mother and looked at us from time to time, but we couldn't tell what she wanted or even what we should do. Should we go say hi to her? Leave her alone? Did she want an escape? But she stayed glued to her mother's side the whole afternoon and our indecision became a decision and we did nothing.

Even if we had known what had Hailey wanted those years ago in that living room, we don't know if we could have given it to her. We were too young, too ill-equipped to understand what it could possibly be like to lose a father and what someone's needs were in a situation like that. And so death transformed Hailey as well, as it would change Peter Bishop years later. However, where death changed Peter to a god among teenagers, it changed Hailey into something different, an Other, blocked off by a wall that we could never breach and, honestly, weren't sure if we wanted to.

Years later, we learned that it was actually Mr. Matthews himself who was the drunk driver, going well over Spring Hill's speed limits, although he had hit a stop sign and therefore only taken his own life. We didn't quite understand why, but knowing that Hailey's father had killed himself, even though it was an accident, made us see her differently. We had grown up with Hailey, but we thought we had known her, at least the important parts of her like what her family was like. Finding out the truth about her father's accident felt like we had found out a secret, which made it feel like she had hidden something from us. Granted, none of us shared everything in our lives with each other. We all have secrets. But the death of Hailey's father had been such a notable event in our childhoods that finding out that it wasn't what we had thought, or been led to believe, made it feel like some kind of cover-up. Some kind of lie. Like

she hadn't trusted us. It felt like we couldn't trust her. Although she still traveled through the years with us, walking the same dirty halls and eating the same gummy cafeteria pizza, Hailey was separated by secrets and the solitude of experience that none of us could imagine. We were glad that we couldn't imagine.

Since his death a week ago, Hailey had been talking about Peter constantly. We assumed that her own past personal experience with death was what made her react so strongly to Peter's passing. As we sat clustered at our senior tables on the far end of the cafeteria, picking at dull corndogs and bruised fries, Hailey continued her monologue.

"This one time in World History, Mrs. Johnson asked us to pair up to make brochures for different countries, you know, using these old colored pencils that have to be at least fifty years old, and I was sitting behind Peter and he turned around in his seat and asked me to be his partner." Hailey popped a fry in her mouth then wiped the grease along the side of her jeans. "I was just so surprised because out of everyone in the class he wanted to be partners with me. And it's not like I'm super dumb or whatever, but history is not my best subject, and he still picked me. It's the little things, you know? Looking back it's just so crazy to think about those little moments."

We zoned in and out of Hailey's chatter. Although we felt bad that she wanted to talk so desperately about Peter and we weren't giving her our full attention, her endless talking was exhausting. The rest of us talked about Peter too because it was impossible not to with the sting of his absence so fresh in our minds, but we also lapsed into discussions of upcoming football games and complaints about our classes (Mrs. Brown was not going easy on us with the English classwork even though it was her last year before retirement). We need to break up the talk about Peter in order to stay sane and not leave ourselves mired in the quicksand of his loss.

Hailey, however, seemed to thrive off talking about Peter. It made us uncomfortable, reminding us about her father. Was she more comfortable talking about Peter because of what she'd been through? Were we less comfortable because we hadn't lost a close family member? It made us doubt ourselves and our maturity, and that soured our mood.

Hailey applied a fresh coat of lipgloss. "How great would it be if we did something for Peter at Harvest Fest this year? Like a memorial or something." Hailey spoke through a mouth full of fries.

"It's not a bad idea," Katie Harrison said, playing with the straw of her Capri-Sun. We agreed. It wasn't a bad idea. It would be nice to do something for Peter. But we didn't know if we had the authority to suggest something like that to the adults in charge. They tended to stick to their traditions.

"How would we even start to do something like that?" Benji Matherson asked, met with murmurs of agreement.

Hailey piled her trash on her tray, leaving behind her corndog. "I'm sure I can figure out who to talk to, and when I show that the whole senior class supports my idea for a memorial, I can totally pull this off."

We didn't know if we would support her idea though. Hailey had never been known for her ideas, like when she tried to start a bake sale to fund new uniforms for the dance team and had scheduled it on a Friday night and accidentally substituted salt for sugar in her brownies. Or when she tried to launch a campaign for extra credit in history class and instead earned us all a double load of homework.

And we just couldn't get behind the concept of Hailey as some kind of leader, much less a kind of representative of us as a class. Hailey was too different from us to be our mascot or

spokesperson. Despite her efforts, she felt like an outsider to us, floating on the edges, like many of us, but much more annoying than most when she tried to rise to the surface, like scum on a pond.

“You don’t need any help planning the memorial?” Katie asked.

“I have some really good ideas for it. You all just have to support me. I’ll do all the heavy-lifting. Maybe we could all go to a town meeting though. There’s one tomorrow night. I’ll send out a text tonight with details,” Hailey said. The bell rang and we all quickly gathered our things without any of the usual loitering.

“Wait,” Hailey said. “You’re all with me on this, right?”

We looked at each other. One of the vice principals walked by. “Move it along,” he barked. “Get to class.” We took the opportunity and scattered.

That night, as promised, Hailey sent out a text with details for the town meeting the next day. She asked us to text her back if we planned to come and show our support. She didn’t want to go alone. None of us texted her back, and when she asked why at school the next day, we all came up with various excuses.

“Sorry, I have to babysit.”

“I’m grounded for the rest of the week.”

“I have to study for that test on Friday.”

At first Hailey teased us--not that we could blame her because our excuses were transparently lame--or rolled her eyes, but the more excuses she heard throughout the day, the quieter she became. She didn’t bring up her Harvest Fest memorial idea again, and we were relieved to let it die.

CHAPTER II

THE MURAL

The first few weeks of our senior year, we were still processing Peter and what his death meant to us, still registering that this was our reality now, as we wandered through the halls with hangdog faces. We moved as if through a fog. For our parents, who had either gone back to complaining about the day-to-day or had begun nagging us to get an early start on college applications, the cloud of tragedy seemed to have moved on. A very few of us had already applied early to our top choice schools, but most of us were still figuring things out.

The concept of college was both thrilling and terrifying and for the same reasons. At the root of it, college meant leaving the claustrophobic bubble of the town that we called home and entering a completely different, unknown world. In other words, it meant leaving our old selves behind and trying to become adults. At least that's what we gleaned from our older siblings when they came home on college breaks talking about politics and current events and doing their own laundry. College scared us, and we wanted something to distract us and slow down time to keep us in the present just a little longer.

The principal came to the art room one day midway through September. Mr. Johnson's white hair was combed back and his back was starting to hunch. While he wasn't a bad guy, he seemed to no longer want to deal with kids, and if any of us were ever sent to the office for disciplinary reasons, he delegated our handling to one of the vice principals. So we were surprised when he came into the art room unprompted and unrequested. We were working on self portraits which so far either consisted either of our badly disproportionate faces angled to the

slant of our hands or wildly abstracted collages of color, for those of us who had altogether given up hope of accurately portraying reality.

Mr. Johnson walked into the room in his long, loping stride and tapped Ms. Miles on the shoulder. “Could I have a word with your children?” He hadn’t tried to whisper, and the ring of the word “children” echoed in the poorly insulated room and stopped us, paint brushes and pencil stubs suspended in our hands.

Ms. Miles turned to us and swept her hair over her shoulder. We liked her because she was young and pretty, wearing colorful printed cardigans, and struck the right balance between talking to us like real people instead of little kids while also not being too interested in the drama of our lives. “Ya’ll listen up.” She gestured for him to go ahead.

Mr. Johnson stood at the front of the room, nearly backed against the wall, and cleared his throat. “Kids, how’s it going?”

His hands opened and closed nervously into fists and he straightened his bowtie.

“Anyway, I wanted to make a request of you. I thought a couple of you could design and paint a mural for Peter Bishop along one of the hallways,” he said. His combover had begun losing its shape, betraying his weariness and how, perhaps, he really was getting too old for this job. “As a memorial. His parents called and made the suggestion, and I think it’s a lovely one,” he said. “Volunteers?”

Georgia and Tucker raised their hands. They both had long held a reputation as some of the best artists in our class, and they had started dating a year before. Unlike other couples, they didn’t display cringeworthy amounts of PDA. No one else raised their hands because clearly this was an opportunity meant for them.

“Wonderful,” Mr. Johnson said. “Let me know what you all come up with.”

For the rest of the period, Georgia and Tucker huddled together at a table, sketching designs. We wandered over as we wanted, praising or making timid suggestions. A mural memorializing Peter was a great idea. He had been a part of us here, and now he would forever stay a part of us. We almost wished we had come up with the idea first and briefly recalled Hailey's push for a memorial for Peter. But she never could have come up with a great idea like this. Our shoulders felt lightened and we watched over the shoulders of Georgia and Tucker as they worked their magic and spoke for us in art what we couldn't put into words.

Their mural was to be on the side hallway to the gym, the one with the water fountains lined up in a row like a trough. Each of us began taking special routes to our next classes so that we could go down the hallway and visit Georgia and Tucker, who had been excused for class (and, honestly, we might have tried our hand at painting if we'd known that was a benefit), working on the mural. They had gone through several designs, but the more abstract or overly sentimental ones were voted down and we all finally settled on their last design, a little doodle we found sketched on one of the back of the other designs. It was a fishing pole pulling a deep blue fish out of a pond, the fish illuminated by a yellow sun, rings of light radiating out around it. The design was simple and we thought it was a fitting choice for Peter, who loved to fish.

When we visited Georgia and Tucker, Georgia on a ladder, painting the sun, and Tucker kneeling on the floor, working at the details of the water in the pond, it was relaxing. If you overlooked the thick smell of paint filling the hallway. Sometimes unwitting freshmen, trying to impress their new friends and make some kind of reputation for themselves, would hold their hands around their throats and mimic choking on the chemical smell. We glowered at them in

disgust until they left in shame, having been taught that their antics were juvenile and that our loss was not to be laughed at.

We took to watching over the mural until it was completed, not wanting its creation to be tainted by the clownish behavior of children who hadn't yet learned respect. Down the hall, the drama kids rehearsed *Romeo and Juliet* for their fall semester show. Their melodramatic readings were appropriately somber as they echoed off the walls like the sound of the ocean in a shell.

One day, we had taken our guard posts by the mural. Hailey stood babbling to Katie, who watched Georgia and Tucker in silent reverie. One girl, Sally Saunders, began crying, real tears that streaked and ruined her makeup, and her friend took her to the bathroom for privacy and to clean her up. Hailey pulled out her phone and shook her wrist, jangling the set of rhinestone bangles on her skinny, spray-tanned arm.

"I don't know why she was crying," Hailey said. "Not to be mean or whatever, but I'm the one who's had a crush on Peter for forever."

What was she talking about? This sudden, alleged crush was unlikely, since we all knew that Peter had asked Hailey to the winter dance the year before and she had gone with the soccer captain instead. What? Was she trying to claim Peter? Like one of her knockoff Kate Spade bags or Lilly Pulitzer dresses?

We knew Hailey. She made constant bids for attention and had bleached her hair the year before, though her black roots showed. When Hailey's father died all those years ago, the town had showered her mother, tall and blonde, with casseroles and condolences, while we gave Hailey space. She had turned to the comfort of makeup and clothes, handbags and manicures.

She was the first of us to begin using hair dye, playing with different reds for many years before dyeing it that bleached blonde and never looking back.

Hailey liked to think of herself as popular. She wasn't, at least not in the sense of others wanting to be around her. Hailey just managed to be there, wherever there was to be, inserting herself into conversations and hangouts. She either talked about herself glowingly, like some kind of goddess among mortals, or gossiped about others in the meanest of ways, often making things up about people just to have something to say.

“Did you see those two sneak off together at the party last weekend?”

“Sally's really gained weight lately, don't you think?”

“You'd think he could afford some deodorant.”

Her comments were either fabricated lies, or they were the kind of truth that people didn't say out of common decency. Maybe Malachi Brody did smell after gym sometimes, but who needed to comment on it? Much less with the veiled venom about his family's financial struggles. But most of the time her rumors were just lies, things she made up just to seem like an insider, just to have something to talk about to make herself seem more interesting and to try to make people want to spend any amount of time with her.

Her desperation to be liked was as obvious as her fake tan. Whenever she spread her little rumors, she would pull a person to the side at a party, or hold them up after class. This was meant to give the appearance of confiding secrets but loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. Her voice had a distinctive nasal twang, although that may have been a product of our imaginations because of how whiny she was. She wanted attention and acceptance and pity, but the way she went about it ensured that she would never have it. We found her annoying and desperate.

So when she declared her love for Peter, although it helped drive the worries of college and the future from our minds, we knew it was a lie. We said nothing though, as she looked at us as we all stood in front of the mural, awaiting our response. For the time being, we could take the high road. Our mothers had at least raised us that well.

Hailey sniffled, her gaze shifting between the ground and our faces.

“Here, take a Kleenex,” Katie finally said, pulling a pack from her purse.

“I have one, too,” Sally said, freshly emerged from the girls’ room.

“Thank you,” Hailey said, her voice cracking. “Thank you all so much.” She burst into tears and held out her hands.

No fewer than four of us offered Hailey tissues, and she accepted all of them with the watery, gracious thanks of one of the wronged women in our mothers’ soap operas.

Peter’s funeral was on a Thursday morning. Students who wanted to attend were allowed to leave class early. That morning, we dressed in our Sunday best, climbed into our hand-me-down pick-up trucks or Toyota Camrys, and headed to school. As we walked to class, we avoided the freshmen, even the sophomores and juniors. They were whole, intact. They had not known grief. We sat patiently through first and half of second period, waiting for our cue. When Mr. Johnson dismissed us over the loudspeaker, we rose with the quiet dignity of the widowed, hiked our backpacks on our shoulders, and made sure to walk by Peter’s mural as we headed out under a rainy sky.

Some of us went to Spring Hill Baptist Church alongside Peter, and those who went elsewhere still knew how to behave at a funeral. We filed into the pews, lone islands with careful space between us, and examined our surroundings. The vague light of a rainy day

deadened the tall stained glass windows. Up front, Peter's parents talked with the pastor, a man with thinning brown hair who was not as old as we thought he should be. Peter's mother wore a plain black dress, so well-worn that it was almost navy, and Peter's father had his arm tight around her shoulders. It stayed there throughout the service, and when he released her afterward to shake hands with funeral attendees, the mark of his clenched fingers remained in the thin fabric.

