**UNTIL THE CATERPILLAR FLIES**

*“I’ve got a girl in the war, Paul, the only thing I know to do  
Is turn up the music and pray that she makes it through.”*

-Josh Ritter

PROLOGUE

A funeral is no place for solitude.

The space to hear yourself think. The regret and guilt. The silence is anything but quiet.

He looks around, out at the rows and rows of gravestones behind him, as if expecting a crowd to come walking over a hill, arm in arm, held together by grief. A murder of crows flies overhead. Such a strange term for a gathering: *murder*. Some species stay in packs, never leaving each other’s side, no matter the damage done. Some species never leave one of their own alone to suffer. It’s been said that crows, upon hearing the sound of another crow in distress, will send off signals throughout the sky, calling others into action. They’ll fly from miles away, just to be there, so that the suffering will not happen in isolation.

Someone clears his throat. Kyle turns around and remembers the man with the shovel. Two of them, actually. Standing over the grave. One is smoking a cigarette. The other fiddles with his cell phone.

So he is not entirely alone.

“This it, then?” the guy with the cigarette says. The cigarette is dangling from one corner of his mouth as he speaks. The guy pulls up a hand, takes the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger like a joint, sucks in while squinting his eyes, then he pulls the cigarette away and blows smoke into the space between them. “Anyone else coming?”

Kyle Hartvigson, 60 years old, stares back at this guy, wondering what he does in his spare time. Does he smoke weed out of a bong? Does he stick needles in his arms? A strange thing to think here, standing a few feet from a casket, but that’s what he’s thinking. Maybe it’s not so strange at all.

“No,” Kyle says, “I guess not.” His feet hurt. His hip is sore, more sore than usual. His back aches. The years have caught up with him. He looked into the mirror earlier, at a face that is weathered not just by time but also by circumstance, and he barely recognized the face looking back at him.

“So, um,” the guy with the cigarette says. “Are you gonna, like, I don’t know … say something? Like to honor this person? Or do we just …?”

The guy actually flicks his cigarette out toward a tree, an act that Kyle can’t help but to think is against company policy.

Kyle feels the aches again. In his feet, his knees, his hips. And his heart. Time is unkind, and yet we would give anything for more of it. The material things we would barter, the wars we would wage, the promises we would make. Just for a little more time.

Of anyone, Kyle Hartvigson knows this lesson too well. A mistake he’ll never make again.

He turns again, as if maybe they’re finally arriving. He’s waiting for the proverbial crows to come in. He’s waiting for a miracle. Another goddamned miracle.

“No,” he mumbles. Really, what’s there to say? He turns back toward the open grave. Louder, he says: “No, you can begin.”

The sound of dirt hitting the casket moves all the pain in his body, all the pain he’s ever felt, into the heaviness of his heart. Everything locks up inside of him – his muscles, his stomach, his jaw, his veins. A fever flashes over his body, something that makes him shiver. He cannot watch. He turns to walk away.

He limps past the graves and flowers and patches of grass, back toward his car and the road and the loneliness of his life. He’s moving slowly, the years of injuries and heartache and age breaking him down, and a pack of leaves (a murder of leaves?) swirls in front of him. The wind picks up, the breath of a thousand ghosts. He keeps walking, unsteadily, and feels something else pass through his body – this time, a sensation of familiarity.

Kyle looks down at the ground. He sees a flat slab of rock, covered in leaves. He winces as he lowers himself onto one knee. He wipes the leaves away. He sees words. Everything that had tightened up in his body lets go. A chill bursts through his pores.

“But it …” he whispers, staring at the slab of rock. “It can’t …”

He falls backward, onto the grass. He stares up at the sky. Leaves swirl around above him.

“It can’t be,” Kyle says to the heavens.

PART 1: BROKEN WINGS

CHAPTER 1

*February 2020*

The call came at 8:36 on a Sunday morning. Kyle set down the digital clock, groaned and climbed out of bed. Of course, he had left his cell phone in the living room.

“She’s gone,” a voice said. He knew the voice. Corina. He also knew without asking who “she” was. Jocey, his younger sister. While Kyle had two younger sisters, Jocey was the only one who warranted phone calls – on a Sunday morning, no less.

“Well, where could she be?” Kyle asked, pawing at the front of his underwear then using the same hand to rub sleep out of his eyes.

“I … um …” Corina was crying. Kyle felt his stomach drop, like he was going over the edge of a rollercoaster. While calls from Corina about Jocey were somewhat common, her voice usually dripped with annoyance or panic, but never sadness. Kyle was suddenly awake, as if a bright light had been shone in his face.

“Corina,” he said, “what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“She’s gone, Kyle,” she said again. “Gone!”

Kyle closed his eyes. He choked on his breath. Was this the call he’d been expecting, more or less, for fourteen years?

“When you say gone …”

“I just found her,” Corina said, “on the floor. She’s …”

The creak of the ceiling and the hopeless anticipation that follows.

The sound of an approaching train as you frantically turn the broken starter of a car stuck on the tracks.

A fist coming toward your face while your hands are being held down.

Looking out the window of an airplane, watching the wing tear away and sail off into the clouds.

“… when I found her … wasn’t breathing … swore up and down she was clean …”

Corina was talking, but Kyle could only hear fragments. He had to bite his lip not to scream, for fear of waking the kids. The *kids*. How was he going to …?

The world swirled around him. He had to sit down on the couch to avoid fainting.

“She’s dead, Kyle,” Corina said through the phone.

The fist split his lip. The train whistle blew, followed by the sound of crushing metal and breaking glass. The roof caved in, and the airplane plummeted.

“Goddamn her,” Kyle said. He’d had years to prepare himself for this inevitable moment, and yet those were the only words that came to him upon impact. His head fell into his free hand. “Goddamn her,” he whispered.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. An angel, perhaps.

“Kyle?” His wife’s voice. Claire was standing over him, wearing a midriff T-shirt and silk panties. In any other moment, he’d have been turned on. She put a hand over her mouth. “Is it Jocey?” she whispered. An educated guess. Kyle nodded. “Is she okay?”

Kyle’s inward anger built from his abdomen, rising through his rib cage and throat, and bursting forward with uncontrollable intensity.

“No, she’s not okay,” he said. “She’s fucking dead, Claire.”

His wife recoiled, took in a deep breath and sat down on the arm of the couch next to Kyle. On the phone, Corina was crying and talking gibberish. Kyle wished he could crush the phone between his fingers and make everything go away.

“Dear God,” Claire whispered. Kyle looked at her. *Fuck God* was what he was thinking. Claire rubbed his back. She stopped suddenly. Kyle looked at her, a frozen look of panic on her face. He turned toward where her gaze was focused. A small child, holding a ratty blanket, stared back at them with large eyes.

“What happening?” said Dez, Kyle’s 4-year-old daughter. She had long, dark hair and blue eyes, just like her Aunt Jocey did.

*Did*.

“It’s okay, hon,” Claire told her. “Go back to bed.”

“Daddy’s crying?”

“We’ll talk later,” Claire said. “Please.”

“But Daddy’s crying.”

