

“There’s a world inside my head Emmy, and it’s as messed up as the world around me. There’s no escaping it.” That was Jake giving me a sign, I see that now, now that it’s much too late. I sift through memories like a paleontologist digging up pieces of the past, trying to force them together, trying to see the skeleton not for what it is, but for what it once was.

Someone left the T.V in my room turned to CNN, a well-meaning nurse maybe, and I saw the footage from that day, I saw the pictures of his victims smiling in portraits from happier times, and I saw a photo of Jake and me, our arms thrown around each other. They called me a hero; I don’t let them turn on my T.V anymore. The reporters are clamoring for a statement from me, so far my hospitalization and my parents have kept them at bay, but today I go home and my parents are fighting so many battles that they don’t stand much chance of winning any.

As I’m wheeled to the car the day erupts with shouts, and camera flashes. I wince, for the past week all I’ve heard is whispers. The doctor’s, my parents, even the police have addressed me and each other in hushed tones. They’re afraid to speak to me, or touch me, as if I am a dandelion that might break apart, and blow away at the slightest provocation. The reporters have no such qualms however, they yell, and reach for me as if I am a life line. I know I can’t run forever, but I breathe a sigh of relief as the car doors slam, and we pull away from the throng.

More reporters are set up outside our house. The police have come and gone, leaving everything inside in disarray. They’ve all come seeking answers, to make sense of this tragedy, to put a nice bow on things, and move on with their lives. No one will come right out and say it, but I know what they’re thinking ; how could we have missed the signs, and what kind of negligent careless parents

raised such a coldblooded killer. They're thinking this is our fault. I know this, because I used to think the same things when I saw reports about shootings on the news, when I thought this could never happen to me.

Jake's bedroom door is wide open, his meticulously neat room has been ripped apart by officers that are too late to do anyone any good. I look away, and lock myself in my own room. After an hour of staring at the ceiling, at the night blue sky and winking stars that Jake painted for me a lifetime ago, I take a few sleeping pills and pray for a dreamless sleep.

The sound of gunfire wakes me, and I stifle a scream as I fall out of bed and land on my knees, I reach out to grab the side of my bed for support and my injured shoulder hits the dresser. It's only after my aunt calls out to me that I realize the sound I heard was her knocking on my door.

"Emmy breakfast is ready, and we need to hurry if we want to escape the vultures outside, and make it to the service on time." It's a moment before I manage to speak.

"Okay, I'll be right there." I can't quite hide the pain in my voice, there's a pause and I can almost see the worried expression on my aunt's face.

"Is everything alright in there? Emmy if you need help just let me in."

"No, I'm alright," I lie, as I blink back tears. There's another long pause, and then my aunt says,

"Okay, I laid out your dress on the back of the chair. I'll be downstairs, if you need me just call."

I drag myself to my feet, and move gingerly towards the chair. The dress is exactly where my aunt said it would be, I run my fingers over the black fabric and hear Jake's voice as if my memories are so crowded with him that they bounce and echo off the walls.

“When I die I don’t want people to wear black.” I had looked up from the T.V at his words, but of course he never looked away from his drawing.

“Don’t worry, when you die I’m breaking out my red dress and dancing shoes.”

“Not red,” he said holding up a colored pencil, “blue.”

“Right, that will bring out my eyes way more,” I said trying to force Jake out of his dark mood.

“Blue is the color of open spaces, I want to look out and see an ocean of blue.”

“I want everyone to dress in green, toad green. If I have to be dead, they have to look gross. And, instead of flowers I want everyone to write one thing they loved about me, or one thing they always wanted to tell me, and tie it to a balloon. At the end of the service everyone will let them go at the same time. That way I’ll have something to read if I get tired of playing my harp.” Jake had looked at me then, and smiled.

“That’s actually a cool idea, but you’re still lame.”

“Yeah and you’re still morbid,” I’d said and thrown a pillow at him.

I leave the dress, and move to my closet. I walk down stairs wearing a navy blue skirt, a baby blue sweater, and the turquoise earrings Jake gave me for our last birthday. I’ve tied my hair back with a bright blue ribbon. My father breaks the silence,

“What the hell are you wearing?”

“Jake wanted everyone to wear blue, so that’s what I’m going to wear.” His face contorts in anger and astonishment, “I don’t give a damn what that—“

“That’s enough Jim,” my aunt cuts in, “Emmy you look lovely. Now, sit down and eat so we can get going.” My father glares, but stays silent, my mother just looks down at her plate and fiddles with her black pearls, and I sit and try not to look at the empty seat across from me.