We listened, quiet and still, as the pastor spoke about Peter and how loved he was and what a wonderful person he was and how God had needed him up in Heaven and Peter was watching us all from above.

"I now invite anyone who wishes to come up and say a few words about this beloved soul," the pastor said.

Peter's father walked to the front and leaned against the wooden podium where the pastor had stood. "I just want to—" he stopped and closed his eyes tightly, then opened them and took a deep breath, although he looked down and not up and outward at us. "I just want to thank all of you for coming to help us say goodbye to Peter. I remember when Peter was six and I started teaching him how to fish. He hated it." Peter's father almost smiled, one corner of his mouth lifting. "He hated having to wake up before the sun. He hated sitting there for hours. He hated having to be quiet and still. But you all know that now, that was one of his favorite things to do. Peter learned to be still and quiet and patient, and as his mother and I deal with this, we will have to learn again how to be still and quiet and patient as we trust in God and His ways."

Peter's mother made a noise like a stifled squeak. Peter's father finally looked up and out at us. "Again, thank you all for being here for us and for Peter. And thank you for that beautiful mural."

Georgia and Tucker leaned into each other, and Tucker brushed Georgia's hair over her shoulder then squeezed her hand. Peter's father moved to join his wife back on the front pew. Malachi Brody, Peter's best friend, stood but it took him a few moments to collect himself. Before sitting down, Peter's father placed a firm hand on Malachi's shoulder and helped him up to the podium. Sweat stained the back of Malachi's white dress shirt a dark gray.

Peter and Malachi had been best friends, and we had heard that he was supposed to go fishing with Peter that Saturday morning but had slept through his alarm

"Peter was my best friend," Malachi said, a crumpled piece of paper clutched in his hand. He tried to unfold it but gave up and ran a hand through his uncombed hair. Peter's father stood and helped Malachi back to his seat. The pastor waited off to the side and when no one else came to the podium, we prepared to leave, pulling our purses onto our laps or checking our pockets for our phones and wallets. Then Hailey stood.

Her black heels, too tall to be decent, squeaked as she walked to the front. She tugged at the hem of her short black dress where it had ridden up against her black tights from sitting, flipped her hair, and cleared her throat.

"Many of you know how important Peter was to me," she said. "I met him in third grade. Peter was the most special person I've ever known." We shuffled our feet, cramped and pinched inside our tight church shoes. "I can feel him looking down on me today, telling me that I can get through this." We did not care that her eyes were red and puffy. We cared that she dared to stand in front of us, in front of Peter's parents, with plastic tortoiseshell sunglasses perched on her blond head.

"I will miss him forever," she continued. "You have all been so supportive in my time of grief, and I can't thank you enough." Here she turned her blue eyes upward and pointed a

glittered nail to the high ceiling. We cringed. “We love you, Peter.” She looked forward, over our heads. “Thank you.”

She brought a wrinkled tissue to her eyes, rimmed with eyeliner, and walked back to her seat.

Friday, we were all back in school. Our teachers encouraged us to go talk with Mr. Hyland, the school counselor, to talk about Peter, but no one took them up on it. Hailey came in late that day, wearing black. She couldn't wear her funeral dress again because it would violate the dress code, but she would have if she could have, of this we were sure. Any opportunity to try to steal the spotlight, to claim grief as hers alone. Instead she wore black lipstick, her mouth dark and pruned like rotten fruit. She had smeared some on her teeth, but no one told her. “For Peter,” she said of her lipstick, not when asked, but when we all stared at her as she walked into Mr. Davenport's creative writing class, late.

Mr. Davenport was so lanky that he gave the impression of being a tall man. He was in his thirties but already his short hair was thinning, pulling back deeply on either side of his widow's peak, forming a hairline like an arrow. He asked us to write poems exploring our grief. The poems would not be graded, and some of us were disappointed that we wouldn't be able to share our poems, proud as we were of our midnight scribbles about the increasing feeling of being the odd-shaped puzzle piece for which you could never find the space. He gave us twenty minutes to finish writing, during which time he walked around the room. When we were done, most of us stuffed our poems into our backpacks or the back pocket of our binders, the pocket reserved for forgotten syllabi from the start of the year. Hailey raised her hand.

“Mr. Davenport, I’d like to share mine,” she said, lifting a piece of notebook paper filled with a rainbow of multi-colored gel pens. She stood without permission and opened her mouth to speak. We didn’t know if we could take hearing whatever she had to say, whatever lies were about to pour forth from the black hole of her mouth. You would think she’d have the good sense to somehow feel our annoyance radiating outward like heat from the sun and shut up for once, but she didn’t.

Katie’s voice cut through the room. “Nobody wants to hear it!”

Hailey looked at Katie, who had buried her face in her hands as soon as she had spoken. Hailey then looked around, perhaps looking for someone to disagree with Katie, to say *I do, I want to hear your poem*, but we looked down at our desks, studying them with the intensity of monks in prayer. Nobody *did* want to hear her poem, but we weren’t going to say anything. It was better that she heard it from her best friend, although we agreed that the timing and tone may have been off.

“Thank you, Hailey, but I think these are best kept private,” Mr. Davenport said, ever the diplomatic teacher. “I think we’re all as overwhelmed by Peter’s death as you are.” He gave her one of his sympathetic smiles, the one he used when he wanted to make us feel like he understood us.

Hailey fell back into her seat as if she’d been struck. No one looked at her.

At lunch, she sniffled, and not one of us offered her a tissue from the plastic packs our mothers now made all of us carry. When Hailey sat by Katie in Biology, Katie got up to go to the bathroom. When she returned, she sat at a different table, going so far as to abandon her lunch tray. Before last period, as we made our quick trip to Peter’s mural, we crowded together

and left Hailey to stand alone. We mourned and felt the weight of Peter in our chests. Hailey didn't get to have a monopoly on grief.

Throughout the day, Hailey continued to lay it on thick how she had loved Peter, as if the more she talked about it now, after the fact, the more she might be able to make it convincing.

In Calculus II, Hailey leaned over to doodle hearts in pencil on our desks. "I think everyone in school kind of imagined us ending up together," she said.

At lunch, she was happy to find a captive audience. "It's just so sad how we'll never know, you know? We'll never know what could have been." We lost our appetites.

In the pick-up line after school, where some of us waited for our parents to pick us up, Hailey continued her dramatics, weaving a circlet from dandelions she plucked from the grass. "Peter would have been the king to my festival pageant Queen," she said, placing the circlet on her head. "He told me that he hoped I would win." Her performance was nauseating and infuriating and we marvelled at our self-control when we didn't slap her every time. No one ever said anything in response, and eventually her endless stream of talking cooled down.

Over the weekend, Malachi organized a vigil at Boykin Pond, where Peter had been headed to go fishing. Some of us came early and fished a little before the sun went down. Malachi was the only person who caught anything, one tiny fish thrashing its silver body against death. He threw it back. The air rang with cicadas, the sound of a dying summer, and the humidity wrapped around us even though we were nearing October. We stood along the edge of the pond holding a hodgepodge of whatever candles we could find: our older sisters' Bath and Body Works candles in Pumpkin Spice, our mothers' Fresh Linen from Yankee Candle, our

grandmothers' tall red and white tapers from dining rooms, reserved for special occasions. Malachi passed out tea lights in Styrofoam cups from the Dollar Tree, where his mother worked. Hailey was not there. We asked Katie about her absence.

“I couldn't give her a ride,” she said. Her fingers shredded the edge of her cup, and the white particles floated down and stuck to her Myrtle Beach sweatshirt. We imagined Hailey at home, reapplying black lipstick, sore over missing an opportunity to claim Peter for herself, bitter as a green lemon.

Malachi had a photograph of himself and Peter, arms around each other and fishing poles high in the air, like spears or lances of knights from long ago. He also brought a toy boat, the kind he might have built in woodshop or with his father as a boy, on which he placed the picture, leaning against the wooden sail. Kneeling by the pond, he pushed the boat out into the water. About twenty feet from shore, the picture slipped off the boat. It seemed to take an eternity to slide below the surface, Peter's face smiling out at us, begging to be saved, until the water claimed it.

We wanted to jump in, to pull Peter up, and a few of us even took a step forward as if to try.

“Should we...?” Benji said vaguely, his brow furrowed, worried, looking at Malachi. He reached out an arm and took a step toward the pond, his shoe sinking into the rocky mud. Malachi placed a hand on his shoulder and held him back. We wanted to save Peter, but we knew it would be no good, and we stayed rooted to the ground.

We stood side by side until the moon rose above the blackened trees and felt the loneliness of our grief fall away, like shedding a skin. It was a clear, perfect night, and we

flinched at the sound of a lone car speeding down the nearby road, the site of the accident. We wanted to go on standing there forever, an unbreakable wall.

Monday and Tuesday, Hailey wasn't in school. We didn't notice until Wednesday when Mr. Davenport asked if anyone had talked to her. We hadn't. On Thursday, the morning announcements began, reminding us about the pep rally the coming Friday. Despite the flyers that now wallpapered our lockers, there was no mention of the Harvest Festival or the opening night of *Romeo and Juliet*. We pulled homework out of our bags, reading questions on *The Scarlet Letter*, calculus worksheets, biology notes on our dying fruit flies. As our teachers busied themselves in writing the day's agenda on their whiteboards, hushed conversations rose up.

Again, the intercoms crackled to life. "Bobcats, sorry for the interruption. I've just received some tragic news."

Our hearts stopped.

"This week, we have lost another member of our family. Yesterday we lost Hailey Matthews."

We looked at each other, bewildered.

"For those wanting to talk, Mr. Hyland is still available in the counseling office. Thank you."

Yesterday? We had seen nothing online. We pulled out our phones and began scouring social media for any mention of Hailey, but we found none. It had been exactly a week since Peter's funeral.

"Phones away, everyone," our teachers said.

We could not remember one thing that our teachers said in class. When we tried to listen, their words passed through our heads like shadows. Hailey was dead? But we hated Hailey. She couldn't die. Most of our teachers tried to carry on normally, but Mr. Davenport and Mrs. Brown held their own moments of silence in their classrooms before giving the class the rest of the period to study for tests. Mr. Davenport tried to be sensitive to what he thought we might be feeling, and we thought that perhaps Mrs. Brown was especially sensitive to Hailey's passing, perhaps because of her upcoming retirement.

Throughout the rest of the day and Friday, we monitored our phones for clues. None came. During the break between third and fourth period, we found Georgia and Tucker, touching up Peter's mural and signing their initials in the corner.

Sally Saunders asked, "Have ya'll thought about what you'll paint for Hailey?"

Georgia and Tucker dunked their paint brushes into a cup of water and swirled them around, rinsing off the paint. Georgia had some blue paint smudged on her chin.

"Mr. Johnson hasn't asked us to do a mural," Tucker said. He tried to wipe the blue paint off Georgia's chin, but he only made it worse, and she waved him off.

"But he will," Millie Ullman insisted. She had been captain of the volleyball team three years running and was strong in her opinions.

"Will he?" Georgia said.

"He will," Millie said.

"We'll work on some sketches later," Tucker said. They packed up their supplies and headed back to the art room. Another one of us was dead and the paint on Peter's mural hadn't yet dried.

Early Sunday morning, we surprised our parents by fetching the paper from the sidewalk before they were awake. But *The Spring Hill Journal* held no answers, no article or obituary. No mention of a funeral, although Peter's had been late too, due to investigation of his accident and his parents waiting for a few extended family members to arrive in town. We asked Cal, this semester's student intern at the paper. He a sophomore strived for the detachment he felt necessary in journalism, even though he just mainly edited ads and school supply lists for typos.

"We don't cover suicides," he said.

Suicide? We could not believe it. Hailey was not the type. She wore pink and glitter and had a laugh that grated in our ears. She was annoying and obsessive and narcissistic, posting selfies nonstop and caring only about the next school dance, the next party, the next chance to claim the title of Harvest Festival Queen. She was young. She couldn't die. We couldn't die. And yet, here we were, a dying breed.

Katie was not in school Monday or Tuesday and we worried. Wednesday, she returned, wearing no makeup and moving at a turtle's pace through the hallways. We kept our distance.

"Can you imagine?" we remarked to each other as we stood outside our second period classes. We watched Katie, who dragged the weight of a failed best friendship behind her wherever she went.

At lunch, Georgia sat with Katie at a quiet corner table, their trays of pizza sticks untouched. After third period, we gravitated toward Georgia's locker.

"Well?" we asked. "Well?"

Georgia had circles under her eyes. "She killed herself," she said. We tapped our fingers on the side of our jeans, impatient. Cal had already told us that it was a suicide.

“How?” Sally asked, in bad taste, we thought.

Georgia fiddled with her lock, looping it around her finger. “She hanged herself,” Georgia said. “With her father’s red silk tie.”

We remembered the tall ceilings of the Matthews’ house from last year’s Halloween party, draped in orange streamers and cottony shreds of spider web. Hailey’s mother had rolled her eyes and told us that Hailey had spent all day decorating. We recalled the way the skeletons were hung high on the walls, dancing, with their toothy smiles grinning down on us. Most of us had skipped out of Hailey’s party early to meet at the Confederate cemetery, where the real fun was found in the brown paper bags we’d smuggled under our costumes.

The first bell rang to signal the start of fourth period, and we scattered to our classes.

After school, we found Tucker using white paint to clean up an edge along the fish in Peter’s mural. “What about Hailey’s?” we asked. He told us that he had gone to the front office during lunch to ask where the administration would like Hailey’s mural painted. Mr. Johnson told him that the nature of Hailey’s death would not permit a mural or memorial to be condoned. “Suicide, you know,” he had told Tucker.

We knew. We knew from the missing moment of silence in the announcements, from the lack of coverage in *The Spring Hill Journal*, from the mural that Georgia and Tucker would never paint. We knew from the way we felt uneasy talking about Hailey, from the way our mothers began asking probing questions about our emotional states and the way our fathers refused any mention of “that Matthews girl.”

When we looked up Hailey on Facebook during fourth period, the most recent post on her profile was her message to Peter after his passing. No one had posted on her profile since then. Her long message ended with a picture that Hailey’s mom must have snapped in elementary

school. Hailey was sprawled on a purple rug, a pink dress splayed around her tiny body like a fan, coloring construction paper valentines to distribute among the makeshift mailboxes we used to make in class every Valentine's Day. The one between Hailey's hands was a red heart, slightly misshapen, with Peter's name written on it in large purple letters.