“Go to bed!” Kyle screamed, pulling the phone away from his ear. Dez winced and covered her face with her blanket. Kyle hung up the phone, stood and walked to the window. A sunny day. God’s cruel joke. Behind him, Dez started to sniffle and cry. He did not turn around. He couldn’t look at her, not right now. Dez was always a mini version of her Aunt Jocey. She adored her. Kyle couldn’t imagine looking his daughter in the eye and telling her that her favorite aunt was … *dead*.

He was still holding the phone, his hand shaking with rage. He looked down at the blank screen. He swiped to his text messages and scrolled back two days.

“Overdose?” Claire asked from the couch. She was whispering, as if Dez couldn’t hear even though she was sitting next to Claire with her head on her mother’s lap.

“Lucky guess,” Kyle mumbled, still looking at his phone. He found the string of texts.

*U ok?*

Before that, from Jocey, two days ago: *Don’t ask.*

Before that, from Kyle: *What U need it for?*

Before that, from Jocey: *I need to borrow some money.*

The previous text from Jocey, before that string, was nearly three months old. That’s how rare their contact had been lately. *Goddamn her*.

Kyle dropped his phone onto the carpet intentionally and looked out into the mocking sunshine. Claire was still behind him, trying to say something comforting – one of those useless clichés about fate or time or end of suffering --- but he wasn’t listening. He was just thinking about Jocey, his baby sister. The most beautiful gift God could ever grant a little boy. No toy or game or ball could ever compete with a baby sister.

And then God took her away.

Kyle pressed his forehead against the glass.

“Please, God,” he whispered. “I’ve never asked you for anything. Please, God. Just this one thing. Please bring my Jocey back.”

CHAPTER 2

The service came two weeks later, at a cemetery Kyle had driven past many times but had never actually visited. Kyle, his rage even thicker, stood 20 feet away from his sister’s casket. He was surrounded by 50 or 60 other people. He couldn’t believe how many people knew her.

As a church type read scripture in front of the casket, Kyle scanned the crowd. He looked at the faces of those he didn’t know, wondering how many of these people had watched Jocey stick a needle in her arm. There were a few grubby-looking guys that probably traded drugs for sex. Kyle could hear his own breathing through his flared nostrils.

In front of him, his mother wept uncontrollably. His father had to hold her up with one arm, probably the first physical contact they’d had since the divorce. Kyle’s father’s face was eerily devoid of emotion. A career electrician, his father stared absently at the casket as if he were watching the television news. Kyle’s parents had divorced twenty-something years ago, and Kyle always felt like Jocey had changed on the day her father packed his bags and moved out. Jocey used her smile as a shield in the years that followed, and after a blowout argument with their mother she moved in with their father as a teen and came and went as she pleased. Kyle had always resented that.

To his mother’s right was Barrett – Bear, as she was known. His half-sister, Bear was the youngest of the three siblings. She was 17 years old, her beauty masked by the mascara that ran down her face and the snot bubbles that cascaded from both nostrils. Bear’s father stood a few steps to her right.

Watching his family, Kyle felt even more animosity toward Josey. He wanted nothing more than to stand over the casket and scream: *Look what you’ve done! Your family will never know joy again because of you!*

His wife Claire, carrying Dez on her shoulder, squeezed his hand. Dez sucked her thumb, something she hadn’t done since she was 2. Their older child, Nolan, sat in the grass a few feet away, drawing pictures on a notepad with his head down. Nolan, 7 years old, was never good at expressing his emotions. When Kyle and Claire had initially broken the news about Aunt Jocey, Dez broke into unrelenting tears while Nolan just turned on a cartoon and stared blankly at the television for an hour or two.

A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds as the pastor continued to read meaningless Biblical verses about salvation and being one with the Lord now. Kyle didn’t know what to think about God or religion anymore, but he knew that if there was a heaven, Jocey wasn’t there. She’d done this to herself. Virtual suicide. Worse than suicide. Killing herself without the common courtesy an explanatory note.

Kyle turned to look at the crowd again. Strangers, even the faces he recognized. They felt like enemies now, like co-conspirators in his baby sister’s fall from happiness.

She always seemed so happy. That damn smile covered up everything. Even when he intuited her sadness, she’d flash that smile and put him at ease. He was overcome with shame for how stupid he’d been. How blind to the darkness that she carried through adulthood.

When they started lowering the casket into the ground, Kyle bowed his head – not in prayer but with guilt. This could have been avoided. For fifteen years, Jocey had been a runaway car heading for a cliff, and Kyle had been powerless to stop it. Now that she’d driven off the edge, Kyle couldn’t help but to think of all the ways he’d let her down. He’d pushed too hard. He’d been too distant. He’d loved too much. Or maybe not enough.

And then they started shoveling dirt into the hole, and Kyle’s mother turned to him and collapsed in his arms. She felt so light, as if she hadn’t eaten in days. Tears filled his eyes and flooded the rage within him. *How could you do this,* he thought, *to your own mother?* Kyle turned to look at his father, who nodded and smiled. A creepy smile. All-knowing. Like he was holding three Jacks and a pair of Queens.

Kyle rubbed his mother’s back. He told her everything was going to be okay, even though it wasn’t. He told her that Jocey was in a better place now, even though that was a lie. When you lost a sister, a daughter and a friend, nothing was ever going to be the same again. But he couldn’t tell his mother that, of course. He just told her all those ridiculous things that are meant to comfort the grieving.

Time heals all wounds?

This too shall pass?

She’s at peace?

“She in the fucking ground,” Kyle whispered, although he hadn’t realized he’d said it out loud until Claire and his sister Bear looked at him. Even his mother stopped sobbing, if only for a moment, to flash a perplexed look behind the red eyes. “Give me a minute,” Kyle said, and he stepped away as Bear took hold of his powerless mother.

The crowd started heading toward the parking lot and Kyle resumed his search, scanning for a face that he finally found. Claire tried to take him by the arm, asking if he was okay, but he pulled away and walked briskly toward his target. He unwittingly stomped across a tombstone that rested flat on the ground, leaving clumps of dirt on Ethel Grandhope 1906-2001, and headed straight for Corina. Jocey’s best friend. Since preschool, when Jocey befriended Corina, the only African-American girl in the class. He called out her name.

She stopped, looked toward him, and nodded for the two girls walking with her to continue on.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m so-“

“Which one is he?” Kyle said, louder than he’d intended. The other two girls, almost 20 feet away, stopped suddenly and looked back. Kyle came up on Corina and stared down at her.

“Excuse me?” she said. Corina was a small girl – at 5-foot-2, almost a foot shorter than Kyle. Like Jocey, she’d always had a pretty smile. They were alike in many ways, except for the color of their skin. “Who?”

“When you called that morning,” he said, “you mentioned something about a guy being there.”

“Kyle, what are you -?”

“With Jocey!” he said, trying to control himself but unintentionally spraying flecks of spit on Corina’s bare arm. She looked down at her skin and her facial expression changed, matching Kyle’s anger. “You said some guy was with her when she died,” he continued. “Well, where is the piece-of-shit junky?” He looked around, his head swinging from side to side as his nostrils flared.

“Kyle, this isn’t the time or place.”