There are protesters lined up outside the cemetery when we pull up. They shout and slice the air with their signs and angry exclamations. Insanely, there is also a small group of people that are being called Jake supporters set up on the other side, yelling about how justice should be for all not just some. Police are planted in the middle, wearing riot gear and scowls as the media scrambles everywhere.

We drive past them, and park just inside the gate. I step out onto the grass, and look up into the cloudless sky that seems to stretch out forever.

“Most people think white is the color of purity, but it isn’t, it’s blue. It’s sad and beautiful at the same time, like washing your tears away in the coldest, cleanest river.” Jake’s words leave me breathless now as I stand surrounded by purity, but at the time I had only laughed.

“Oh, gag me a river,” I’d said.

“You scoff on the outside, but you know I’m right. You of all people should know, you’ve got a blue aura.” I rolled my eyes, “spare me, aren’t you a big enough weirdo without the psychic power claims?”

“It’s not a psychic power, I’m just sensitive to things others aren’t. Maybe people would see them if they just took the time to look.” I’d gasped dramatically, and leaned forward.

“I think I see yours it’s...it’s stool brown with ugly green discharge. What do you think that means?”

“I should’ve known you’d just make fun of me.”

“Okay, okay I’m sorry. So, what does yours really look like then?”

“I don’t know I can’t see my own. Maybe I’m not supposed to.”

The service begins, and the preacher is saying something about forgiveness. I tune him out. A hand grips mine, and I look down to see Stevie. He’s wearing blue jeans, and a blue pullover sweater, he smiles sadly and gives my hand another reassuring squeeze. He looks younger than his eleven years, or maybe I’m just remembering the last time we stood together like this, when we buried his sister.

After the service we walk back to the car, Stevie’s hand still in mine, and he takes a few deep breaths which I know means he’s preparing to say something. “I ha--hate what people are saying about Ja--Jake, as if they knew him, or ca--cared. Just because you do a ba--bad thing doesn’t mean you’re all ba-bad, does it?” He looks up at me pleadingly. I know I should reassure him, but I hesitate, I can still hear the screams, and smell the gun smoke.

“Em—Emmy?” I bring myself back to the present, and force a smile, even though it probably looks more like a grimace judging by the worried look on Stevie’s face.

“Of course not, sometimes even good people do terrible things. People are going to keep on saying a lot of awful things, because they’re hurt and scared, but all that matters is that we remember Jake. The way he really was.”

“I’ll remember, and I under—lunder—“ he takes a few deep breaths, and pounds his chest, as if he’s trying to physically dislodge the words.

“I understand why he did it. I wanted Rob and them dead soba- bad, I wi-wish I could’ve done what Ja-Jake did.”

“Shh, don’t ever say that, don’t even think it.” He meets my gaze and there’s a defiance and a rage I’ve never seen in him before. When he speaks there’s no hint of his stutter.,

“Why not? There the reason Becky is dead, and they wanted to do the same thing to you. , They were the monsters not Jake.” I don’t know how to respond, I know he’s wrong, and I also know he’s right. I want to lash out at something, or someone, but that would only cause more pain. It will never end, that’s what this has shown me, blind rage and violence breed like rats that gnaw at what’s best in us, until there’s nothing left. If we allow them to run free Jake will have been right, and there will really be no escaping it.

My mind turns to the first time I met Becky, her shy, gentle nature belied by her bright orange hair, black clothes and nail polish. She and Jake had been instantly drawn to each other, and now they’re both gone. But, the happy excitement on Jake’s face when he burst into my room one day after school is something I’ll always remember.

“Emmy, I need your help.”

“Sadly, I think you’re beyond my help,” I’d said sarcastically as I continued to scroll through my text messages. He’d only made a face, and continued in a rush.

“Seriously, I need a favor. You know that new girl Becky?” I’d stopped playing with my phone and looked up at him with interest.

“Yeah, what about her?”

“I asked her out, and she said yes—“

“Congratulations.”

“I know, but the thing is her mom’s a lush and she’s pretty much raising her little brother, and she can’t go out unless...”

“Oh no, stop right there. If you think I’m spending my Friday night babysitting while—”

“Please, please, Emmy I’m begging you. I’ll do anything.”

“My chores and math homework for a week?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, I’ll do it, but only because you look so pathetic.” He’d rushed over to me and twirled me around the room as if I were weightless.

“Thank you, thank you. You’re the best sister in the world.” I’d laughed and shouted in surprise.

“I know, now put me down you dumb ape.”