After fourth period, not yet ready to go home, the hallways fell quiet as everyone else went home and we stood in front of Peter's mural. The frigid air of the vents bored into our skin. Somewhere near the school, a tractor rumbled by. The mural had been done well. The wood grain in the fishing pole was rendered in painstaking detail and careful lines formed ripples in the water, billowing outward. Still, it somehow fell flat. We looked at the mural and missed Peter, but there was nowhere to look for Hailey. We had nothing except the sound of Hailey's heels squeaking around and around in our heads.

Mr. Davenport came to stand beside us. Our backs stiffened. His white shirt was wrinkled and his belt did not match his shoes.

"Where's the mural for Hailey?" he asked, his hands in his pockets, jangling spare change. As if it was our fault that Peter was the only one memorialized. As if it was our responsibility. We were kids. It was the town and the administration and the adults like him that wanted Hailey buried and swept under the rug like dirt.

"She doesn't get one," Trey said.

Mr. Davenport stopped jangling the coins in his pocket. "Do none of you feel badly?" Deep lines formed on his fallen face.

We wished he would leave.

"We tried, but the principal said no," Georgia said.

Mr. Davenport turned and looked at each of us, one by one. “Not about the mural,” he said.

We studied the painted fish scales, the peaks and valleys left by the brushstrokes. The space between us closed in as we contracted like a fist. He had no right. We were young and grieving, scarred and bleeding, and he had no right after everything we had gone through.

“About what?” we said.

CHAPTER III

HAILEY

It was Friday and time for the pep rally. Other students wore the school colors, Bobcats black and gold, and some painted their faces with a metallic gold Dollar Store face paint. We remembered using that same face paint in years past, but not this year. We wore our regular clothes, even purposefully avoiding wearing any clothing featuring black or gold. We avoided the Bobcats cheers in the hallways. At lunch, a group of junior girls came around from table to table, gold streamers braided into their hair.

“Now’s your chance to enter to win a Bobcats swag bag!” they said, giggling and grinning like jesters. They held out blank slips of paper and black ballpoint pens to us. “Write down your name and we’ll enter it into the raffle!” The means for the raffle was an old worn top hat from a costume shop that was pulled out every year for exactly this reason.

“No, thanks,” Millie said, stirring a Cup O’ Noodles.

“Come on!” the girls said. “You never know—you might win!” They shook the slips of paper. A few of us took the scraps just to shut the girls up and either folded them up still blank or wrote down “Hailey Matthews” and threw them into the hat.

The girls moved on to the sophomores’ tables, where we saw them huddle over the hat together and hurriedly pick out our slips of paper. They later wadded them into a ball and tossed them into the trash.

When the bell rang for fourth period, we followed the rest of the school to the gym for the mandatory pep rally. We filed into our seats in the bleachers along the walls of the gym in a silent procession as the other grades laughed and whooped around us. The cheerleaders

streamed out from the side door, shaking their pom poms. One of them pulled at the hem of her pleated skirt and we thought of Hailey's dress at Peter's funeral.

Mr. Johnson came onto the court and spoke of "our loss" and how the football game that night was an opportunity to come together. He announced the football team as they strutted across the court, clapping each other on the back. The other classes cheered. The cheerleaders launched into a routine and then the mayor and some of the Harvest Festival committee came out.

"It should be our best year yet!" they exclaimed. They talked about the different booths and the rides and how the budget had been increased. They urged us to enter the pageant, at which several sophomores and juniors whistled and clapped. "It's time for us all to come together as a town," they finished before handing the megaphone to the principal. But it wasn't, because there were two of us missing, and one of those who wasn't even being acknowledged now.

The principal took up the pepping part of the pep rally again, seemingly happy to have the megaphone back in his hand. "We are the Bobcats, the mighty, mighty Bobcats!" His voice boomed across the gym. He pointed across the bleachers, from section to section, freshmen to seniors, trying to conduct us in a chorus of C-A-T-S. We were the A. Each time it was our turn, we managed a cheer so weak that it was as if we weren't there at all.

Saturday night was the theater department's opening night of *Romeo and Juliet*, and our spirits felt more in line with the tragedy of Shakespeare than the inane celebration of a pep rally. We came to watch the play even though it was a weekend night, and last year we wouldn't have been caught dead at the school when we could have been elsewhere. The school felt eerie and

out-of-bounds. We paid out five-dollar student ticket fees and unenthused ushers handed us programs.

We entered the cold auditorium, cheap red curtains draped along the walls. The drama kids' parents and grandparents sat in the front and centermost seats, their digital cameras, and smartphones for a few tech-savvy parents, poised in their laps. Their hushed murmurs rose as they looked around and saw the crowd.

“It must be really great this semester!” they said to each other.

One mother, close to where we sat in the back rows, whispered to an elderly woman beside her, “It’s because of Peter Bishop.” The grandmother didn’t give any sign that she heard as her wrinkled fingers picked through a Ziploc bag of almonds, but the woman continued.

“Times like these make them come together and feel closer to their school.”

“What about that Matthews girl?” another parent asked.

“Who?” the mother said. The lights went down.

At intermission the lights came on but we stayed seated. The cheerleaders sold cupcakes in the lobby to fundraise for their upcoming competition. Mothers bought them and return with lipstick smudged by frosting. Finally, act five arrived. When Juliet killed herself, we clutched the ends of our armrests, our arms pressed together like magnets. Our faces stayed hidden by the darkness and by the closeness of so many bodies in one place, at one time, that we could not tell where one ended and the next began.

For the next couple of weeks, we continued going to school in a way that felt like a giant I of normalcy. We went to classes, completed the homework (most of it, anyway), took the tests,

went to the football games, and began really digging into our college applications. On the outside, we looked like typical high school seniors, much to the relief of our parents.

The parents who knew about Hailey's suicide dropped the subject at their earliest convenience, as if they were too embarrassed to be associated with such a scandal or else as if they were totally unequipped to handle the suicide of a teenage girl. The latter was perhaps more disturbing because it made us feel helpless. They were adults. They should be equipped to handle this kind of thing.

Occasionally, one of us would build up our courage, heart pounding, and test the subject of Hailey with an unwitting parent.

"It's strange," we might say over dinner one night or during a commercial break while watching television before bed. Our parents would look over at us, across the tops of their phones or books, or from the kitchen where they sat working or cleaning up. "Isn't it weird how no one talks about Hailey Matthews?"

They flinched as if our words, needlelike, had pricked them. Most of the time they would continue what they had been doing, mumbling responses that invited no further conversation.

"Not at all," they might say.

"It's just a shame."

"There's no reason to dwell."

While these responses were all equally frustrating, the worst response was the rarest, and somehow also the closest to what we wanted. This was when their eyes stayed on our faces, brows furrowed, and they would freeze with the newspaper or dishrag gripped in their hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

But they never said it in the way that meant that they really wanted to talk. They said it with an undertone of reluctance, as if they were wishing inside their heads, *Please say no, please say no*. We could see them faced with the obligation of having to deal with their children's worries in the name of being good parents.

"No," we would reply, then open our phones and delve into the internet. The answer was yes. They didn't know how badly the answer was yes. But it was only yes if they wanted to hear it. Only if their question lost its sheen of dread.

How could we deal with Hailey if our parents couldn't? But, unlike us, they had the choice not to deal with it. They could go about their daily routines, which Hailey's presence hadn't touched before and certainly didn't now, from the grave. (We assumed there was a grave. We had not seen it.) As our parents went to work, sitting in their cubicles or offices, or as they stayed home, taking care of our younger siblings or planning dinner or keeping the house in working order, Hailey wasn't there for them. She wasn't still present like she was for us, in the hallways which were quieter without her jangling and clicking, at lunch without her forced giggles, and staring at us, watching from her many empty seats.

We had never before realized how many seats any of us occupied in a day, unassigned but claimed through weeks or even years of habit. Like the table in the cafeteria where Hailey had waited with Katie before classes started. Her desk in every class, many of which bore a history of names carved into them but now we felt like those didn't matter; if Hailey had sat there, it was her seat. The benches along the lunch tables, hers the centermost one. The spot on the sidewalk by the skinniest tree, where she waited for her mother to pick her up in her sand-colored BMW. The space in front of her locker, now emptied and the outside wiped clean,

unlike Peter's, which held a shrine of photos and notes, the administration allowing us to mourn at least one of our losses. Her locker was the most glaring negative space. We now went out of our way to swerve past the space around it as though someone was still standing there, invisible. Who knew that we had ever taken up so much space? That any one of us had such a presence?

But our parents experienced none of this. Maybe they really could move on, untouched, as if nothing had happened. Some parents, those less connected to our lives either due to careers too successful or too faltering, had never even heard about Hailey—and how could they, when the school barely addressed her death and the newspaper had refused to cover it? And Hailey was not a topic of conversation that we knew how to broach with them. We didn't even know if we wanted to.

It had been three weeks since her death, but it didn't feel like it. We kept moving forward as if in a trance, the time passing but we felt frozen, our minds still processing that first declaration from the morning announcements. Our brains were like a record that kept skipping, stuck in one place of one song. Every time the intercoms crackled, our hearts went into overdrive, like hummingbirds trapped in the cages of our chests. But it didn't matter what happened outside our minds or bodies—no one outside of us could see the interior. They only saw teenagers, despondent and stressed over their senior year.

In Mrs. Brown's class, our midterm was to write an in-class essay on *The Scarlet Letter*. None of us felt particularly concerned about it. Mrs. Brown was a pushover. Since this was her final year, she was even more easygoing than ever. In a way, it felt like she would be graduating with us. Although we felt a kind of solidarity with her in this way, even time spent in her class was not free of our trouble with Hailey.

For the midterm, we sat dutifully and wrote our essays quickly, those of us with poor handwriting trying to write as legibly as possible. However, some of us simply couldn't focus. We wrote a few sentences, then were lost to daydreams, staring at the wide window at the side of the classroom, outside of which it was beginning to drizzle.

Katie was one of us who was preoccupied, writing a word or two then stopping every so often to absentmindedly doodle in the margins. Mrs. Brown tended to stay at her desk, but she seemed to zone in on Katie today. She ambled over to Katie's desk and squatted beside her.

"Miss Harrison," she said, her smile yellowed from years of smoking. "Are you doing okay today?"

Katie mumbled something that we couldn't hear.

"No, no, don't apologize. It's a difficult time," Mrs. Brown said, patting Katie's arm.

Katie looked relieved for a moment. "Thanks, Mrs. Brown," she said.

"Senior year is stressful for students," Mrs. Brown continued. "It's a wonder you can focus at all, with all of those college applications due so soon."

Katie's face fell, and we felt it. Mrs. Brown was just like every other adult, after all. Unwilling to talk about Hailey and unable to understand how we were feeling.

"Keep working," Mrs. Brown said, rising to stand. "The midterm is still important. Still have to keep up that GPA." She headed back to her desk.

We turned in our half-hearted essays, barely reaching the word requirement, thinking how we could have written a novel about Hailey if only anyone gave us the chance.

We did not know how to cope with this frustration. Hailey had been the worst. That much was true. Wasn't it? She had inserted herself, unwanted, into every social situation. She had taken every opportunity to leech attention, even from situations completely unrelated to her,

like trying to wring milk from stones. But it was wrong that she should be forgotten or, worse, not even known.

Even though we were nearing the end of October, the southern humidity continued to saturate the air around us on warm days, and as we breathed it in, wiping sweat from our hairlines, we were torn between wanting time to march on into cooler weather and wanting to freeze time and stay as close to Hailey and Peter as we could. It seemed that the more time passed, the more they drifted away from us like twin leaves, dead and brown, swept away in a river's current. The Harvest Festival was coming up fast and our school became increasingly involved, posting more and more fliers on the walls, urging sign-ups for activities and volunteer work, and celebrating what it saw as our town's important and admirable history.

This year was the twenty-second festival, held every November. It was a way to fill the time between Halloween and Thanksgiving, prime time for anything pumpkin-related. As children, we had looked forward to it as much as Christmas. "Is it time yet?" we would ask our parents weeks ahead, the anticipation expanding in our bodies like the helium in the balloons that they handed out for free at the ticket table. When we went, our parents would give us five dollars or so, then they meandered around, buying a beer and eventually unfolding umbrella chairs, planting themselves in the wide grassy area near the stage amidst a circle of their parent-friends. While they planted themselves like trees, we pooled our money then ran from vendor to vendor, trying to see how many goodies we could afford. After gorging on candy apples and fried cookie dough, cotton candy and caramel popcorn, we played tag or Red Rover behind the stage, where local bands rotated. The Unmanned Planes, consisting of middle-aged men wearing Grateful Dead shirts, had been part of the lineup for as long as we could remember. We kicked

off our shoes and ran until our chests burned and our heads pounded, then let ourselves fall back into the grass as our bodies slowly caramelized in the sun. Old Mrs. Downing, a widow with a long gray braid running down her back, would bring her Shetland pony, Butterscotch, and take turns giving us all rides. Even when we were too old to ride him (“It would be cruel,” Mrs. Downing said), we packed baby carrots in our pockets and visited Butterscotch, letting him nibble the offerings from our hands, his whiskery lips wetting our palms.

The festival had changed little through the years. The same vendors still showed up, sometimes offering a new fried treat (the year before, it had been fried watermelon, which didn’t sell well—our town was one of habits). Lucy Woodward’s mother, who had displayed hippie tendencies with her organic herb garden and afternoon kombucha, still sold earrings and necklaces constructed from hand-painted wooden beads. Mrs. Downing still brought Butterscotch. The pageant contestants still paraded across the stage, smiling too widely when they lost before quickly leaving the stage. The same bands played, with newly founded high school bands joining the rotation for a year or two before disbanding either over “creative differences,” as they nearly always said, or as the members graduated and left for college.

Spring Hill High was heavily involved, primarily in providing free labor for the various booths, games, food vendors, and special events. Most of our parents were just as wrapped up in the festivities, waiting year-round to sit in their lawn chairs, chatting about nothing at all as the afternoon faded into dusk, happily oblivious to the goings-on around them.