“Oh, we get to pick how and where things happen?” he said. The other girls had started creeping closer. “Well, I sure as hell didn’t get to pick when my little sister died, so spare me the rules, whatayasay?”He pointed a finger in her face. “Just show me which one he is.”

“Kyle, please.”

He felt the warm tears running down his face.

“Please,” he said. Then, when he said it again, it came out in a whisper: “Please.”

“Kyle.” A different voice this time, stern but with strains of concern. He could see Claire’s shadow but did not have the strength to look her in the eye. “Hon,” she said. “We should … get going.”

Kyle wanted to argue with her but didn’t have the strength. His head was down, his shoulders slumped. It took all of his energy just to look up at Corina. The corners of her mouth turned up – not a smile, exactly, more like a gesture of peacemaking.

“We’re all hurting,” she told him. “We all loved Jocey.”

Another phrase that didn’t make it any easier. Kyle nodded anyhow. It’s all he could think to do.

Corina and her friends turned and walked away. Claire rubbed Kyle’s back. His kids each hugged one of his legs, probably because kids seem to have a sixth sense for when a hug is needed. Kyle crouched down and looked them in the eye. Nolan and Dez. Twenty-six years ago, they were Kyle and Jocey. In a flash, he was a child again. He didn’t want to stand up.

“You’re so sad, Daddy,” Dez said. He nodded. She hugged him again. He didn’t want to let go.

“Okay, let’s roll.” Kyle looked up to see his father standing there, jiggling car keys on his finger. “The reception starts in fifteen,” his father said, then he winked. *Winked*. “All the Pilsner goes quick.”

Kyle stared up at his father’s blank face. Like he’d had a lobotomy. He wondered if his father had fallen into some dissociative state as a way of self-preservation. Kyle wondered if he would be the same way if something ever happened to Dez. He stood and placed his hands on his father’s shoulders.

“Claire,” he said, still staring into his father’s empty eyes, “go on ahead. We’ll meet you at the car.”

Kyle’s wife and kids scurried off. Most of the others from the funeral had left.

“Dad, give me the keys,” he said when they were out of earshot.

“Come again?”

“The keys, Dad.” He reached for them, but his father pulled them away. His facial expression did not change, caught in some blank, wide-eyed stare.

“Easy,” his father said.

Kyle put his hands on his hips and stared at his father. Part of him wished he could feel whatever it was his father was, if anything at all. Whatever cloak of denial was protecting his father, Kyle wanted to put it on.

“Dad,” he said. “Don’t make me take them from you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Every time Kyle had heard someone say that line, in real life or in the movies, it came with a bitter tone and a gleam in the eye. His father had neither of these things, just that vast, blank desert of his eyes.

“Dad, I’m worried about you. Have you been drinking? Maybe taking some pills?”

Kyle’s father chuckled. “C’mon, Kyle, what is this?”

“It’s okay, Dad. I get it. This whole thing, it’s … hard.”

“Not for me,” his father said. He actually shrugged. Kyle had always loved his father, but in that moment, he actually thought about hauling off and slugging him, right there at the cemetery a few minutes after Jocey was laid into the ground.

“Dad,” Kyle said, then he took in a deep breath. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on. We’re all going through it right now. Why don’t you let me –“

“I’m not drunk, son.” He chuckled again. Kyle had never seen his father mock someone before, much less his own son. Chuck Hartvigson had always been a passive man, the adjective *sweet* being used most often to describe him. “Haven’t had a drop since New Year’s Eve, swear to God. Now if we could just get going.”

“It’s just that-“

“That what, Kyle?” his father said, using the tone of a lawyer even though Chuck Hartvigson had probably never set foot in a courtroom in his entire life. “That you think I’ve gone and turned into a drunk, just because of this whole … *charade*?”

That word – *charade* – hit Kyle like a cold-cock to the back of the head. His father had even thrown in a dismissive hand wave for effect, as if to show that he couldn’t be bothered with all this death and grieving nonsense.

Kyle closed his eyes, trying to find peace. “Dad, please,” he said softly, without opening his eyes. “You can’t …”

“Can’t what?”

When Kyle opened his eyes, his father was staring at him blankly. With genuine misunderstanding. Grief being such an unforgiving bastard, it was impossible to ascertain what might be going on inside Chuck Hartvigson’s head. Kyle tried to maintain patience, but his own emotions were wrestling to get out.

“Really, Dad? A *charade*? For Pete’s sake. They’re still shoveling dirt on the casket. As we speak. And you’re-“

“I’m not worried about all that,” Kyle’s father said with a groan, the way a husband does when his wife tells him something is too expensive but he wants to buy it anyway.

Kyle had a kid on his football team back in high school who suffered so severe a concussion that he didn’t make sense for three days. The kid was talking nonsense about butterflies and children’s toys and past presidents for three days straight. Talking to his father at the cemetery felt like talking to that kid.

“Dad, help me understand,” Kyle said, genuinely confused. “What’s going on?”

His father looked around, grinned, then took Kyle’s cheeks into his palms. As if Kyle was still a child.

“You see,” Chuck Hartvigson said, “I’m not sad about Jocey. Not at all.” He leaned in even closer, and for a second Kyle thought he might kiss him on the lips. But his father just brushed his cheek against Kyle’s, whispering in his ear: “She’s coming back. Don’t you see?”

CHAPTER 3

Kyle and Jocey sat in the back seat, passing a piece of paper back and forth. The game was simple: each of them writes a word and together they build a story. Jocey wrote the word SINGS and passed it back to Kyle.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he said, looking at the sheet.

“*Sings*,” Jocey said. “Like a song? Duh.”

Kyle, eight years old, tossed the paper into the seat between them.

“It’s a verb,” he said. “You can’t put a verb after a verb. You can’t say: ‘She walks sings.’”

“Yes, you can!” 5-year-old Jocey shouted. “You can put a burb with a burb!”

“That’s not a sentence,” Kyle said, looking out the window. “There’s never been a sentence – ever – that had two verbs together.”

“Yes there has,” Jocey said. “Burbs always go together. They like each other. They *love* each other.”

“Now you’re just being dumb.”

“Kyle,” their mother said from the passenger seat. Gloria Hartvigson, always ready to mediate, was flipping pages of a magazine while Chuck drove the car. She had been working on the same magazine since they left the suburbs two hours earlier, on a road trip through the countryside. Chuck’s idea.

“I didn’t say she *was* dumb,” Kyle said. “I said she was *being* dumb. There’s a difference.”

“Mom!” Jocey shouted.

“She’s fine, Kyle,” their father said. “Give her a break.”

“Yeah,” Jocey said. “*You’re* the dumb one. You think the burbs don’t like each other.”

“Verbs aren’t a person,” Kyle said. “They’re a *thing*.”

“Burbs don’t like it when you say that. Burbs have feelings.”

“You’re so weird,” Kyle mumbled under his breath. He looked out the window. “What’s a *burb*, anyway?”

Jocey grinned. That beautiful smile. It could light up a room. Or the backseat of a car driving out on the countryside.

“Isn’t that what you said?” she asked sheepishly.

“I said *verb*.”

Jocey shrugged. She flipped her dark hair dramatically.