That night Becky and Stevie arrived at our house at six. I beat Jake to the door, and opened it to find Becky bent over whispering reassuringly to Stevie, who looked very small, and very miserable. I smiled, and opened the door wider.

“Hi, I’m Emily, come on in.” Becky straightened up, keeping one hand on Stevie’s shoulder, and extending the other one to me.

“I’m Becky, and this is my little brother Stevie.”

“Hi Stevie,” he’d just shrugged off Becky’s hand, pushed past me, plopped down on the sofa, and glared at the three of us.

“I’m sorry, he doesn’t really like meeting new people,” Becky had said, and then more quietly, “he doesn’t say much either, because of his stutter.” Jake had tried to sneak out then, but I grabbed him, and led them to where Stevie sat, arms crossed, looking down at the coffee table that held Jake’s scattered sketch pads.

“Come on Stevie, say hello to Jake and Emily.” That only won us another glare from Stevie. I smiled and shrugged as if it didn’t matter.

“That’s okay Stevie, you don’t have to talk to us, but I do want to get to know a little more about you. You know since we’re going to be stuck with each other for a while. I have a list of questions that will tell me every important thing about you, and since my brother is a talented artist and mind reader you don’t even have to say one word.” Jake snatched up the closest notepad and a few pencils and winked at me.

“Okay, I’m ready, ask away,” he said, pencil poised.

“Question one’ what’s your favorite color?” Jake gave Stevie a long look, smiled and covered half the page with different shades of pink.

“OMG, mine too,” I said brightly.

“Okay next question, favorite animal?” Again Jake peered at Stevie before scribbling on the paper, he held the notepad out to us to reveal butterflies all done in the same pink hues. Becky giggled, and Stevie shook his head violently, but I kept a straight face.

“I like your answers so far, but this is the big question now,” I said gravely.

“Who is your favorite artist?” Jake looked at Stevie, nodded, and began to sketch. After a moment he held up a picture of Justin Bieber.



“No wa—way!” Stevie shouted, and we all burst out laughing.

I come back to the present as Stevie drops my hand, “I sh-should go.” All the fight has gone out of him, and standing there with his shoulders slumped he looks like a little old man that’s seen too much. I want to take him in my arms, but I know he wouldn’t want that, so instead I retake his hand.

“Can’t you come by and have dinner with us? There’s a mountain of food, and I doubt anyone will show to eat it,. Plus, I could use the company.” He nods, and I see some of the tension go out of him.

The car ride home is filled with heavy silence, although it feels less oppressive with Stevie sitting beside me. The two of us dressed in blue, like the smallest sliver of sky peeking out from between roiling clouds. I look around; at my grim faced father, glassy eyed mother, at the gesturing protesters, at Stevie curled up into himself, and think-we are the survivors.

The second we open the door we hear the phone ringing, it has rung nonstop lately, but none of us have the courage to answer. For now it’s just us, the unfortunate survivors. We sit down and pick listlessly at our plates, except for Stevie who digs in eagerly, and I notice how thin he is. Becky was more a mother to him, than his actual one. I look to Jake, or where his place used to be, and my heart breaks all over again. My vision blurs and I push away from the table.

“May I be excused?”

“You haven’t eaten anything,” my aunt says, not that she’s touched her food either.

“I’m not hungry, I just want to rest for a while, I don’t wait for an answer, I rush to my room and collapse on my bed. I press my palms against my eyelids, but the dam has broken. I’m not sure

how long I stay like this, pouring my sorrow into my pillow, but I must have drifted off at some point, because the dreams come again .

I'm crouching in the shadows of the small arts and crafts store Becky worked at four times a week. I worked two blocks down at the yogurt place, and we usually walked together after our shifts, but I skipped work that day to go to a party at a friend's house. Afterwards people, including Becky, told me there was nothing I could have done to prevent what happened, but the fact is I wasn't there that night so I am pulled there over and over in my dreams.

I hear screams coming from the alley; I don't want to go, I know what I'll see, but my feet move of their own volition. And, there's Rob, Jason, and Tom holding down Becky's naked, bloody body. I let out a shuttering gasp, and they turn to look at me. Rob rises first, his rugged face and cruel smile shifting until it transforms into that of a slobbering jackal.

"Your turn," he snarls. The other two are right behind him as he lunges for me, jaws snapping. I run, hearing their laughter bounce off the walls of the buildings. There's a fence leading into the park, I climb it and let myself drop onto the other side, just as Rob slams into it. Pushing to my feet, I take off again, not daring to look back, but I can almost feel their breath on the BACK of my neck. The cemetery lies in front of me, its big black gate is slightly ajar. I squeeze through, and stop dead at the sight of Jake sitting on the ground. His knees are drawn up to his chest, and he's staring at his bloody hands with a sick fascination.