Our town’s identity relied on this exciting oasis of activity in the desert of sleepy town happenings, but how could anyone go about baking pies and setting up the hay bale maze for the little kids and signing up to work backstage at the pageant after not one, but two deaths? How could they expect us to move on like that?

If anything, the town and our school seemed even more invested this year. Perhaps their peppiness only seemed peppier in contrast to our grief, or perhaps they were trying to eclipse the sadness with extra pep. Either way, we couldn't stand it.

Sign-ups for activities had been lower than usual, so one day, a Monday, for the first few minutes of first block, everyone was forced to line up in their classes and sign up for his or her own choice of forced labor.

We reluctantly stood, and in electives and mixed classes, we were the last in line. There were sign up sheets for every tent, from fried cinnamon rolls to the ring toss, in which the prize was the jars of jam that participants tossed rings onto for a dollar. Where was the sign up for missing Peter? Or losing sleep over Hailey? Or being emotionally neglected by the adults in our lives? Those were the activities we were well-acquainted with, the activities that we excelled at. As the teachers smiled widely, the same smiles our parents wore as they asked how our day was over lukewarm dinners of meatloaf or fried chicken, we fervently believed that no one could be emotionally neglected better than we could. We had been well trained in that skill.

In the end, we picked some activity or other, most of us signing up for the pageant, where we could work backstage, away from the crowds and the false cheer. We could hide amongst the racks of costumes and tables of makeup and donuts, where darkness and silence were required for the show, so we wouldn't have to be seen or speak to anyone but each other, whispering in corners. Better yet, we might not even have to show up backstage. Usually there were enough helicopter pageant moms backstage that additional help was barely needed.

The sign-up sheets were posted in the common area at the end of the day, and students congregated around them, checking to see if their friends had signed up for the same activities that they had.

We drew together naturally, like lead to a magnet.

“You guys sign up for the pageant?” Lucy Woodward asked, her hair tied back in one of her mother’s hand-dyed bandanas.

“I did. It was the best of all bad options,” Millie said.

“Same here,” Benji said. Most everyone else agreed.

Scanning the lists, past names dotted with hearts and smiley faces, we were relieved to see that it looked as though the pageant would be primarily staffed by our senior class, away from the other classes, giddy and immature in their inability to see how utterly pointless and inappropriate it all was.

We became increasingly morose both in school and at home. Many of us took to skipping first period, too tired and unmotivated to enter the rowdiness of high school so early in the mornings, instead preferring to spend out time quietly picking at breakfast burritos and biscuits as we sat in our cars in the parking lot, watching the rest of the students rush past us into the regular rhythm of a normal daily life.

We were restless at night as well, unable to sleep and tossing and turning. When we did drift off, our dreams of chase continued. Some of us delved into internet holes where we stayed, reading deeply about unsolved mysteries and horrific crimes, breathing them in like air, until the dim light of morning began to break over the trees in our backyards. Others sat at their windows, secretly smoking and exhaling into the night breeze, watching the smoke drift like ghosts out into the night over our suburban lawns.

CHAPTER IV

THE MUDDING SPOT

The school seemed reluctant to deal with our new habit of tardiness, and we were fine being left alone. We should have known it was too good to be true though, to be late every day without repercussion. Our sweet respite was cut short after Katie had left her door unlocked, which we heard about after the fact, from our parents, of all people, passed through the phone tree.

Katie's mom had woken up in the middle of the night one night to get some water. She had started menopause unusually early, apparently, and had been having trouble sleeping, often waking overheated after having dreams of burning to a crisp on tropical islands when she didn't take her melatonin (our parents could have left out these details).

She saw the pink light of Katie's lamp from under her door, and peeked inside, thinking it strange that Katie should be up so late on a school night.

Mrs. Harrison was appalled and shocked to find that her daughter had crawled through her second-story bedroom window.

"Katie, what are you doing?" Her voice was a high screech she hadn't heard come from her body before, surprising herself.

Katie stood out on the roof of the porch below, her arms outstretched and head leaned back as though possessed. She teetered precariously at the edge of their red-shingled roof, the light of an unclouded moon illuminating her from above as though she were an angel, or a phantom.

It was a striking, unearthly image, and we could imagine ourselves in her place. Mrs. Harrison quickly recovered and rushed forward to reach through the window and grab her daughter around the waist, swinging her back into the house with a strength she hadn't known she had.

“Like when a new mother has the strength to lift a car off her baby,” Mrs. Harrison had said. “Adrenaline, you know.”

Our parents knew. They suggested we keep an eye on Katie, just in case.

After the incident with Katie, which, Katie told us, had actually included her mother shrieking so loudly that she was nearly knocked off the roof and into the bushes below, followed by an hour of overreacting howling as her mother cradled her like an infant against her chest, despite Katie's struggles, our parents were on edge. Mrs. Harrison had, of course, called all the parents the next morning, warning them that we were all suicidal teens on the edge, and that something would have to be done.

With a kind of frantic fervor we had rarely seen from them, except for Black Friday sales or when our in-laws were coming into town, our parents threw themselves into overdrive. They banded together into some kind of conglomerate intent on protecting us from what they believed to be our number one threat: ourselves. In the face of our consecutive losses, our parents somehow managed to make the worst of an already terrible situation. They hardened into a solid steel wall, intent on blocking out all the light left in our dreary lives. Family dinners had all the cheer of funerals, curfews were tightened until we were hermits, and our parents interrogated us on a near daily basis about our mental wellbeing. The uniformity of their reactions was unsettlingly uncanny, as if our tragedies had made an army of them.

“Are you happy?” they asked like clockwork, sitting gingerly on our beds or peering at us too intently over dinner.

“Of course,” we replied with haste.

“Are you sure?” they pushed.

“Yes,” we said through gritted teeth.

“Are you really sure?” Their persistence was suffocating. They had neglected us after Hailey, but this kind of attention was worse than an uncomfortable silence. They somehow wanted to enter the messy labyrinth of our grief while stoically refusing to allow us to talk about Hailey, to speak aloud about what she had meant to us and how that had changed, to have a conversation on our terms instead of theirs.

Were we sure we were happy? No, we were not sure. In fact, we were one hundred percent sure that we were unhappy.

In the face of our newly restrictive curfews and surveillance and increased insomnia, many of us began sneaking out after dark to be with the only people who understood us: each other. At first, we met only on Friday nights, a celebration of another week’s end, but as our parents’ strictness increased, so did the frequency of our meetings. Our hours were inconsistent. Someone’s father might be spending a late night watching the Discovery Channel or someone’s mother might be reading romance novels until the late hours, and we would have to adjust our schedule. We preferred after midnight, for the security of sleeping parents but also, admittedly, for the illicit fun of it.

That is, those who could sneak out, sneaked out. Some, like Benji, were unable to slip past their parents’ defenses. Benji had been interrupted mid-escape by a blaring motion sensor

his parents had installed on his second-story bedroom window. He had gotten used to stretching his long limbs down the side of the house and landing, cat-like, on the lid of the trashcan.

“I knew it!” his mother had cried with a little too much glee, as if she’d won a guessing game on a gameshow. Benji had relayed the whole sad story the next day at school.

“They’ve all gone nuts, man,” he had said, wildly glancing around us as though uncovering some kind of conspiracy. The rest of us took advantage of our precious freedom while it lasted, aware of the speed with which our parents had learned to communicate.

Alerted by text messages passed from person to person, we would slide open our windows and slip down the siding of our houses in dark clothes, clutching our phones.

A few days after the crackdown, we met at midnight sharp at the mudding spot, just past the Oaky Trails neighborhood. The mudding spot was a cleared out lot surrounded by trees and overgrown brush where we often came to spin our cars around after a good rain, splattering our windshields with mud. Adults did not approve, so it was the perfect place to meet. Those who lived in Oaky Trails walked, and those who lived farther took their bikes to avoid the noise and light of cars, although we hated giving up an opportunity to drive.

We gathered around a few phones laid flat on the ground, their flashlights shining upward in a hazy beam of light. Someone had tried to be clever and turned on a YouTube video of a crackling campfire. Someone else had brought a couple six-packs. A couple of people lit up cigarettes, and the smoke mingled with our breath in the air. We wished we had s’mores, but didn’t say so, at the risk of sounding babyish.

“Has Benji’s mom called anyone’s parents yet?” Trey asked, reminding us of Benji’s failed escape.

Not that anyone knew of, but we were sure it was coming, the final nail in our coffin of doom. We needed to do something.

“We could run away,” Sally suggested, although without conviction. Maybe if we had the money. We wondered if she was kidding, but didn’t ask.

“We could strike,” Lucy said, her face obscured by the eery shadows cast that the iPhones cast. It wasn’t a surprising suggestion from her, given her hippie mother. But we were only seventeen, some of us eighteen. Our only idea of strikes came from vaguely remembered lessons about unions and the civil rights movement in our American History classes. Besides, what would we strike? Our families?

Our families.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Millie said. Rumor had it that her parents had tried to take her phone but she had flat-out refused, flipped them off, and slammed her bedroom door in their stunned faces. If anyone could figure out how to strike, she would.

“How do we do that?” we asked.

“Maybe not a strike, per se, but a boycott. A boycott of our families,” she said, shivering with excitement. They tried to put his arm around her shoulders, mistaking the shiver for a chill, but she shrugged him off and continued. “They want us to stay home, to stay in our rooms, so let’s do that. We’ll stay in our rooms and refuse to leave. Don’t go downstairs and say good morning, don’t come down for dinner, don’t even go to church when they come knocking on Sunday morning.”

Skip church? Our mothers would have a coronary.

We loved it.

Around one in the morning, a police car came snooping down the street. Behind our wall of trees, we quickly turned off the flashlight of our phones and split. We departed with determination, with hope, and with the feeling that triumph and freedom could be just around the corner.

We were far too excited to behold our parents' reactions when we refused to go to church on Sunday. When we sneaked back into our bedrooms, we took boxes of Pop-Tarts and granola bars to hoard and steel ourselves for the days ahead. Friday morning, when we didn't come down for breakfast, our parents knocked on our doors. Some of us said we didn't feel well and others claimed a headache.

"Take some aspirin," our parents prescribed, oblivious. "Let me know if I can get you anything." They shuffled back down the hallway into the heart of the house, while we stayed on the fringes, refusing to join. In our rooms, we pattered around, surfing the internet, playing video games, even cleaning the mess that was the bane of our mothers' existence, just to pass the time. We had been steeped in anticipation and the exciting connotation that came with the word "boycott," but now, in the reality of it, the hours dragged on as slowly as if we'd actually been in school. Was this how all boycotters felt? Their minds dulled by the slow passage of time as they waited for triumph?

We wanted our parents to wake up and realize that we were in pain, that we were not fine, that we couldn't just go about our normal lives like they wanted us to. We needed them to see that, after Peter and Hailey's deaths, we were not the same.

By lunch, our hovering mothers began to fret and their knocks on our door were the most exciting part of our mornings. "How about a sandwich? Do you want me to call the doctor?"

We said no thanks or replied that we weren't hungry.

"Well, all right," they said, reluctance dripping from their voices.

They were noticing, and we were glad. We texted each other, giddy and excited. The boycott was working. Our texts were littered with firework and thumbs-up emojis. Let our parents wish we would come out of our rooms, back into the world. Let them see that it was better to let us have our freedom than to force us to lock ourselves away.

"Okay," our parents said. "Do you want some soup?"

We did not. We wanted victory and the satisfaction of teaching them a lesson. Treat us like adults and loosen the reins. Until that happened, we lay sprawled on our beds, scrolling on Instagram or ESPN, and watched the light from our bedroom windows move across the room like clouds. When the shadows grew long, our parents again came knocking, this time with greater force.

"Dinner time," they said.

"No thank you."

"I need you to open the door." Their voices reached a higher pitch.

"I'm good, thanks."

"Open the door. Now." Their voices dropped to the tone reserved for stern discipline. We usually hated it, but now we loved the hardness of their voices, the frustration. It mirrored how we felt, railing against a wall of anyone who didn't understand us.

When we refused again, our mothers started to cry and our fathers yell, or, as they would say, use their outdoor voices. When we still refused, we realized a flaw in our plan. Mothers desperately poked at the locked doors with bobby pins and flung them open in a panic, tears

flowing. Some fathers actually used their shoulders as battering rams and burst the doors open in an aggression we had not yet seen in our short lives.

Oh shit, Benji texted everyone right before his mother burst threw his door and fell from the force of her own momentum right onto the screen of his laptop, cracking it.

The result was a barrage of phone calls to Mr. Hyland, our school's only counselor. It turned out that confronting our parents, paranoid and strict after another kid's suicide, with the wise idea of locking ourselves in our rooms, out of sight, exacerbated their fears rather than offering the clarity of perspective. It also turned out that after such a stunt, parents were even less likely to listen.

Mr. Hyland was eager to listen and advise in the way that made us want to clam up around him. He was short and thin and wore a brightly patterned bow ties. He looked as young as we were and had the irritating, impassioned demeanour of a fresh graduate, inexperienced and eager to insert himself into the world with naive ideas and misguided plans. Friday night was probably the best night of his life. Perhaps due to his excitement and perhaps due to our parents' hysteria, he agreed to make a series of house calls on Saturday, the following day.

His visits were terrible. He started at Trey's house, made the rounds, hit Benji's around noon, passed through the Oaky Trails neighborhood, and ended at Millie's house. Each visit was held intervention-style in our living rooms, our parents on the couch, us perched in a chair or on a footstool, and Mr. Hyland in between. Afterward, our parents headed to the kitchen phone to call other parents and we retreated to our rooms to alert each other. All the meetings seemed to be the same, as if Mr. Hyland had a script. It was what we had expected.

“I know it’s been difficult since the loss of your classmate,” he said, taking a sip of the coffee or sweet tea that our parents specially prepared and provided for him, as if we were some kind of special house guest.

“Classmates,” we were quick to remind him.

Then later, “Have you had thoughts of suicide?”

We were teenagers. Who hadn’t? “No,” we said. “But Hailey--”

He cut us off. “This is about you. Not anyone else.”

It wasn’t though, and that was what he couldn’t see. He couldn’t see the echoes of Hailey riding her pink bike down the street or hear her pitchy laugh. This was about Peter and Hailey and how we couldn’t talk about Hailey, and about how in the wake of the most desperate act she could muster, they had brushed her under the rug like dust instead of the real, living, solid person she was, a person like us.