“Well, maybe you’re right,” she said, looking out the window dismissively, “I was talking about a *burb*. I have no idea what a *verb* is.”

Kyle started giggling. He would never meet anyone as funny as Jocey, never in his whole life. She tried to stifle a smile, looking out the window. She tried really, really hard. Then she stole one sideways glance, and they both burst out laughing.

In the front seat, their father placed his hand on the console between seats. Their mother put her hand atop his, looked at him, and grinned. The countryside rolled by them.

Jocey looked at the interlocked hands between the front seats and leaned forward, looking into the rearview mirror.

“Are you gonna *kiss*?” she said.

Kyle started laughing harder, so hard that he blew snot out of one nostril. Jocey didn’t miss a beat.

“You guys aren’t gonna make another baby, are you?” she asked her parents, deadpan, then turned toward Kyle and raised her eyebrows. He laughed so hard that it hurt.

They drove for a few more minutes, out in the country. The trees and fields passed, and the sky began to darken. The laughing quieted down, and Kyle found a position so comfortable that he fell into a half-sleep state. He could feel Jocey watching him, but he kept his eyes closed.

“Mom?” she whispered.

“Yes, hon.”

“How come I can’t marry Kyle?”

Their mother turned toward the back seat.

“Because he’s your brother.”

“But I love him.”

“I know you do,” their mother said. “But one day you’re going to meet a boy that you love in a different way. The way I love Daddy.”

Jocey looked out the window, lost in thought. Kyle opened one eye and watched her. Her brow was furrowed, as if she was deep in thought. She sat like that for about a minute.

Then she said: “Mom?”

“Yeah, hon.”

“That’s gross.”

Kyle burst out laughing again.

CHAPTER 4

Two-and-a-half weeks after that life-altering phone call, the sadness set in. Kyle could barely get out of bed and had to call in sick to work. The memories came flooding into his consciousness like a tidal wave. Jocey laughing. Jocey in pigtails. Jocey laughing. Jocey tap-dancing. Jocey laughing. Jocey playing soccer. Jocey laughing.

He couldn’t get the sound of her laughter out of his head. The image of her throwing her head back, howling with glee at even the dumbest joke. Kyle never could have imagined the pain it would cause now. For thirty years, Jocey’s laughter was his favorite sound.

Kyle stared out a window in his bedroom, wearing a tattered robe and an old pair of eyeglasses. The silence surprised him in a house without children.

The bedroom door opened, and Claire peeked her head in. He couldn’t bear to look her in the eye.

“You okay, hon?” she said. Kyle shrugged. She came to him, placing her hands around his waist. She leaned in, resting her cheek against his neck. “I’m worried about you,” she whispered.

*You should be* was the response that came to him, but he did not say it out loud. The truth was that he didn’t want anyone to worry about him, didn’t *need* it. Dragging others down, especially Claire, made everything worse. He didn’t need her pity; he needed her to be there for their children so he could grieve in peace. She rubbed his chest. It felt strange, like the way a kid might feel if a creepy barber massaged his neck.

“I’m here for you,” Claire said. She’d become a walking encyclopedia of clichés. She didn’t know Jocey like he did. Claire was starting to feel like a stranger, an outsider to the family in which he was born. Kyle felt like he was a visitor in her house. He just wanted to go home.

He gently pushed her hand away and untied his robe. He put on a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants.

“I feel like I should be at work,” he muttered.

“You need time,” she said, like she was some kind of an expert on all this. He felt like he was talking to a robot, incapable of understanding human emotion.

“At work, there’s distraction,” he said. His phone buzzed on a nightstand next to the bed. He turned toward it.

“Leave it,” Claire said.

Kyle ignored her. He went to the phone. The buzz had become an evil reminder of that horrible Sunday. Every time he heard the sound, a deep throb started in his gut. He went toward the nightstand clumsily, hurrying, as if he needed to save someone.

Bear’s name was on the screen. The only sister he had left.

“Kyle,” Claire said, her voice sounding like it was coming from another dimension.

He clicked the phone.

“Sup, Ky?” Bear said. “You at work?”

“Not today. What’s going on? Are you at school?”

“Unimportant. Look, Mom’s a trainwreck. She’s, like, drunk.”

“It’s not even 10 o’clock in the morning.”

“Right? I don’t know what to do with her, Ky. I’m ...” Kyle could hear her choking up. “I’m scared.”

“Where’s your dad?”

“Work,” Bear said. “He’s pretty much over it.”

“Be right there.”

When he hung up the phone, Claire was standing a few feet away, her arms folded.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

He sat on the bed and pulled on a pair of socks.

“It’s my mom,” he said. “She’s drunk, and Bear needs me, and … I don’t have time to talk about it.”

He stood up, and Claire placed a hand in the center of his chest.

“You can’t do this,” she said.

“Get out of my way, Claire.”

“You’re killing yourself,” she said. “You’re trying to be everything for everybody. You need to work on you.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil,” he said. Then he pushed her hand away, more aggressively than he’d intended.

“Really?” she said. He walked out of the bedroom. She followed. “That’s how you’re going to be?” she said.

“Where are my goddamn shoes?”

“Kyle, c’mon. Don’t do this. Don’t push me away. Not now.”

“Where are my fucking *shoes*?” he shouted. Claire recoiled. He’d never shouted at her like that. Not once. He immediately regretted it, and knew he should apologize, but he continued looking for his shoes. He just wanted to get out. He found them next to the back door.

“Kyle, stop. What’s gotten into you?”

He sat down and started to put on one shoe.

“Well, let me think,” he said. “For one, my sister died. You may have heard.”

“Stop it, Kyle. Stop being so condescending. You asshole.”

“And then there’s the part about my mother being shit-faced at 10 in the morning and my dad going all catatonic and walking around like he’s had some kind of grand mal seizure.” He stood up and looked her in the eye. “That’s what’s gotten into me, Claire. Now, if you’ll move …”

Tears filled her eyes. She stepped out of his way. He grabbed his car keys and headed for the front door.

“She wouldn’t want this,” Claire said softly. “If Jocey was still here, she’d be disappointed.”

Turning to face her with fire in his eyes, Kyle said: “What do you know about what Jocey would want?” He was breathing hard. He was tired. He knew he should have walked out without saying more, but he couldn’t stop himself. “You didn’t even know her. You knew the junky. That person wasn’t my sister.”

“I loved the person I knew,” she said. “I’m hurting, too, Kyle. You’re not the only one.”

He turned his back. He opened the front door.

“You don’t know shit about pain,” he said, his teeth clenched. And then he walked out into the day.

CHAPTER 5

Kyle drove 15 miles per hour over the speed limit, arriving at his mother’s house in 20 minutes. Bear opened the door for him, and he gave her a one-armed hug.

“She’s out back,” Bear said. “Just follow the smell of vodka and orange juice.”

“Thanks, kid.”

“Oh, and I’m not a kid,” Bear said, smiling. She had Jocey’s smile. The sight of it made him happy and sad. Bear was right: she wasn’t a child; she looked like she had aged 10 years in the span of 2 ½ weeks.

His mother was smoking a cigarette and standing at the back door from the kitchen, looking out at the backyard.