"I had to stop them Emmy," he says, extending his hands to me in a supplicating gesture. I turn back to see that Rob, Jason, and Tom are slowly sinking into the ground.

“Emmy,” Jake is on his feet now, his hands still extended, except his face is gone, only the skeleton remains. I stumble backwards, trip, and fall. He keeps coming, and I watch him move closer. I’m unable to move, or scream, and my only thought is-this is not my brother.

“Emmy!” I come awake with a shutter to find Stevie standing by my bedside.

“You were ha-having a bad dream.” I sit up and wipe the hair out of my eyes.

“thanks, “I look at my clock, and see I’ve been asleep for a little over two hours.

“I ha-have them too, you know of th-the night I found Becky.” I hug him to me, “I know.”

Even now it’s hard to believe the backlash Becky suffered after she accused Rob, Jason, and Tom of rape. It’s sad to say that we live in one of those backwoods little towns that’s only major source of pride is the football team, of which Rob and them were stars, but it’s true. Even if they weren’t Rob was the mayor’s son, and Jason was the sheriff’s, Becky never had a chance. Things got so bad at school that she stopped going all together. I saw the rage growing in my brother day by day, and I had no idea how to reach him.

One morning I arrived at school to find it buzzing. Rob, Jason, and Tom’s lockers had been spray painted. I took one look at the grotesque faces that were surrounded by a black and sickly green aura, and the drippy red letters that read, “rapist,” and knew who’d painted the images instantly. The locker room and all their gear had also been trashed. The rest of campus came to the same conclusion; I arrived at the principal’s office just in time to hear a very red faced Mr. Collin’s shout,

“Who else would possibly do this?” Jake only shrugged, “I don’t know, maybe it’s the same person that keeps spray painting “whore” on Becky’s front door.” He’d turned to me then, he could always just tell when I entered the room, “they’ve got some grainy video of someone breaking into the school last night, and they think it was me. Can you believe it?”

“What time was the break in,” I asked. Jake shrugs, and Mr. Collins says, “around ten.”

“then it couldn’t have been Jake, We were at a movie,” I lied. Mr. Collins squinted his little pig eyes at me.

“Young lady, lying for your brother is not smart.”

“I’ve still got the receipt, and Jess can vouch that we were there.” Impossibly Mr. Collins’s eyes narrowed even further, Jess was my best friend, but her mother was the owner of the factory that employed about sixty percent of our town’s population, so there was no way he was going to openly question her word.

“Can I go now,” Jake asked already rising.

“For now, but you can be sure I’ll be asking Jessica if she did indeed see you last evening.”

Once we were in the hall I pulled him aside.

“Are you insane?”

“How can I not be? Those bastards ruined Becky’s life, and they’re treated like the victims. How can you stand it?” I didn’t have an answer for him then, and he walked away from me without looking back.

Later that night someone, probably Rob, threw a brick through Becky’s living room window. The note around it read, “keep remembering our night together, we’ll have to do it again, real soon.” She took the note into the bathroom, pinned it up to the mirror, filled the tub, and slit her wrists. That’s how Stevie found her.

It helps if I keep a picture of her ne-next to my bed. Th-that way I re-remember how she looked before,” Stevie whispers. Maybe I should do that too, if I surround myself with my smiling ghosts, maybe they’ll stop haunting me.

“I need to go back to the cemetery, Stevie. Will you come with me?” Stevie gives me a sideways glance, “o-okay, but why?”

“There’s something I need to do.”

Becky’s funeral was a small, simple affair. It was just Jake, Stevie, Jess, the preacher, and me. Her mother was too, “sick” to attend. Jake was silent for the entire service, and for the rest of the day. He didn’t speak until the next afternoon when he walked up to Rob, Jason, and Tom’s table and screamed, “you killed her,” right before he tackled Rob to the ground. By the time I pushed through the crowd of kids that always gathered at the first signs of a fight, Jake was on the ground, Tom was kicking at his legs, and Jason was on top of him, slamming his meaty fist into his face. I took off my backpack, grateful for the brick like literature book inside, and swung it with everything I had at Jason’s head. Jason crumpled to the side, and Tom lunged for me, I jumped back just out of his reach, but he turned and caught me with a slap that snapped my head back and sent me crashing on my butt. He came for me again, but Jake tackled him and started raining blows down on his head and shoulders. Teachers finally broke through, and pulled Jake off Tom, one grabbed me and yanked me roughly to my feet.