It was their fault that we couldn’t properly grieve her, that we couldn’t process this and get past it. We were stuck like rocks wedged in the sediment at the bottom of the river, unable to move on and get past this thing that was Hailey. Mr. Hyland and his forced attempt at communication was everything that was wrong with our situation.

“We’re all here for you. Me. Your parents. Your school,” Mr. Hyland said, finished up his predetermined lecture.

Yes, of course they were, they all were, before they rushed off to call their friends and talk about us instead of listen to us, or to make babies of us and offer us hot chocolate, ignoring the real issues.

When we went up to our rooms Saturday before dinner, we stayed there. It was no longer out of a sense of guerilla warfare tactics, history lessons flashing in our heads, but with a sense of

defeat and hopelessness. Children, children, they treated us like nothing but children. Do what they say, say what they want to hear, be where they want us to be. We weren't kids anymore and they couldn't see that.

Back at school on Monday, Mr. Hyland could apparently sense that his counseling attempts weren't working because he intensified his efforts. He came to each of our homerooms one day to make his announcement.

"Hi everyone!" he said, gripping a clipboard tightly across his chest. "How are we all doing today?" His voice had the tone of a preschool teacher or a Muppet.

"We're great, Mr. Hyland," our teachers said after a beat, making eyes at us, urging us to respond with them.

"I know you all have been through some tough times, but we're going to get through them together," Hyland said, nearly dropping his clipboard. "I think some one-on-one conversations where we can both sit down and really get to know each other will help."

Well, there was no way in hell that was going to happen. We knew none of us would ever stop by Hyland's office to chat.

"I know you're all busy, so I'm going to invite you each to come by my office for a few minutes during your classes," Hyland said, but the word *invite* didn't feel like it would be optional. "Your teachers have already agreed."

Our teachers smiled at him in a way that indicated that they had been given little choice in their agreeing.

"Okay, kiddos! I'll see you all soon!" he said, then swept onto the next class.

And so, usually one time every class period, Hyland called us one by one out of class-- interrupting our learning, if you will--to persevere in his quest to solve all of our problems

without actually having to listen to us even once. We would be sitting in Calculus II or Government and Economics, our teacher would receive a call on their classroom phone, and we would know that one of us was about to be lifted from the doldrum of lecture as if to a strange spaceship where our emotions would be poked and prodded, as though answers could be so easily found.

“Katie,” our teacher would call. Or “Malachi” or “Georgia” or “Benji.” And when it was our name, our hearts would drop like a stone to our stomachs and we steeled the walls around ourselves, ensuring that Mr. Hyland would not get in.

Mr. Hyland’s office was down the main hall, near the administrative offices of Mr. Johnson and his vice principals, but more offset, separate from the intimidation of their authority, which we associated with getting in trouble for mouthing off in class or, for a few, instigating fights and the like. Hyland’s office was painted a warm yellow that evoked sunshine, a tactic he no doubt gathered from some outdated book about how to counsel teenagers. His office walls were covered in motivational posters, the kind with the stock photo image surrounded by a thick black border with a generic word or phrase at the bottom that we assumed was meant to inspire introspection or change. MOTIVATION, the posters shouted down at us, or POTENTIAL or EXCELLENCE. We hated this posters, but after a few visits, most of us found that we had a favorite that our eyes would drift to in quiet moments or when we wanted to avoid eye contact. Many of us were partial to one with a picture of an enormous, ancient tree, its roots spreading out under the shadow of its thick foliage. At the bottom, it said CONNECT.

Along one wall sat a blue suede couch, worn and faded from use, with a coffee table that housed stacks and stacks of various pamphlets about stereotypical teenage issues, from eating disorders to teenage pregnancy to depression to dyslexia. Mr. Hyland seemed to be running low

on depression pamphlets, and some of us had one stuffed at the bottom of our backpacks, never opened.

We knew only of each other's conversations with Mr. Hyland from our own communication, but most people immediately texted others afterward to rave about how unbelievably ridiculous he was and the texts were passed around.

He asked how I was feeling, Sally had texted Katie. As if he doesn't know.

He offered me a fucking Kleenex, Trey messaged Benji. Can you believe that?

He's the worst, was the most shared sentiment, usually accompanied by the devil face emoji or the smiley with Xs over the eyes.

We felt wholly unified in our hatred of Hyland and everything he represented. He was everything that was wrong with our town and our parents and the adults in our lives. Everyone left their meetings with him angry and ranting, and our reiterations of how awful he was continually validated our anger and banded us closer together.

That is, until after one particularly long meeting that even went past the end of the school day, Katie emerged from his office. She didn't rant, didn't rave, didn't rage against the injustice of our lives. In fact, she didn't say anything at all. Finally, as we stood loitering around our cars in the parking lot, Millie spoke up.

"What did Hyland try to make you talk about today?"

We wanted to know. After every meeting with Hyland, it was now a habit, almost a rule, that we all shared and commiserated over our experiences. We resented that Katie wasn't forthcoming this time, that we had been made to ask.

Katie untucked her long brown hair from behind her ear and scuffed a sequined Sperry topsider against the pavement. "Nothing."

We looked at each other, eyebrows raised.

“What do you mean nothing? It’s always something,” Sally said, laughing a little, trying to lighten the mood.

Katie shrugged. “Not this time,” she said.

She was lying. There was no coming out of a meeting with Hyland in which nothing happened. That was the whole point of the meetings. He wanted us to talk, to discuss, to say exactly what he wanted, and we never did. It was a battle of the wills every time, and would be until one of us gave in. Maybe Katie gave in.

As was tradition, the town was holding weekly meetings every Thursday night in the rec room of Spring Hill Baptist Church. At the meetings, primarily run by the PTA, they discussed everything concerning the festival. Really, it just seemed like a way to pat themselves on the back every week, boasting about how great it would be this year, or to have mass freakouts over trivial details like whether the field roped off for parking should have marked rows, or if the psychic medium from the next town over would be able to make it this year.

Since Hyland and our parents had teamed up to monitor our wellbeing, our parents had been frogmarching us to these meetings every week, our mothers keeping us pinned to their sides the whole time. We assumed that everyone was undergoing the same restrictive, forced attendance, until one week we saw that Katie had come to the meeting but her mother had not.

At the end of the meeting, while our mothers said long goodbyes to their friends and made promises to each other about grabbing lunch or coffee soon, we filtered out of the rec room into the wide gravel parking lot off to the side of the church. At long last, the weather was cooling down, and we stood in circles talking about nothing in particular. Some of the braver of

us pulled out cigarettes, mostly just to further piss off the parents when they came outside. Katie walked out by herself, after us but before our parents, wearing gray sweatpants and a blue puffer jacket that was undoubtedly too warm for the season.

“Katie!” a couple of us called, and we turned toward her.

She paused awkwardly, seeming caught in the decision of whether she wanted to keep heading to her car, parked in the back row near the woods, or to accept our quasi-invitation to join us. She slipped her keys back into her pocket, smiled a stilted smile, and walked over to where we stood.

“Hey, guys.” The smile faltered.

“Where’s your mom?” Benji asked. He would, as he had the biggest helicopter mom out of any of us and would probably be a mama’s boy for life.

“At work, I think,” she said.

“You came to this dumb meeting when you didn’t have to?” Trey asked with a laugh.

“Yeah, I guess I did,” she said.

“Why?” Trey asked.

Katie played with the zipper of her coat, running it up and down the metallic teeth, then left it zipped up nearly to her neck. “Oh, you know,” she said, waving her hand as if waving off a fly. “Why not?”

We could think of a million reasons why not, but gave a noncommittal murmur of agreement. “Right, right,” said Millie.

Clearing our throats, we went back to our conversations. At some point, Katie left, her car gone by the time our parents finally left, in annoyingly high spirits and unable to be brought down by our grim demeanors no matter how hard we tried. Eventually we let them chatter away

on the way home as we rolled down our windows and felt the night air chill our faces, letting ourselves get lost in thought.

Katie was coming to meetings on her own. Who would come on their own? We pulled out our phones and texted each other.

What the hell was that? Millie messaged.

Who goes to those fucking meetings if they don't have to? Trey wrote.

Does she actually care about the stupid festival? Sally texted.

None of us could figure it out. We couldn't get inside Katie's head. She had locked us out. What did this mean, to have one of us acting like this, giving the impression that she actually cared enough to take initiative and show up on her own? We knew one thing: it meant she was no longer feeling what we felt and no longer thinking what we thought. No longer feeling the inspiring, persistent rebellion of injustice. We began to see Katie as someone separate.

At first we had thought that out of any of us, Katie must have been the most angry with how the town and school were handling Hailey's suicide. They had been best friends, after all, since at least middle school. Middle school was notoriously the worst, but it was also a time when, through the grueling combination of puberty and the messy transition from child to young adult, our social status and reputation were formed. Although that didn't necessarily mean reputation in terms of the scandalous, that was certainly the case for some, such as Cheryl Combs, who arrived to first period one Monday in seventh grade with the first hickey.

No one had known how to handle the obvious presence of the bruised blotch on Cheryl's neck, to which she drew attention by pulling her hair back in high ponytails and donning glittery

chokers for a week. Everyone waited for someone to make the first move and define how such things would be handled. Should we think she was cool? Lame? Desperate? A slut? How we would view Cheryl depended on how others would view Cheryl, although we wouldn't admit it.

Katie had long been a friend to everyone, well-liked and pleasant to peers, parents, and teachers alike. She gave teachers presents before Christmas break and made a good impression on parents when she came over to our houses and was the person we wanted as a partner when we had to pair up in class. If we had superlatives in middle school, she would have been our Best-All-Around or Miss Congeniality. She laughed freely in the halls and gave out smiles like candy on Halloween.

It made sense that Katie would be our guidepost, our lighthouse. She solved our problem with Cheryl's hickey at lunch. Katie went through the line line normal, selecting chicken tenders and fries with two packets of honey mustard, then sat down beside Cheryl, who had suffered an unusually lonely lunch so far. Katie complimented her sparkling purple necklace then leaned forward, in the private, conspiratorial way that girls do that would become so familiar to us in coming years. She smiled and giggled along with Cheryl throughout lunch, and then they walked to class together, friendly shoulders bumping, hunched with the weight of secrets and textbooks.

After this, Katie not only set the standard for how we reacted to each other, but she also solidified her reputation as a nice girl, a girl who could be trusted and who was a genuine friend. It was probably this reputation that led Hailey, who still struggled to find her place in Spring Hill even though she'd moved here several years ago. However, when most of us had been born here and known each other for our entire lives, finding a place to fit in was not an easy task. Hailey

latched on to Katie in the latter half of middle school like a drowning animal to a riverbank. Wherever Katie went, Hailey was there too.

We'd thought they were best friends. So it didn't make sense that Katie didn't feel our outrage over the town and school's treatment of her best friend's suicide. Maybe we didn't know Katie as well as we thought we did. No matter. She could go to the meetings and talk to parents and do whatever she wanted. We would proceed together, without her.

CHAPTER V

KATIE

Katie remembered Hailey in middle school as a blank slate, someone empty who was waiting to fill herself up somehow. Hailey had chestnut brown hair back then and braces constantly adorned with bubblegum pink rubber bands, and the color reminded Katie of the pink peppermint candies that her mother kept in the foyer to greet guests. Hailey had tried dabbling in chorus and basketball, but she couldn't sing and didn't work well on the team, so nothing stuck in terms of either interest or friend group. Katie didn't really know Hailey that well because there seemed to be nothing to know. She didn't mean that in a cruel way. It was just as if Hailey hadn't figured herself out yet, and if she didn't know herself, how could someone else really know her? But Katie didn't mind when Hailey sat by her at lunch one day in seventh grade and kept showing up every day after.

They hung out every day at school, although Katie never committed to Hailey in the kind of monogamous best friendship that Hailey seemed to want so badly. In class, Katie sometimes partnered with other girls in class if they asked for, and Hailey sometimes got upset. At Christmas, Hailey would buy Katie matching best friend necklaces or bracelets, the kind shaped like puzzle pieces or halves of heart with BEST on one and FRIENDS on the other. Katie bought Hailey Starbucks gift cards, which she also gave to her other friends. On weekends, Hailey wanted sleepovers with just the two of them, gossiping and watching movies like *Titanic* or *The Notebook* all night long, whereas Katie liked inviting others over to play board games or weave friendship bracelets together.

Hailey didn't exactly have other friends. She didn't talk to many other people in any kind of significant way, except if Katie was with her, and then she talked a lot, too much even, as if trying to prove that she was a fun person to be around. On the other hand, Katie liked to make lots of different friends. She enjoyed talking to people and getting to know them and they, in turn, reciprocated. This seemed to bother Hailey, but she did it to herself. Katie didn't want just one friend. A best friend isn't a boyfriend, her mother used to tell her when she vented about her frustration with Hailey. A best friend isn't some kind of significant other who you should be devoted to at the exclusivity of everyone else.

Katie prided herself on being patient and kind--a person who was generous with herself, a phrase she had read somewhere and liked so much that she wrote it on a piece of notebook paper, decorating it with Crayola markers, and hanging it above her bed. *Be generous with yourself.* She liked to make friends and be a friend to others. Hailey was a difficult person to have as a friend, let alone the person that others saw as Katie's best friend, because Hailey was the opposite kind of person. She wasn't known to be patient, kind, or generous in any way. She was closed off both with others and herself. She didn't try to get to know others, and didn't let others get to know her.

Their freshman year had been difficult because they were transitioning to high school, but it had been particularly difficult for Katie because her parents had been fighting over how to discipline her younger brother, who had begun acting out. One time as they hung out before school started, Katie tried talking about it with Hailey.

"Did your parents ever fight?" she asked.

"Never," Hailey replied, reapplying strawberry kiwi lipgloss.

“Mine have been fighting.” She waited for a response. “It’s really hard. And my dad can get really mean.”

Hailey pouted her lips into her compact mirror.

“It’s just really hard,” Katie said, twisting the strap of her backpack. She knew that Hailey could talk for hours about shopping or *Grey’s Anatomy*, but about personal stuff, she said nothing.

“What’s your mom like when she gets mad?” Katie asked.

“She doesn’t,” Hailey said. The bell rang and she snapped her compact closed and they went off to class.