“Getting out of control,” she said, nodding toward the grass without looking at Kyle. She took a drag off he cigarette. Kyle couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her smoke. “Your father never let it get like this. He was a prick about lawncare.” She took another drag, then exhaled quickly. “About the only thing that limp dick was good for.”

“Mom, please.”

“Sit,” she said, pointing toward the patio with her smoking cigarette. “Make yourself at home. Make yourself … well, you know what I mean.”

The house had never felt like home. He’d moved away to college by the time his mother and step-father moved.

“Mom, how much have you had to drink?”

She held up the near empty glass and jiggled the ice cubes around.

“Orange juice,” she said, walking out onto the patio. “They say Vitamin-C is good for your impurity, you know.” Kyle followed her and started to say something, to correct her mispronunciation of the word immunity, but she cut him off. “I’m glad you came,” she said. “I don’t see you much anymore. And we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Your father.” She leaned forward, looking at Kyle with one open eye. She tried to focus on his face, but he could tell she was having trouble. “He’s not handling it well,” she said. “Acting a fool, y’know?”

“I’ve noticed. But Mom, about you-“

“That man never had a lot of friends,” she said, sitting down and looking out at the yard. He noticed for the first time that she had buttoned her blouse askew, missing one button along the way. “Being lonely at a time like this, it tends to, y’know.” She used the cigarette to make a circle around her ear. “Cuckoo,” she sang. “Cuckoo.”

She took another long drag of her cigarette.

“Mom, how are you doing?” Kyle asked, sitting down across from her.

“Well, hell,” she mumbled. “What kind of a question is that?” She reached out and grabbed an envelope that sat on the table between them. “Take a look at this,” she said, holding it between two fingers. “This should show ya who ya ought to be worrying about.”

“What is it?”

She just nodded, stabbed out her cigarette in the empty glass, and stood up, needing to steady herself before heading off to the kitchen.

Kyle opened the envelope. A single piece of paper, with the phrase:

WEEP NOW, IF YOU MUST, BUT OUR JOCEY’S COMING BACK

“That’s from him,” his mother called out. “Your father, the cuckoo bird.” She reached under the sink and pulled out a bottle of vodka that only had a couple fingerfuls left at the bottom. “No idea why he gave that thing to me,” she said, referring to the letter. “Ask me, he ought to keep his nonsense to himself.”

“Mom,” Kyle said, folding up the note and placing it in his pocket. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

She unscrewed the cap and looked at him through the open door.

“Thish is my first,” she said. Then she tossed the cap in the sink and put the bottle to her lips, finishing what was left in one gulp. Kyle stood and walked back into the house, knowing there was something he should say but not having the words accessible to him.

Instead, he said: “I’m going to check on Bear.”

Her bedroom was down the hall, the door open. She was sitting on the bed, wearing headphones, and he could tell that she’d jumped into bed when she’d heard him coming. Kyle had been a teenager, too, once – although that now seemed like someone else’s life.

“How ya doing, kiddo?”

She pulled off the headphones. “Oh, hey,” she said.

He sat down at the end of the bed. “You okay?” he said.

“About what – Jocey? Or Mom?”

“It’s a lot, huh?”

She nodded. Kyle didn’t know her as well as he’d known Jocey. Bear was more like a cousin, really. He’d been in high school when she was born, and he resented her existence for the years they lived together. Only after he went off to college and into adulthood did he learn how to be a big brother to her, as well.

“Can I be honest?” Bear asked.

“Shoot.”

“I miss Jocey, I do. But I guess I feel like I always knew that this is how it was gonna end up. For her, y’know?”

Kyle nodded. “Jails, institutions and death,” he said. Bear cocked her head, like she didn’t understand. “It’s something Jocey told me once, something she’d heard in an NA meeting or something,” he added. “Drug use always ends in jails, institutions or death.” Saying it out loud, considering what had happened, made him shudder.

Bear smiled. Jocey’s smile. “I like that,” she said. “Makes sense.” She set her headphones on the bed cover and pulled her knees up into the crisscross-applesauce position. “What makes it hard,” she said, “was that Jocey was doing pretty well for awhile. There were a few months there when it seemed like she’d turned it around. She loved going to those NA meetings. She loved her sponsor. She loved ... life again.” She dropped her head. “I just wish I knew what happened.”

Kyle took in a deep breath. “Yeah, well,” he said. “Some things we don’t get to know. Life’s not simple that way. Her life wasn’t some linear miniseries, where everything leads up to this one ending, all tied up with a bow. It’s more complicated than that. This disease, it doesn’t work like that.”

Bear reached back and unhooked her necklace. She took it off and held it out for Kyle. There was a brass heart on the chain.

“Open it,” she said.

He did, seeing pictures of both his sisters looking back at him. It was amazing how much their smiles looked alike, even if everything else was different. Dez, Kyle’s daughter, had the same smile.

“Then there’s Mom,” Bear said. “I don’t get her. She watches her daughter die of the disease, then she goes straight to the bottle.” She took back her necklace and looped it around her neck. “If I get mauled by a lion, would Mom go live in the jungle?”

Kyle didn’t smile, but he felt some small spark of joy. The mind of a teenage girl.

“I’m not going to try to pretend to understand any of this,” he said. “But what I do know is that there’s some attempt at control going on. Shooting heroin, drinking alcohol, it’s all about trying to control how you feel. I know it sounds insane, but …”

Bear reached for her headphones, holding them in her hand. The 21st Century teenager’s way of wrapping up a conversation.

“You ever read The Alchemist?” she asked.

"Is that what they’re reading in high school these days?”

“For fun,” Bear said. “I’m a nerd like that. Anyway, there’s a line in the book that sort of sums the story up. It’s something like: ‘Man’s only responsibility is to follow his destiny.’”

“’To realize one’s destiny,’ Kyle quoted, “’is a person’s only obligation.’ I have that quote posted in my office.”

“That’s it,” Bear said. “If we try too hard to control things, we’re, like, nuking fate. Y’know?”

Kyle nodded. “I do,” he said. He stood up. “You’re a pretty smart kid.”

“Except I’m not a kid, remember?”

“You are,” he said. “Enjoy it. Don’t try to grow up too fast. You’re already smarter than most adults I know. Did you get that smart playing hooky?”

Bear smiled. Her sister’s smile. “I couldn’t leave Mom home alone,” she said, her smile fading. “Besides, public school makes you dumber, not smarter.”

Kyle nodded his head silently. In so many ways, Bear reminded him of Jocey. She wasn’t as full of life, or as funny, but she was damn sharp.

“Don’t do drugs,” Kyle said suddenly. The words just came out as he stared at her, a half-joke and half shallow warning. As if one was needed. He kept staring at her, at the life in her eyes and the innocence of her youth.

“Of course not,” she said, her face going sour. Kyle reached out and rubbed her head, as if she was a 6-year-old, and Bear forced a grin. “Kyle?” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “I have something I have to admit.”

He tensed up. He expected the worst: that she’d pull out a used syringe and was on the same path as Jocey. In that brief moment, Kyle imagined having the perfect words that would stop her addiction cold in its tracks, as if he’d had it all along, but then the realization washed over him that he was powerless.