“They’re both crazy,” Rob shouted as we were dragged to the principal’s office. Jake is expelled, I receive a week’s suspension, and Rob, Jason, and Tom get one afternoon of detention. Even though they got off with the equivalent of a slap on the wrist, it was stupid of us to think they wouldn’t try something. Jake and I embarrassed them in front of everyone, and Rob had his nose broken in the fight,

even worse, Jason had a mild concussion and was pulled from practice thanks to me. We actually felt absurdly good about getting some small measure of revenge for Becky; like I said, we were stupid.

They found me less than one day later. I was walking out of the library with Ken, my history partner when they showed up, and circled us.

“We’ll walk you home, Emmy,” Jason sneered. To Ken’s credit he did try to object, but Tom’s blow to his jaw put an end to that. I ran, digging in my oversized bag with one frantic hand. Rob slammed into me, just as my fingers closed around the small cylinder of oc spray. I fell hard, onto my knees, and felt the gravel dig into my skin. He grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked.

“Look guys, she wants to get on her knees for us. Just like Becky.” Jason stepped in front of me, his crotch just inches from my face.

“Let me have her first,” he said, and yanked my shirt until the fabric tore. I drove my fist into his groin, and he collapsed on the ground, retching. Rob still had me by my hair, and it was only by luck that I was able to blast him with the spray. My eyes watered as the cloud of oc spray covered Rob, and rained down on me. I pushed to my feet, and ran again, knowing Tom was right behind me. I could feel the blood running down my knees, but I didn’t slow down. A car happened to be driving past, and I frantically flagged it down. The car stopped, and Tom melted back into the shadows. The driver was Mrs. Eller’s, the librarian. She was kind, but a bit near sighted, so she of course didn’t see the guy that was chasing me.

Jake took one look at me and lost it. And, when the sheriff did everything short of calling me a lying slut, Jake lunged for him. I was able to hold him back, but just barely.

“It’s not worth it, Jake. Come on, I’m fine, and sooner or later they’re going to get there’s.”

“They won’t stop. They’ll never stop until someone stops them. They’ve tried to take everything I love from me, I want to do the same to them. There’s a world inside my head Emmy, and it’s as messed up as the world around me. There’s no escaping it, it will never change.”

“Yes, it will, we’ll leave this place. We’ll get out where they can’t touch us, and we’ll make the change little by little.” Jake just nodded.

“Jake, promise me you won’t try to do something else.”

“I promise, everything’s going to be okay.”

I don’t know where he got the gun, or how he was able to just walk onto the field in the middle of a playoff game, but he did. The crowds cheers turned to screams as Jake shot Rob in the chest, then Tom in the stomach, Jason tried to run, and was shot in the back. People began shoving each other in a panicked attempt to escape, one elderly woman was trampled in the frenzy. I ran in the opposite direction, screaming Jake’s name. He turned, pointed the gun in my direction, and pulled the trigger.

I stood frozen until I heard a grunt behind me. I turned to see the sheriff dying with his gun in his hand. Jake looked toward the stands and lifted the gun again. I kept calling his name, and moving towards Jake until we were only feet apart.

“I had to stop them, Emmy. I had to.”

“I know Jake, but they’re gone now, and you need to put the gun down. Please, Jake put it down.” He lowered the gun, and for a second I thought *it was over*, but then he shook his head and put the gun to his temple.

“No,” I screamed, and lunged for him, we went down, and the gun fired into the air, I felt a blow to my back, I looked, but Jake and I were alone in the center of the field, like the eye of some

enormous storm. It took me a moment to realize I was shot, I watched transfixed as my blood seeped out of my body. Jake fired behind me, and the sheriff went down again, this time for good.

“I’m so sorry, Emmy it wasn’t supposed to happen like this.” Jake’s hand gripped mine, and I felt his tears on my skin, but I couldn’t respond, I couldn’t even keep my eyelids open. There’s one final shot, and Jake fell beside me his gun still pointed at his head. Our blood mingled, and soaked into the grass. I held onto Jake, and thought that this must have been what it was like the day we were born, and then I couldn’t hold on to him any longer.

Stevie and I stand in the cemetery. He has an orange balloon clutched in his hand, and I’ve got a blue one in mine.

“are you ready,” I ask. Stevie checks that his note is securely tied to the string one last time and nods.

“What does yours say,” he asks.

“That I love him, and that that day I saw his aura. I want him to know,” I stop, unable to speak the words through my tears, “I want him to know it’s blue.” We let them go on three, and watch them rise, until a wind snatches them up suddenly and they disappear.