Katie tried to let Hailey get to know her and to get to know Hailey, to peel back the thick layers of the superficial that she covered herself with like a second skin, but Katie rarely got anywhere. And yet Hailey stuck around, glued by her side through middle and high school.

Katie had learned to deal with her shadow. She had to admit, it was kind of nice to have someone there, someone who was so loyal, even if Hailey wasn’t the person that Katie would have chosen to have around. She had other friends who were kinder or more fun, but none who stuck quite like Hailey did. However, that all changed when Peter Bishop died.

That first day that everyone began congregating in the hallway to watch Georgia and Tucker work on Peter’s mural had been difficult for everyone. Katie had stood there, lost in thought with everyone else, when Hailey had declared that she had a crush on Peter.

This declaration had clearly irritated the rest of the class, but for Katie, it went beyond irritation. Hailey, who had basically crowned herself Katie’s best friend but had rarely shared any personal details or secrets with Katie, Hailey, who had regularly enjoyed rating and mocking

boys based on their looks but never admitted to any kind of serious crush or feelings, had now seemingly confided a devastating secret to the class at large. This set Katie reeling.

If Hailey had really liked Peter, why hadn't she said so? Why didn't she call the minute she heard about Peter and lean on Katie, treat her like the friend that Katie had tried to be for her? Why would she have chosen to completely bypass her and turn to everyone else, whom she had never tried befriending and whom had never much cared about her?

None of that had made any sense to Katie. If a person had a secret and needed to talk to someone about it, that person talked to a friend. Nothing else made sense. Katie liked sharing secrets with friends. It helped cement bonds and made her feel important, somehow, although there were some private confessions she wished she hadn't heard through the years (Cheryl Combs' mysterious hickey in seventh grade had come from Millie Ullman's older brother, but Katie never told anyone). The thought that her own, self-identified best friend didn't see her as a confidant was simply unfathomable. It did not compute. Therefore, Katie could only assume that Hailey wasn't telling the truth. This wasn't a real secret, but yet another performance meant to garner attention from others and make herself known.

Katie had known Peter. Not well, but enough. They had grown up together, after all, born and raised in Spring Hill. They had ridden bikes together and gone to vacation bible school together in the summers. Peter was just a good guy. He was nice and funny and respectful and offered sticks of gum to people when he got one for himself. Katie had always thought well of him.

When Katie deduced that Hailey's declaration was a lie, their friendship suddenly shifted, like the tectonic plates they had been learning about in earth science class. Hailey hadn't felt it, not at first, but Katie knew right away. She felt the jarring movement and resultant rift that

sprang up between them, lava-like anger cooling into a cold shoulder. She had turned and left after Hailey's outburst in the hall. Peter had deserved better than to be the butt of some gimmick for attention.

That was why, in Mr. Davenport's creative writing class, Katie hadn't been able to contain herself about the poems. It had been bad enough when Hailey had tried to somehow stake a claim on Peter in front of his mural, like a dog marking its territory. When Mr. Davenport asked everyone to write about their feelings, Katie had appreciated a much-needed minute to process things privately and silently. She couldn't believe it when Hailey wanted to share her poem. It was the mural outburst happening all over again. This horrible public intrusion into the private. Hailey making a show to get attention and lying and using poor Peter to do it. So Katie had snapped and had told her, not in so many words, to shut up. Afterward, she couldn't believe that she'd actually done that to her supposed best friend in front of everyone. She was embarrassed. However, she didn't know how to apologize. And if she was honest with herself, she didn't even think that an apology was due. That was really the beginning of the end of their friendship, if she had ever been able to call it that.

In the weeks that followed, Katie had watched as Hailey became increasingly unbearable and how quickly it became apparent that the class's hatred of Hailey was growing. They glared at Hailey, their eyes narrowing whenever she walked into a room. Any hangout or meet-up to which most people were invited, via details spread through text message, Hailey was left out of.

One time after school, Katie had headed out with everyone else to her car in the parking lot. She had sat in the front seat, rubbing her temples. Almost every afternoon since the trouble

with Hailey started, she'd been developing headaches. It was raining out, but not too badly. It was the kind of light drizzle that was irritating in the way that it made Katie crave a real outburst.

Someone leaned on their horn, and there was Hailey, a row across from Katie, standing out in the parking lot in front of her car, a silver SUV which stood out for the hot pink plastic eyelashes attached around the headlights. The hood of her car was open and she was waving her arms, blocking the traffic of students eager to leave and be anywhere else besides school for one even one more minute. Katie cracked her window and cold rain dripped inside onto her skin, making the hairs on her arm stand on end.

Trey Watkins, temper flaring, was leaning out the window of his black Honda Accord, his face red as he yelled at Hailey. "Fucking move, Matthews!"

"My engine won't start!" Hailey called back.

"What did I say?" Trey hit the gas, lurching toward Hailey, then pumped the brakes. She jumped to the side and Trey swerved around her, speeding out of the parking lot.

"Does anyone have jumper cables?" Hailey called to no one in particular, but she was just yelling into the abyss. "Can someone help me?"

As the cars continued filing out of the parking lot, Katie pulled out in line with everyone else.. She kept her eyes focused straight ahead, and she saw the movement of Hailey waving out of the corner of her eye, she rolled up her window.

As quickly as Hailey had latched onto her back in middle school, Katie stopped answering Hailey's calls, stopped responding to text messages, stopped communicating or accepting communication. It was strange. She knew that she should feel bad, but she didn't. Shouldn't she miss Hailey, who had been like an extra limb to her for years? Hailey had always

been there--or, rather, she had and she hadn't. She had been there physically, but never emotionally. Any real conversation with her had only been about superficial things like what dresses they were wearing to the pageant (short and blue for Katie, long and silver for Hailey) or what the homework was (Hailey never knew; Katie did every time) or who was dating who and how long they thought it would last (Benji and Lucy, less than two weeks, which turned out to be eerily accurate). Katie could never talk to Hailey about real things, like how she felt about her parents (it got more complicated every year) or the future (med school or law school, if her parents got to pick) or herself (to be determined). Because of this, Katie had a hard time mustering guilt over feeling bad that she wasn't there for Hailey now that Hailey needed someone.

Katie had kept a diary for most of her life, which she wrote in every night out of habit. Anytime that she tried to write about Hailey, her hand simply hovered in midair, the pen suspended over the page but never touching it. She had no words. Finally, she drew two girls, one decked in a long white dress and feathered wings, the other all in black her face scowling, hair pooling at her feet. A devil and an angel. She quickly turned the page and began making a to-do list for the next day.

At school, the seniors seemed to band together in the wake of Peter's death as the rest of the world kept spinning. It was as if all of the grief and confusion and anger that the seniors felt became so much that it needed a dumping ground, and Hailey had made herself readily available. Their toxicity had found its outlet and filled Hailey like a sandbag. This was clearly taking a toll on Hailey, who had become thin and had bags under her eyes, but Katie just looked the other way.

Once, Hailey had come to her house, long after the foundation of their past friendship had cracked. It was so strange; it was as if a teacher had shown up to her house. It was late at night, after Katie had come back from the vigil that Malachi had held for Peter at Boykin Pond. Katie's parents were up in their bedroom, laughing at some late night talk show, so when someone knocked on the door, Katie went to see who it was. The knocking had been so light, so tentative, that she was sure it must be a child and wondered why a child would be out alone. Hailey stood at the door, baby pink headphones slung around her neck and in a full face of makeup, her hair straightened, Vera Bradley tote slung over her shoulder and their American History textbook clutched to her chest. Her smile looked strange in the yellow light of the porch. It didn't reach her eyes.

“Hey, Katie!” Hailey said, as if everything in the world was fine and nothing had happened out of the ordinary. “There's a test this week and I know how you freak out,” here she rolled her eyes, teasing, “so I was wondering if you want to study?” She rapped her acrylic nails on the cover of the textbook.

If she had shown up crying or upset or anything but cheerfully grinning that hollow smile, if she had shown up without a stitch of makeup on, with her hair a mess, if she had shown up in pajamas or a t-shirt or something that showed she no longer cared so much about her appearance, about what people thought about her, about getting attention, Katie might have smiled back, let her in, and everything might have been fine. If she had asked how Katie was or said she wanted to talk or that something was bothering her or if she had apologized about Peter, offered up some sort of excuse for her behavior, for the irritating, gratingly fake, repulsively terrible way that she was, for the person she was and had become, Katie could have gone back to

their amiable companionship, or, even more, maybe they could have finally become the best friends that everyone thought they were.

But that Sunday night, with bubblegum pop music whining tinnily from her headphones and her head cocked to one side like she was an oblivious puppy, it was clear that Hailey hadn't changed.

Katie shut the door.

Then Hailey had killed herself. Katie had heard about her death first over the morning announcements, with everyone else, and of the fact of her suicide in the hallway chatter between classes later on, while she switched out textbooks in her locker.

"The editor told me that we don't cover suicides," Cal, the newspaper intern, had reported when asked about any upcoming printed announcement or article, as there had been for Peter.

That was how Katie had found out that her best friend had committed suicide. Not from Hailey's mother, not from her own parents not from Mr. Johnson or her teachers, all of whom knew that Katie and Hailey had been joined at the hip and no doubt knew about the nature of Hailey's death through the grapevine. She learned from overhearing *other* people finding out. Katie had grabbed the textbook and slammed her locker.

In class, Mrs. Brown asked them to open to chapter thirteen, and Katie realized that her textbook didn't go that far. She had grabbed the wrong textbook, and instead of her English book she was still holding her American History book. The one for the test that Friday, the one that Hailey had come to her door wanting to study for.

The next few days passed in a fog, and Katie missed a couple days of school, faking sick in her room, complaining of headaches and stomachaches and any kind of ache she could come up with. She had never skipped school before, so her parents trusted her. Katie lay in bed on Monday and couldn't stop thinking about Hailey.

Why hadn't she let Hailey in the door that night? If she had, would things be different? This was the consequence of, for once, not being kind. It was too much. But she hadn't been as bad as the rest of the seniors, had she? She couldn't stop the questions, couldn't stop wondering what the steps were in this path being taken. Had Katie's outburst at Hailey in Mr. Davenport's class somehow made the rest of the seniors feel that it was okay to leave Hailey out, to treat her the way that they did? How much of this was her fault? What percentage? Twenty? Fifty? One hundred? She wanted numbers and logic, a quantifiable answer for how much blame she should shoulder.

On Tuesday, Katie waited until her parents left for work and then walked to Hailey's house. They lived in the same neighborhood, although Hailey lived toward the back, where the bigger, fancier houses had gone in after the neighborhood's initial conception. Katie didn't know what to do with herself, but she felt that a polite, adult thing to do would be to visit Hailey's mom. Politeness and manners was something she felt in control of. In place of answers to her questions, she at least knew this.

Mrs. Matthews had always been as done-up as Hailey. She never left the house without makeup and wore only designer brands. Mrs. Matthews travelled a lot for business, so Katie had known her only in bits and pieces, through snippets of conversation over the years, but she knew that she was a very put-together, collected kind of person.

When Mrs. Matthews opened the door, at first she looked completely normal. She had her eyes lined and her lipstick on, her hair pulled to one side in a clip. She wore a pink sweater with gray dress pants. “Oh, Katie,” she had said. “Please, please come in.”

Katie had expected to say how sorry she was for Mrs. Matthews’s loss, perhaps give her a hug, and head home with a renewed sense of security as the kind of person who demonstrated good southern hospitality and kindness.

She hadn’t expected that Mrs. Matthews had been drinking, which she realized when Mrs. Matthews stumbled a little in her heels, pulling Katie into the house, sloshing a little vodka from the crystal glass in her hand onto Katie’s jacket. Mrs. Matthews sat her down in the living room and delved into a stream of chatter about everything from the gardener who hadn’t weeded properly to how busy work was these days to how quiet her life had become.

“Hailey was always blasting her stereo in her room,” Mrs. Matthews said with a laugh, although her face didn’t reflect the odd cheeriness of her tone. “It was that pop music ya’ll listen to,” she said, gesturing to Katie. “I bet you have that exact CD she used to play on repeat. With the girl singing about her boyfriend all the time.” She looked at Katie expectantly.

“A lot of them do that,” Katie said, trying to laugh it off.

“No, no,” Mrs. Matthews said fiercely, shaking her head, determined to get her point across. “The one who sang. About her boyfriend,” she emphasized. “Or about the other boyfriend. Tyler.”

“Taylor Swift?” Katie said.

“That’s the one!” Mrs. Matthews said excitedly, stamping her shoes on the carpet like a young child. “That one song is so good, but not after fifty or so times.” She kept talking about the music Hailey had liked. Katie listened and nodded at the appropriate times.

The longer she looked at Mrs. Matthews, the more she saw her slow unhinging since her daughter's passing. She had lined only one of her eyes, and her lipstick was drawn far outside of her lip line, giving a clownish effect. Her dress pants weren't pressed and, most surprisingly, Katie realized that she was wearing one of Hailey's sweaters, an expensive Christmas present she had bragged about one year. It had a coffee stain down one arm, faded so that it almost blended into the pink, where Katie remembered Hailey spilling her latte one time at Starbucks, then swearing and wiping at the sweater furiously, going on about how upset her mother would be when she saw.

"And on top of everything else, they had to cut the tie," Mrs. Matthews said, taking a sip from her nearly empty glass.

Katie found that she had zoned out. "I'm sorry, what?"

"That silk tie that she kept in her nightstand. The one Lawrence--I'm sorry, Mr. Matthews--the one that he wore every Christmas. You know, that one that she loved. They had to cut it to get her down."

Katie felt her skin grow cold.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Mrs. Matthews said, drooping toward Katie. "I'm sorry. That's too much. TMI, right?" She drained her drink and headed to the mini bar for a refill.

"Can I get you anything, honey?" she called over her shoulder.

Katie stood, feeling a little shaky. "Do you mind if I use the restroom?"

"Of course not, but go to the one upstairs. The one down here was in the middle of renovations when--" she stopped herself and looked down into her glass.

"No problem," Katie said. She headed upstairs, feeling unusually aware of her feet and how heavy they were.

She meant to head straight to the restroom, but instead felt herself careen toward Hailey's room as though pulled by a magnet.