But Bear said nothing of the sort. “I was mad at her for a long time,” she said. “At Jocey. For most of my life, maybe all of it. I guess I still am.” She dropped her head, as if in shame. “I used to have to lie about her,” she continued. “Well, maybe I didn’t have to, but I did. Other people would talk about their big sisters who were in college or getting married or starting a career, and I’d want to be like them, so I’d make up stories. ‘Oh, my sister Jocey, she lives in France. My sister Jocey, she owns her own clothing line. My sister Jocey, she …’ I don’t know. Anything, really. Anything but what she was.”

“A junky,” Kyle whispered. He hadn’t used those words in a long time. There had been a period in his life when that was the only word he could use to describe her. Over the years, he had tucked that word away, hidden it in some forbidden place. He hadn’t necessarily come to accept her addiction, but he’d come to look at it through a different lens. Whereas it had started as this rumbling avalanche, at some point he stopped running and just found a safe spot to put himself, covered up and safe from its wreckage. He’d handled his parents’ marital problems the same way, so that when the divorce finally came, he had built up so much protection that it wasn’t going to bring him to his knees.

“I’ve always hated that word,” Bear said, pulling her knees up to her chest. “When I was in the ninth grade, some asshole was telling a story before social studies and he used it. ‘Junky,’ he’d said. I don’t even know what he was talking about. But it set me off. I started screaming at him. Swearing at him. It was the only time I ever got sent to the office.”

“I’d have done the same,” Kyle said. “We tried so hard to protect her.” He stood up and looked down at Bear, feeling the sense of hopelessness that had been such a big part of his role as big brother. “You can only protect someone so long,” he added, “before they’re not a victim anymore.” He looked around the room, at the posters and mirrors and textbooks that made him actually miss being a teenager again. “Does that make sense?” he asked.

Bear picked at her comforter. She didn’t look up at him. “Nothing makes sense,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 6

After he left Bear’s room, Kyle found his mother in the kitchen, sitting on the linoleum floor. Her head was down, and she was staring at something, her skirt pulled up to mid-thigh.

“Jesus, Mom,” Kyle said.

“This damn thing,” she mumbled, slurring her words like a stroke victim.

Kyle sat down next to her on the floor. She reeked of vodka and perfume. She had a phone in her hand and was absently tapping at the screen with two knuckles.

“Mom, I’m worried about you,” Kyle said, an understatement, to be sure.

“Why don’t they make these things so regular people can use them?” She said the word reh-goo-luh. She flipped the phone over. Shook it.

“Mom, who are you calling? What are you …?” He took the phone from her. He moved it from one hand to the other, so that she couldn’t reach it. She pawed at the linoleum, immediately distracted. “It’s not even noon, Mom, and look at you.”

“Look at me,” she said. She held up her hand and dramatically looked it, first her palm, then the back, then the palm again. She laughed.

“Mom, you’re drunk,” he said. Her hand dropped to the floor. She wouldn’t look at him. “You have a family,” he said. “You can’t live like this. You’re …” He stopped. It dawned on him how much he sounded like Claire. Giving advice was so much easier than taking it. “Look, we’re all hurting. We’ve all got unbearable pain in us. But this stuff –“ he reached up to the counter, grabbing the empty bottle of vodka – “it’s not gonna make the pain go away. It’s just gonna numb it for awhile.”

“God bless the numb. Grey Goose is a hell of a woman. Now, about that phone …” She leaned across him, and Kyle turned his body to block her.

“Mom, forget the phone. I need you to pull yourself together. You can’t live like this the rest of your life.” A cold chill ran through Kyle’s body, as if he had been here before. He remembered a moment sitting on the floor of Jocey’s apartment, holding a half-used piece of aluminum foil from Jocey as he lectured her with those same exact words. *I need you to pull yourself together. You can’t live like this the rest of your life.* Like his wife Claire, Kyle had become a walking cliché.

“You’re an expert now, huh?” his mother said, picking at a toenail. “On how we’re supposed to feel?”

Kyle held up the empty bottle. “C’mon, Mom,” he said, “you’re working real hard on not feeling anything.”

“You’re damn right I am,” she said sharply. She tried to stand but stumbled back, nearly hitting her head on a cabinet door under the sink.

“Mom …”

“There’s another bottle here somewhere,” she said. “A full one.”

“That’s the last thing you need.”

“Don’t tell me what I need,” she said, trying to get up again. This time, she gave up and leaned back against the cabinet door. “It’s the only thing that makes me feel good,” she said. “The only thing that makes life … *bearable*.” She wiped her nose dramatically. “And there you are, telling me what I *need* and *don’t need*.”

“I’m just worried about you.”

“What if Dez died?” she said, suddenly looking at him. The sound of his daughter’s name snapped Kyle to attention. He stared back at her, at those dancing eyes that couldn’t seem to focus. “If Dez died?” she repeated. “How would *you* handle it?”

“Mom, Dez is four.”

His mom waved her hand in front of her face. “She’s your baby,” she said. “Just like Jocelyn is my baby. *Was* my baby. She’ll always be my baby. That doesn’t change with time. You’ll see, smart guy.”

Kyle sighed. Even trying to imagine Dez dying was impossible, like his brain only had enough capacity to imagine a certain level of grief.

“Can we talk about the damn phone now?” his mother asked. Her lips barely moved. Her eyes were closing. She was basically mumbling.

“What about the phone, Mom,” Kyle said curtly, holding out the cell phone.

“It’s Jocey’s.” Kyle immediately looked down at the phone in a different way. “The phone company,” his mother continued, “they unlocked it for us. Some bereavement policy.” She waved her hand in the air weakly. “Anyway, I can’t figure out for the life of me how to get it working. Can you open it up so I can look at the messages?”

Kyle wrapped his fingers around the phone. “This is Jocey’s?” he said. She nodded. This sensation passed through him, like a ghost moving through his veins. He tapped the screen, and the phone came to life. His fingers hit a couple of icons, and there they were. Her messages stared back at him, like Jocey had come back to life. “Tell you what,” he said, still staring at the phone, his heart beating with possibility. “We’re not in any state to do this now. How about I take this home, fiddle with it, then I’ll call you tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow?” Her eyes were closed.

“Yes, I’ll call you tomorrow,” Kyle said. “And if you so much as stutter or slur, we’ll try again the next day.” She was nodding, but Kyle wasn’t sure if she heard him. “Don’t drink tomorrow, and we’ll talk. Fair?”

She didn’t respond. He started to stand up, and she grabbed his arm. Her eyes opened.

“Kyle,” she said. “Why you on my ass?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not the crazy one, Ky-Ky,” she said, using a nickname that hadn’t passed her lips in close to 30 years. “Have you seen your father?” She twirled a finger around her ear. Stuck her tongue out. “Cuckoo,” she said. “Like a clock.”

He patted her hand. “We’re all handling this like we can,” Kyle said. Another goddamn cliché. He found himself becoming a human fortune cookie. “Now, you. Take a nap, maybe make a nice dinner for Bear and your husband, and keep yourself busy.”

The only true thing about grief is that we all know what everyone else needs to do. We just don’t know how to take care of ourselves.

Kyle held up the phone. The winning lottery ticket.

“See you tomorrow,” he said, looking down at his mother. Her head was down, her body slumped over.

“Fuck tomorrow,” she whispered. “Fuck all the tomorrows.”

CHAPTER 7

They were seeking shelter from the storm.

Even out in the treehouse, they could still hear the arguing. Kyle stretched his legs across the plywood, reading a Stephen King book while Jocey lied her head on his thigh.

“Good God,” she said as the sound of their mother shouting at their father echoed from a back window. “Do they ever run out of things to argue about?”

“When they do,” Kyle said, flipping the page, “they’ll just argue about that.”

Jocey laughed her laugh. The kind of laugh that brought joy to everyone within earshot. Their mother was yelling about their father’s “piddly” salary. Their father was saying something about the money going a lot farther if she wasn’t spending it all the time. Chuck Hartvigson argued like a trapped animal; passive by nature, he could only take so much before the claws came out. He shouted at their mother, and she threw something that shattered against the wall.

“This is love, huh?” Jocey said.

“Just ignore them. The more you think about it, the worse it is. Like getting a flu shot.”

“Maybe I could ignore it better if they weren’t yelling loud enough to be heard all the way in France.”

Kyle kept his eyes focused on the book. His preferred method of escape. Jocey had yet to discover hers.

“It’ll all be over soon,” he said.

“God, I hope so. They better be done by dinner. I’m *starving*,” Jocey said, groaning theatrically like 8-year-old girls do.

Kyle looked at her, all young and naïve. When he’d said it would be over soon, she had taken it to mean the argument. What he meant was: the marriage.

“Why do you like those books, anyway?” Jocey asked. Kyle flipped over his book and looked at the cover. A gravestone with bloody claw marks running down.

“Stephen King is the shit,” he said. “Sorry, I mean, he’s the man.”

“I know the S-word, dummy.” Jocey stuck her tongue out. “Are there bad words in those books?”

He shrugged. “Some.”

“Do people, like, get killed?

“Some.” He smiled.

“You like books about people getting killed,” she said flatly. Jocey sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Are you, like, gonna kill somone?”

Kyle grinned again, more coyly this time. “Probably not,” he said. “But if you keep asking questions, instead of letting me read this book, you’ll be first on my list.”

“Hey.” She slapped his thigh. Kyle read one more sentence, then she interrupted him again. “I can’t ignore them unless I’m talking,” she said, referring to her parents. Their father had fallen silent again. Their mother continued to shout and throw things.

Kyle closed his book. He moved closer to her, putting his arm around her like big brothers do.

They sat like that for several minutes, listening to the argument stop and start, until Kyle was startled by something that tickled his nose. Out of reaction, he swatted and caught something in his hand. His sister looked up, her eyes widening. Shocked, Kyle resisted the urge to utter one of the words that made Jocey cringe. As she looked on, he squeezed his fist.

“Stupid bugs,” he said. Jocey sat up.

“Kyle!” she shouted, anger washing over her scrunched face. “Did you …?”

Slowly, as if the insect might get away, Kyle opened his fist. A wing, with beautiful colors fluttered for a moment between two fingers and then went still. When his hand was open, the crushed form of a butterfly was exposed to Jocey, whose mouth opened. She used an open hand to cover her mouth. The tears came quickly.

“Kyle,” she said, “you … *murderer*!”

“I didn’t know,” he said. She slapped his other arm. “Ow!” he said. “Settle down, Jocey, it’s just a dumb butterfly.”

“It’s a living being,” she said, standing up. Her hands were on her hips as she looked down at him with venom in her eyes. “It’s one of God’s creatures, you jerk!”

Kyle reached across, his fingers angled like an arrow’s bow, ready to flick the creature out the window. Jocey grabbed his arm.

“No!” she said. Carefully, Jocey picked up the butterfly from his palm, holding it by the hand. She held it in her hand. “You’re such a murderer,” she said. “It’s those books, isn’t it?”

“Jocey, it’s a freaking bug.”

She glared at him, then slowly descended the ladder, down into the backyard. The arguing had stopped, if only in a temporary truce. Jocey dropped to her knees. With the hand not holding the butterfly, she started pawing at the dirt. She dug a small grave, lowered the butterfly into it, then, with tears running down her face, she pushed the loose dirt over the insect.

Her mother came out into the backyard.

“There you are,” their mother said. Looking down from the treehouse, Kyle watched his sister stand up, clap her hands together, then she turned her back on her mother. “I’ll start dinner,” their mom said.

Kyle was always fascinated by how quickly she could turn off the anger and act as if nothing was wrong. He imagined his father cleaning up the broken glass a few feet away. The only remaining evidence of the war.

He picked up his book. His intuition told him that the fights would continue, and that the only way they would end was when his parents finally decided to pull the plug on their marriage. It sounded like the easiest way to end things, the only truce to this war. But in every battle, there are losers.

Jocey started climbing the ladder. She was still mad at him, he could tell, but she resumed her position, there under his shoulder, waiting for the protection of her brother’s arm to wrap her in safety.

“Sorry I called you a murderer,” she said. Kyle grinned.

Down below, the shouting started again. As soon as their mother returned to the kitchen, she was back yelling about something. Kyle could feel Jocey’s body tighten up.

Kyle rubbed her shoulder and started singing a their father’s favorite song:

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*

*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*

*All your life*

*You were only waiting for this moment to arise*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*

*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see*

*All your life*

*You were only waiting for this moment to be free*

By the time he finished, Jocey was asleep in his arms.

CHAPTER 8

Kyle came home to an empty house and proceeded directly to his office. Claire was probably out picking up Dez from preschool, and then she’d take her to the park before getting Nolan from elementary school.

His heart was beating through his chest as he pulled out the phone and set it on his desk. He reached into his other pocket and grabbed his own phone, pulling it out along with a forgotten piece of paper. He opened it.

WEEP NOW, IF YOU MUST, BUT OUR JOCEY’S COMING BACK

He could see his mother twirling her finger around her ear. The only reasonable thing she’d done all morning.

Kyle sat down in his chair and set the phones next to each other on the desk. He set the note from his crazy father aside. He took in a deep breath. He picked up Jocey’s phone, accessed her messages, and read:

*U OK? HOLLA BACK* From Corina, her best friend.

Kyle scrolled back to his own message, the last exchange he’d had with his sister.

*I NEED TO BORROW SOME MONEY*

*WHAT U NEED IT FOR?*

*DON’T ASK*

*U OK?*

He stared at the exchange. Sent from “Ky,” the name she’d put in her phone. He read the messages again, through Jocey’s eyes. Her big brother, the one who’d promised to protect her, who was supposed to protect her, and he’d left her hanging. *U OK?* He’d left it at that, not realizing that the lack of an answer was all the answer he should have needed. Big brothers aren’t supposed to ask questions. They just help. When a little sister says she needs money, a big brother is supposed to intuit what that means: *I need help*.

That’s what they’re supposed to do.