She had expected everything to look completely different, but it was exactly the same. The same mess everywhere, on every surface. Makeup and old class notes and knickknacks and CDs were littered in familiar piles. She wanted Hailey to pop up from somewhere, from the little purple futon in the corner or the outdated reading nook by the window or her closet full of beloved clothes and tell Katie that it had all been a joke, that she had just wanted attention and hadn't they all missed her so much. But she didn't.

Then, Katie saw a flash of red. From the center of Hailey's ceiling fan, the cut remnants of the red tie swung in the breeze of the blades. Katie imagined Hailey standing on a chair under the fan, taking a deep breath.

What had Hailey seen? What had she felt? Thought? What was the final straw that tipped her, like an egg off the counter, from life into the choice not to live? What made her go from thinking about it to actually doing it? What made her research how to tie a noose, and pick her father's red silk tie, and hang it from her fan? What made her position a chair beneath it and take that step upward onto the chair, to slide that tie around her neck and feel it looped around her like a scarf or a necklace?

Katie ran into Hailey's bathroom and threw up. She reached for a hand towel but then stopped and balled up a wad of toilet paper to wipe her mouth with instead, not wanting to disturb any of what Hailey had left behind, wanting to leave it all as pristine as possible, frozen in the moments of her living.

"Katie?" Mrs. Matthews called from the hallway.

“In here, sorry,” Katie said, coming out of the bathroom. Mrs. Matthews had left her glass behind and instead held a black garment bag in her arms.

“I wanted to give you something,” she said, unzipping the bag just a crack. The silver sequins of Hailey’s pageant dress glinted against her sweater. “I think Hailey would want you to have this.” She handed it to Katie. “It’s been hanging on her door since she bought it. She had so much fun that day that you two went shopping for your dresses, and she was just so excited that the two of you were going to do the pageant together. She’d been thinking about asking you if you wanted to pair up for the talent portion, do something together, maybe sing or do that old hula-hooping routine ya’ll used to do in middle school.”

Katie remembered the routine that they had worked so hard to choreograph, practicing for hours in the sun until their scalps were burned along the parts of their hair. Hailey had been worried that the kids at school would think she had dandruff.

“Thanks, Mrs. Matthews,” she said, zipping the bag back up. They headed downstairs and to the front door.

“I have to ask you, Katie. You’re the only one who would know,” Mrs. Matthews said, picking at the pilling of Hailey’s sweater as she stood in the doorway. Her voice dropped. “Was it my fault? Was it me?” She kept her head down, not making eye contact.

“No, Mrs. Matthews, of course it wasn’t,” Katie said quickly.

Mrs. Matthews leaned her head back, exhaled, and wiped her eyes. “I shouldn’t be asking you these things. I’m sorry, honey.” She reached out and patted Katie’s arm. Even in a sweater, her hand was ice cold. “She was lucky to have a friend like you.”

Katie gave her a tight smile. Could she even call herself Hailey’s friend anymore? She hadn’t been there for Hailey, hadn’t even given her a chance when she showed up asking for one.

That wasn't a friend. That was someone dark and mean and cruel. What was the good of having some kind of moral code, some kind of accepted rules of behavior, if she didn't take the kindness on which she prided herself if she didn't use it even when she least wanted to? She hadn't lived up to the bar she set for herself. Had she ever?

"Thank you, Mrs. Matthews," Katie said. She headed home, Hailey's pageant dress draped over her arm.

Mrs. Matthews had asked Katie if she was to blame for her own daughter's suicide, but Katie had no one to ask about her own culpability. She desperately wanted a hard and fast answer to the question, to know firmly and resolutely whether she had to go on carrying a black cloud inside of her for the rest of her life, or if she could be forgiven and move forward. She couldn't ask her parents if their little girl was a quasi-murderer, she couldn't ask anyone at her church, she couldn't even ask anyone at school.

She wished that she could ask Hailey and find out what she had been thinking. But Hailey was six feet under. At least, Katie assumed that Hailey had been buried. There had been no funeral, no memorial service, nothing at all to give closure. But if she had been buried, there would have to be a grave.

The day after the encounter with Mrs. Matthews and the handing off of the dress, Katie returned to school, but she didn't talk to anyone. There was nothing to say, and there was certainly nothing that anyone else could say that she wanted to hear. After school, she drove straight to the cemetery, the better-kept, nondenominational one that she knew Mrs. Matthews, lapsed Presbyterian, would have picked, had she picked any at all. She parked along the roads of

the neighborhood behind the cemetery, not wanting any passersby to see her car. She wanted no companion, no friendly face.

If she had ever walked through a cemetery before, she couldn't remember it. She had vague memories of her mother carrying her when she was five, maybe six, through the tall grass of the cemetery in North Carolina where her grandmother was buried, but that was it. In her mind, under gray skies, grass would brush her legs, pushing her forward like waves toward her destination as tombstones lined her path. In reality, it was sunny and unseasonably warm. The grass was kept short and mosquitos bit at her arms. A groundskeeper gave her a curt nod when she passed him, trimming the low-hanging branches of a large oak tree. She stepped cautiously, lightly, trying her best to avoid the five or six feet in front of every tombstone, unable to shake the unsettling awareness that bodies lay below.

Then, there it was. Peter Bishop, Beloved Son and Friend.

"Hi, Peter," she said, her voice cracking and dry. She had thought she would speak to him, actually talk out loud, but now that she was here, that felt foolish. His body was here, but he wasn't here. She sat cross-legged on the ground out in front of where she imagined he lay, facing his tombstone. She wished she had brought flowers or something.

"Sorry," she said, "I came right from school." She picked at the grass.

She wanted to ask him if it was true, if Hailey had really liked him. He might not even have known, but Katie had to think that if Hailey had liked him, *like*-liked him, he would have somehow known. Had he liked her back? Had he been able to look past her pink superficiality, her sparkle-covered surface, to see the person underneath? Had he liked her laugh, maybe, or the way she pronounced words incorrectly all the time and blushed when corrected? Or had he not

reciprocated? Like everyone else, had he found her annoying? What had they meant to each other?

“Was it true?” she said, surprised at the words coming forth at her regular volume, not whispered or hushed, but born boldly into the humid air. Was it true, Peter? Or was Hailey lying?

But, in the end, did it matter? After all, what ended up mattering was not whether or not Hailey had told the truth. It didn’t matter whether she had actually liked Peter or not. What mattered was what Katie had done with her confession, how she had reacted. And everyone else in the class, too, who at this point seemed to have gone off the deep end.

The rest of the class dissolved into paranoid chaos and Katie realized that they really didn’t know each other at all. They didn’t see how they had contributed to Hailey’s decision to end her own life, how they had all been players in a game that they hadn’t realized was being played, even now that it was over. But then again, they didn’t see their guilt reflected in the disco ball sequins of a silver dress hung on the back of their closet doors.

Like everyone else, Katie received the text message invitations to sneak out and meet up in secret and not-so-secret places around town, but she never went and they never followed up with her. Instead she stayed home and watched the reflections of the sequins that dotted her ceiling like stars until she heard the click of her parents’ television turning off. When she was sure they had gone to bed, she crept into her father’s office at the end of the hall and sneaked sips of the bottles of scotch and rum, tucked in an upper cabinet, that clients had given him as thank-you presents.

Katie sought distractions in any form possible. She studied for her classes, even though As came easy to her, and cleaned her room obsessively and was the first to jump at any available babysitting job. She attended the weekly PTA meetings, just to have something outside herself to focus on. Other kids were there, too, throwing pity parties for themselves in corners or making a show of rolling their eyes if their mothers asked for opinions, acting far more like Hailey used to than they would have liked. Katie wanted no part of their self-serving temper tantrums. They complained when the parents did nothing and when they tried. They complained when the school ignored them and when the administration sent Mr. Hyland on the difficult task of trying to help them.

Katie didn't think Mr. Hyland was bad at all. She visited him often, eager to get out of her classes, which were filled with uncomfortable silences and glowering stares directed at teachers and lower-level students, and he seemed glad of the visits with a student who would actually talk to him and not make him pull teeth to get a response. She told Hyland she was doing fine, and he believed her, then they would play Scrabble or Go Fish to pass the time, stretching out the stress-free minutes before they each had to go back to reality.

She reasoned that she wasn't lying to Hyland when she told him she was fine. There was nothing he could do to help her, so there was no reason to bring her feelings up to him. He was stressed enough, that much was clear, and besides, there was nothing that anyone, even a licensed professional, could say now to help Katie cope. She had accepted that she had killed her own best friend.

Katie had been looking online for medication ideas or maybe meditation practices, if she went the natural healing route, when she stumbled upon confessional blog posts about something

she knew wasn't proper, wasn't ladylike. But, then again, following her old personal code of conduct had long since gone out the window.

When she first picked up the razor, in the middle of the night in her bathroom, her father's scotch on her breath, she told herself she was only trying it. She was only experimenting to see what it was like. Arms seemed like the most popular choice, but they were so open, so out there, so easily seen and frankly impractical in the southern weather, which didn't allow long sleeves in the dead of summer, and she was well aware that she would be making scars. She thought that Hailey would be proud of her for thinking about her appearance, about what other people would see when they saw her. A door closed down the hall, and she turned on the fan for the cover of white noise. She took one more long drink of the watered-down scotch she kept in her aluminum water bottle, leaned over her thigh, and cut a thin line.

CHAPTER VI

THE UNVEILING

At the last of the PTA meetings, one of the mothers was droning on about when the Unveiling of the new artist contribution to the town should be scheduled during the festival. We huddled in corners around the room, sitting cross-legged on the floor or perched in plastic chairs left in absentminded stacks. While our mothers continued hatching their plans, we sought a way to disrupt them and alert them to what they should really be focusing on. It was wrong to come together as a town without acknowledging those we had lost.

The Unveiling was a big part of the festival and the most significant tradition. Every year, an artist was commissioned to create a piece of art that commemorated Spring Hill. The artwork was kept under wraps each year for the maximum wow effect. Some years there were performances, some years songs, some years sculpture or a series of photographs. The list went on. We had seen oil paintings of the town's founding families, wire sculpture of the kind of peach tree our town was known for, an interpretive dance to nighttime recordings from Boykin Pond, and a sprawling diorama of our entire township, complete with trees the size of broccoli florets and miniaturized train tracks winding through like ribbons.

After the Unveiling, the art was added to the growing gallery addition at the Spring Hill Museum. The museum was located in an old house that the town had refurbished and transformed into a gallery of sorts. Year round, residents could pay the five dollar admission fee and look at art of years past. When we were younger, we had thought this was really cool. We didn't know of another town that did had this kind of personality, this kind of self-celebration. Now, it bothered us. It was as if each year was swept under the rug, faults and all, and forgotten

in place of whatever artwork the town could afford to commission. Any tragedies, accidents, or crimes that had happened were erased in the name of art and Spring Hill, South Carolina.

We gathered from conversations about finding large enough tarps that this year would be a visual art contribution instead of something for the stage. Some years the Unveiling happened on the last night, to end the festival with a bang, but this time they decided to plan it for the first night, a Friday.

“I really think it will set the right tone for the whole weekend,” Mrs. Davenport said. Most of the meeting attendees were parents (and us, but that wasn’t by choice). She wasn’t a parent, but she was married to Mr. Davenport.

Our mothers, and a few present fathers, nodded agreement alongside the parents that had shown up from other classes. Of course they thought that it would set the right tone. One more way for them to glaze over the truth and pain of losing two of our own.

When we heard when they planned to have the Unveiling, we decided that the best way to wake our parents up to the inherent wrongness of their actions, or, rather, their inactions, was to make a statement at the same time. In other words, to stop the Unveiling. Their lives were wholly dedicated to the festival right now and if we could ruin it, we could make them see how it felt to have our lives ruined.

As the meeting wound down, we made our usual slow exit to the parking lot. Katie wasn’t in attendance. She hadn’t shown up ever since we asked her why she was coming by herself. Apparently she couldn’t admit even to herself that she wasn’t one of us anymore.

Millie pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to everyone. The smoking afterward had irked some of our parents at first, but after the first few times when they realized

that their verbal warnings held no power over us, they stopped pestering and chose to turn a blind eye.

“How should we stop it?” Sally asked. We didn’t have to ask what she meant.

“Any ideas?” Millie said.

We looked around at each other, at a loss. What would we do, steal it? We didn’t even know what it was.

Then Malachi, Peter’s best friend, spoke up. He’d turned more and more inward since Peter’s death, and to hear his voice ring out through the twilight was as if we’d heard a ghost speak. His voice cracked either from disuse or puberty. “I’ve got an idea,” he said and clicked on the black lighter in his hand, illuminating his face in an eerie glow.

That tiny flame. It was intoxicating, it was spellbinding, it was rebellious and indelible and, above all, that flame got our attention as it would everyone else’s in attendance at the festival.

“Light it on fire?” Benji asked.

“Light it on fire,” Millie and Trey said in unison, assuredly, excitement in their faces.

“The art?” Georgia asked.

“The art.”

It was perfect. We would light up this year’s commissioned artwork in an enormous bonfire, a sacrifice to our grief and mourning and Peter and Hailey. It would go up in smoke and be seen from miles away, a signal to everyone of what was gone. Let them all feel loss and frustration and anger.

“The newspaper will definitely cover it,” said Cal. “Front page news.”

That filled us with an almost manic glee. Payback for refusing to cover Hailey's death. Let everyone see our grief and what we were capable of because of it. Let the entire town know how we had been ignored and how we had been driven to such a destructive act. Maybe they would even interview us. Our voices and words printed in black and white for the rest of the world to see. After resisting the festival for so long, we couldn't wait for it to start.

Mr. Davenport was droning on about the importance of being able to scan poems, but we couldn't pay attention. It was unseasonably warm and the sweat stains in the armpits of his blue dress shirt spread as he spoke animatedly.

"If you can scan a poem for rhythm, you can write a poem with rhythm," he said, his voice high and excited.

The clock taunted us, the minutes ticking by so slowly that we counted down in our heads. When the bell rang, he called over the hubbub of our packing up, "Have a good time this weekend! I hope to see you all at the festival!"

In the parking lot after school, we waited for the other classes to leave, the sophomores taking the longest, new to driving, herding their friends into their few cars. Katie got into her car without speaking to any of us and drove away. We'd heard that she still planned on participating in the pageant, which was strange on several levels. None of the other senior girls were participating, as we agreed it contributed to supporting the festival which we steadfastly did not. We were excited for it now, yes, but in order to bring it down, not for the actual festivities. Katie had done pageants with Hailey for years and we thought that she might have stopped out of respect for the memory of her best friend. Besides, with her new, introverted demeanor, not to mention the fact that she had clearly gained weight and wore baggy sweatpants all the time, there

wasn't a shot in hell that she could win. We accepted this as another facet of her separateness from us. We could no longer fathom what went on in her mind. We needed to focus.

"Is everyone good with the plan? We all know who's bringing what?" Trey said, having eagerly jumped forth as one of the leaders of our Unveiling mission. Or Mission: Unveiling. We hadn't decided. Trey was aggressive, a kind of guys' guy who felt the need to prove how macho he was.

Everyone nodded. We felt excited for the first time in a long time. All of the tension and disappointment and neglect that we had suffered at the hands of the town and school and parents would soon be rectified.

Benji cleared his throat. He was essentially the opposite of Trey, the thin and lanky class clown who everyone liked but no one really took seriously. "Guys, are we sure about this?" He swallowed and his Adam's apple bobbed.

Some of us shifted our weight uncomfortably. Yes, we were sure. We had to be. If we wanted our grief recognized, we didn't have a choice, did we?

"You're either in or you're out," Callie said. "There's no half-assing this."

"And if you're out," Trey said, crossing his arms, "you're out."

Benji backed down and pulled on the straps of his backpack, which dug into his shoulders. "I'm in," he said.

We knew what Trey meant. This was something we all had to do together. Only we knew what we had gone through. If someone didn't agree with that, that meant they were no longer with us and on our team. They were no longer part of us, just like Katie, who was off in her own world, a distant moon orbiting our planet.

When we got home, our mothers were predictably freaking out.

“The festival is in just a few hours!”

“Be sure you stick with your assigned booth for the time you signed up for! This is a group effort for the town--we don’t need you kids sneaking off and shirking duty.”

“Can’t you shelve that attitude for just one night?”

Their enthusiasm frittered away into micromanaging of our appearances, times, and personalities. Our younger siblings bounded around the house, looking forward to playing the games and loading themselves up with sugar.

Most of our parents insisted we go over to the festival as a family. The pageant was set to run for the hour or so before the Unveiling, ending in time for the newly crowned pageant queen to present the new artwork to the town with the sunset as a backdrop for the new artwork, in order to get the most satisfying, awe-filled reaction out of the crowd. However, the sunset would likewise enhance everyone’s reactions when they watched it go up in flames.

Although we couldn’t talk about it with each other, a thrill went down our spines as we walked over to the festival with our families. Peachtree Park, which was adjacent to our little downtown, was named for the grove of peach trees that stretched behind it into the distance. The event coordinators did the park up nicely every year with festive orange and white lights strung up in the trees marking the park’s perimeter. There was a carnival ride with giant rotating tea cups in garish colors off to one side with a line already forming even though the festivities hadn’t officially started. The air was thick with the smell of sugar and fried dough and the smokiness of barbecue and hot dogs grilling.

Our parents went to meet their friends, and as we wandered to our assigned tents to report for duty, we got a little swept up in the atmosphere. The decorations and crowds and food were

nostalgic and reminded us of our childhoods. For one weekend, we were all in one place, sharing the same experiences. Our parents stopped by our tents and booths from time to time and while we had expected to find this annoying, instead it was endearing. They came by on quick breaks from their own booths, red in the face and grinning like children from laughing and drinking with their friends.

“How’s the nine to five?” Some of them joked. Or, “Only another hour of your shift!” Sometimes they even brought us what they knew were our favorite treats, candy apples or fried Twinkies. We nearly cried when they told us that they had seen Mrs. Bishop, Peter’s mom, and she told them to pass on her love.

As the festival got underway, more and more people poured into the park. The two competing town dentists were drinking beer together and the pharmacist who gave us peppermints when we were sick and our elementary school librarian, who still looked like she should be the host of a children’s puppet show with her full, friendly face and mismatched clothing in so many colors that she’d been asked more than once if she was wearing a costume. Even Mr. Davenport was seen wandering with his wife, following her like a puppy and looking strange in a purple polo that we assumed she had picked out, so different from the white and blue dress shirts that he wore every day. These were the people who shaped us, who made up our lives, and they were all here.

Well, not everyone, we reminded ourselves.

Cal was posted at the Freshly Squeezed Lemonade tent when he overheard three women talking as he mixed up their enormous plastic cups of lemonade.

“No, I haven’t seen her. I don’t think she showed up.”

“Can you blame her? Didn’t you hear about her daughter a couple months back?”

“Yes, just tragic. By hanging of all ways. Such a shame.”

“Let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

Immediately after he handed the women their lemonades, he texted Millie, who spread news of the conversation. So Mrs. Matthews wasn’t here, and that was somehow acceptable. From the sound of the women’s conversation, they didn’t even want her here. They wanted no reminder of Hailey. It reminded us of our mission and why we had to follow through on it. So that they couldn’t just pretend that Hailey had never existed.

Up on the stage, the pageant contestants were making their final walks in their evening gowns, answering questions that didn’t matter and making promises that wouldn’t be fulfilled. They put on their makeup, curled their hair, practiced their poses and walks and answers, all for a fake crown.

Katie was up there, as we knew she would be, parading in her short blue dress, smiling a plastic smile and waving to the crowd like she knew she would win. And she was right. She was a shoo-in. None of the judges knew the kind of person she was inside, the kind of person who would smile and wave on a stage on which her best friend was originally supposed to join her.

The crowd clapped for each contestant, their eyes bright. As planned, we all asked our respective managers-for-the-night if we could take our fifteen-minute breaks to stretch our legs a bit and get a bite to eat.

“We would just hate to miss the pageant crowning and the Unveiling,” we said, pleading and acting for all the world like we genuinely cared.

They ate it up. They thought we were adorable. Go enjoy your youth, they said. But our youth had ended.

Tossing aside our aprons, our hats, our nametags, we made our way into the crowded mass of the festival, each person haloed in the warm, gold light of the slowly setting sun. It was almost time.

We fished in our pockets and jackets and felt our weapons in our hands. Some of us had matches, some had cigarette lighters, some had long lighters, and a few even had candle remnants from Peter's vigil so long ago. With great purpose and seriousness, we made our way to the left of the main stage, where this year's artwork was hidden by autumn-themed sheets that some mother had sewn together into what she surely thought was an appropriately festive and seasonal tarp.

Some of us congregated around the tarped piece of art while others kept lookout. We had decided to light it up as soon as the pageant queen was announced and was about to be brought over to unveil the new gallery addition. The sun setting behind the peach trees lit up the sky and we thought how beautiful it would be with our fire, our smoke signal to the world of all the pain and lack of understanding and empathy that we had undergone, a sign that they couldn't miss. They would no longer be blind to us.

Up on stage, Mr. Johnson, acting as pageant host, boomed loudly into his microphone. "And now it's the time you've all been waiting for. It's time to announce this year's queen and the runners-up of the pageant." Our hearts beat fast in our chests. "These girls carry on the longstanding tradition of what Spring Hill stands for. They represent the virtues of dignity, kindness, ambition, and respect. This year, third place goes to Susan Jackson."

A gangly sophomore whom we recognized from the softball team walked up, wobbling on six-inch heels, to accept a large bouquet of pink roses. We could practically feel our heartbeats align, moving toward the climax we had needed for so long.

As applause died down, Mr. Johnson spoke. We wanted him to hurry up already.

“Second place goes to the talented Mariah Youmans.”

A junior in a midnight blue gown stepped out, waving to her admiring fans before taking the even bigger bouquet of pink roses. They didn’t know, they didn’t understand. These sophomores and juniors, and the freshmen too, had continued on at school as though nothing had happened, still gossiping and focusing on how they looked and dressed, trying to impress each other. They hadn’t understood. They could have been our allies.

“And this year, first place and the coveted title of Harvest Festival Queen goes to,” Mr. Johnson paused for dramatic effect, drawing it out, torturous. Our hearts beat so violently that we swore we could feel our bodies rock, swaying to the blood pumping in our veins. “Katie Harrison!”

The crowd broke into a raucous clapping and cheering, but as soon as Katie stepped out from behind the curtain and onto the stage, everything stopped.

She had changed dresses backstage. She now stood on the stage enveloped in the sequined silver mermaid dress that we recognized as Hailey’s. Hailey hadn’t stopped talking about it when she bought it over the summer and had shown us all pictures on her phone. It was too small on Katie, two sizes too tight, hugging her body like cling wrap as she stood there shining like a disco ball on the stage. It was the tightness around her legs that had us shell-shocked. With every halting step she took, thin, bright lines of blood bloomed across the tops of her thighs.

Katie stumbled and hiccuped with a drunken giggle. She reached out to take the largest bouquet of red roses tied with a golden bow, but she tripped on her heels and lurched forward, tearing her dress with a rip heard clear across the park. She tumbled off the stage.

Someone screamed. “Call an ambulance!”

If we were going to complete our mission, we had to do it now. This was our moment. We couldn’t wait. Should we still do it? Should we not? We argued, unsure of what to do, stuck in limbo between everything that had happened so far and crossing the line and not going back.

“We have to do it now,” Millie said.

“Not now, not like this,” Sally said.

“We can’t wait.” Trey gripped his lighter in his hand.

“You can’t be serious,” Georgia said, looking at him, appalled.

“We’ll never get another chance like this.”

It was true. As we struggled with each other, Trey pulled out a water bottle he’d been concealing and sprayed the tarp with it. The sharp smell of gasoline stung in the air. Those of us determined to continue pulled out our lighters and matches.

A heavy weight slammed into us, knocking us into each other and sending some to ground like dominos, scattering away from the tarp.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Davenport loomed over us. “Your friend is passed out and bleeding over there and you’re here doing what? Starting a fire? Committing arson?” He leaned down and snatched the dropped lighters and candles from the grass.

“What in the hell is wrong with you kids?” Mr. Davenport hissed at us. We had never seen an adult so angry, so utterly enraged. “What the fuck is wrong with you all?” He said it as if something were innately disturbed in us, as if we were diseased, as if we had lost our minds. We wondered if he was right.

“We’re sorry,” Georgia said, a pack of matches still clutched in her hand.

He reached down and picked up the water bottle, then the smell hit him and he stopped as if he'd been slapped. He looked at us with utter disgust. "It's like Hailey Matthews all over again. You never learn." His hands full of lighters and candles, the water bottle tucked under his arm, he walked over to the nearest trash can and dumped everything in.

A siren wailed down the street, growing ear-splitting as an ambulance pulled into the park, plowing right over the grass. Everyone and everything was bathed in a pulsating red light, and as Katie was lifted onto a stretcher and carried away, her dress reflected the lights back into our eyes, making us see spots.

Brushing off our jackets, we stood and looked into each other's faces. Scared by what we saw there, the blankness or the shock or the devastating guilt, we walked away to find out families and go home. Behind us, the quilted tarp dried in the night air.

Although our bodies left that night behind, our minds didn't. Even years later, our thoughts returned to that time like migrating birds or butterflies, coming to the same place year after year, even if that place wasn't and didn't feel like home anymore.

Those of us who fled for college were jostled from studying for final exams by ringing phones and text message alerts from our friends and family back home, asking when we would arrive. Those of us who stayed in town, building careers and families, were ushered into festival participation by our mothers, eager to show off their grown-up, responsible children. But wherever we are, wherever we've gone, our internal clocks aligned and at the start of August we are punished with restless sleep and clenched hearts as we remember that time that we not only lost two of our own, but almost lost three.

We say lost, but that word doesn't feel quite right. It doesn't capture the sensation of having some invisible limb severed, some branch of possibility chopped from our futures. That

sounds melodramatic, the whiny weeping of some preteen in a made-for-TV movie. And maybe that's how we were.

As we had fantasized, the festival did indeed garner media coverage that year. Newspapers from across the region had latched onto the story and a single photo someone had snapped of Katie up on stage before she fell, smiling even as the blood stained her dress. The headlines had been varied and wild: "Pageant Queen Attempts Suicide," "Hometown Horrors," "Town Plagued by Death."

Many reporters discovered Peter and Hailey as they researched Katie and latched onto this triad of death, not letting it stop them that Katie hadn't died or even tried to. One newspaper even found out about our foiled plan of arson and wrote that a group of disgruntled students had tried to burn the forthcoming portrait of a beloved, retiring teacher. We hadn't even known that the artwork was a painting of Mrs. Brown. When we read about our town and ourselves in the papers, we felt sick.

We didn't know what had driven Katie to begin cutting and that mystery behind her actions was what scared us the most. What made her actually dig into her own skin? What made her go from thinking about it to actually doing it? Maybe we hadn't known her at all. Maybe Mr. Davenport had been right, maybe it was Hailey all over again.

The grief of losing people we had claimed as our own had pulled us together, but the guilt and unknowability of our roles in others' decisions isolated us. It was strange for these first formative deaths in our lives to have claimed victims so young, and afterward death kept this association of one frozen in time, forever untouched. Peter would forever be seventeen, with floppy brown hair that never lay quite right and acne scars stippling his rounded jawline. Hailey would forever walk through our minds, heels clicking, hair flipped over her shoulder by glittered

fingernails. Even though mirrors showed us bodies that had grown and changed, gained or lost weight, gotten haircuts or glasses or contacts, we felt the same on the inside. Maybe death worked both ways, not only freezing those it claimed but also those who had known them.

Before Hailey, before Katie, we had felt so strongly that we knew each other because we were going through the same experiences at the same time in the same high school in the same town. But now we considered that maybe we didn't know each other at all, in the heavy thoughts that ran deep as rivers under our skin and behind our eyes, in the way we felt about the world now and even the way we felt about each other.

Katie never returned to school. We saw her once or twice afterward. She was riding shotgun with her mother, staring out the passenger window, looking right through us. Later on, we found out that her parents had pulled her out of school, one semester before graduation, and she'd gotten her GED. Our parents still kept in contact with hers and they told us that Katie was doing fine. She was engaged and had graduated from Clemson University a year early, and was taking a gap year before continuing onto a Master's program in Journalism. Benji was the only one who had ever reached out to her, sending the same single text message every year at Christmas.

Thinking of you. Hope you're well.

This past year she finally responded. *You too.*

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