“You dick,” he whispered, talking to himself as he read the text for a third time, through Jocey’s eyes. Kyle hadn’t truly seen the world the way she had until he’d had a daughter of his own, and even then he was still blind to her. He’d gained a greater understanding of Jocey when his daughter Dez was born, with a 3-year-old protector already in place. A playmate. A beacon of light to show her the way. That’s what Kyle had been to Jocey, but somewhere along the way he had let her down. She’d gone astray, and he had turned his back on her when she needed him. “You dick,” he said again.

He scrolled through the messages. More requests for money. A text from Andrea, Jocey’s NA sponsor, asking if she was okay. Jocey hadn’t responded. A few minutes later, Corina texted, asking if Jocey wanted to go for coffee. No response.

And then, this:

**Rico:** Hey, girl. Heard U partying again. Got some (three thumbs up) shit.

**Jocey:** H?

**Rico**: Better. Perc-30s.

**Jocey:** I’m hurtin. Need 2 get well. No $$$ tho.

**Rico:** We can work something out. 7:30?

**Jocey:** Where at?

**Rico:** Roosevelt Field, South Parking Lot.

Kyle read the text exchange four or five times. By the third time, he could see his little sister pulling up to Roosevelt Field, her hands shaking and her forehead covered in sweat. He’d seen her in that desperate state before, had tried to tell her that she could sleep it off. But she never did. He could see her getting out of the car, where some seedy jerkoff in a bandana, his dick probably half-erect in anticipation, waited with a bag of pills. The murder weapon.

*Rico*. Kyle copied the guy’ phone number into his phone. His fingers were shaking as he typed. *Rico*. Fucking murderer. He wanted to call the guy right then. He imagined himself having a one-sided conversation: *You filthy prick. You killed my sister. Meet me anywhere, anytime. Say goodbye to everyone you love.* Kyle could feel himself smiling as he imagined it.

But he didn’t text the guy. Not now. He picked up his own phone and dialed a different number.

“Who’s Rico?” he said when Corina picked up.

“Who is this?”

“You know damn well who it is. Kyle. Josey’s brother.”

“Are you okay? You sound … different.” Corina asked, but he ignored her.

“Enough with the formalities. Tell me who Rico is.” Corina fell silent. “And don’t say you don’t know.”

He could hear her breathing. He half-expected her to hang up the phone. But they both knew he’d call back. As many times as it took.

“Kyle,” she said. “What’s the point? What’s this going to fix?”

“Tell me who he is,” he said. “Tell me where to find him. That’s all I want to know.”

“Answer my question, Kyle,” Corina said calmly. “What’s the point?”

“So you do know who he is.”

Corina groaned. Kyle could feel himself grinding his teeth.

“Why, Kyle?”

He took a deep breath. “Well, for one,” he said, “he killed my sister. So there’s that.” He had to wipe his mouth. “If somebody murdered me, and Jocey didn’t do anything about it, I’d be pretty pissed.”

“You’d also be dead.”

“And two,” Kyle said, ignoring her comment, “I can’t live in a world where I know someone like this is walking around free.” He could feel tears welling up in his eyes. “C’mon, Corina, what do you expect? Do you want me to just … forget it?”

“Let’s say you’re right,” Corina said. “Maybe this guy did supply the drugs that killed Jocey.”

“*Supply*? He’s not fucking Home Depot, Corina, he’s-“

“Okay, whatever,” she said. “Here’s the point. This guy is responsible for your sister’s death. That’s unforgiveable. I get that. But what you’re doing is allowing him to ruin your life, too.”

“*Allowing* him?” he shouted. “He’s *already* ruined my life! What kind of hokey bullshit are you trying to spin here?”

“You’ve still got a lot of life left, Kyle,” she said. The patience in her voice had not waned. Kyle couldn’t figure out how she could stay so calm. “You can choose to let him ruin the rest of your life, or you can choose to move on.”

“*Move on*?!” Kyle was having trouble catching his breath. He was standing, there in his office, practically foaming at the mouth. That stupid note was sitting on the desk: OUR JOCEY’S COMING BACK. “Do you hear yourself? *Move on?* Jocey’s dead, Corina. Okay? Maybe my fucking dad’s in denial, but the rest of us have to come to accept that. And now you just want me to move on? Wow, Corina. You should be a fucking psychologist. You give brilliant advice.”

“So tell me, Kyle,” Corina said, apparently ignoring his sarcasm. “If you find this guy, and you do whatever it is you’re planning for revenge, is that going to bring Jocey back?”

“You’re starting to piss me off, Corina. You really are. Just give me this heartless killer’s last name or where I can find him, will you! Spare me the lecture.”

“*Do not pay anyone evil for evil*,” Corina said. “That’s from Romans.”

“Are you really reading from the Bible right now, Corina?”

“I am,” she said. “I’m hurting, too, and it’s been comforting.”

“Damnit, Corina. I don’t need to talk about Jesus right now. JUST GIVE ME THIS RICO GUY’S FUCKING LAST NAME!!”

Corina was silent for a moment. Kyle could almost hear her thinking. While his breathing was shallow and quick, hers was more measured. He envied that.

“I’d say this,” Corina said. “This is precisely the time when you need to talk about Jesus.”

Kyle hung up the phone. He thought about throwing it across the room. But at least he had Rico’s phone number. A huge step toward the ultimate goal.

His phone buzzed. A text came in.

I’VE ONLY MET HIM ONCE, it read. It was from Corina. HIS REAL NAME IS MITCH. HE GOES BY RICO, BUT HIS NAME IS MITCH. THAT’S ALL I KNOW

Kyle smiled. He set down the phone and leaned back in his chair, breathing as if he’d just come off the football field.

CHAPTER 9

Two years after the divorce, Jocey started wearing black makeup and black T-shirts, with the names of bands like Ministry and Joy Division, bands Kyle couldn’t remember really being her thing. She was 11 or 12 at the time; Kyle was in high school. He had fallen into a comfortable place where friends and football practice relieved the constant stress of home. He pretty much stayed out of Jocey’s business and requested that she reciprocate the favor. There had been a period when she tried to come into his room every day for a week, and he barked at her to go away. She eventually got the hint.

But then one day, Jocey disappeared. His mother was in a frenzy when he got home from practice, saying Jocey had never come home from school. Kyle told her to relax and headed to the kitchen for an apple and a protein shake.

“This isn’t like her,” Kyle’s mother said, standing in the doorway. He took a loud bite of the apple, chewed for a few seconds, then looked his mother in the eye.

“Maybe she’s not the same as she used to be,” he said with a shrug. He took another large bite.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” his mother asked, but it was apparently a rhetorical question because she kept right on asking. “What if she’s been abducted? Or stabbed? Or what if she’s lost? Maybe she smoked some of that marijuana with her friends and can’t find her way home.”

“Maybe she’s out getting pregnant,” he said while chewing and apple.

“Kyle!” his mother shouted. “She’s 12 years old!” When he smiled and shrugged, his mother said: “This is no time for jokes, Kyle!”

“You’re right, Mom. With all that eye makeup and those stupid goth clothes, nobody’s gonna try to get her pregnant anyway.”

“Kyle!”

“Mom, relax,” he said, tossing his apple core into the garbage can. He unscrewed the lid on his protein drink. “She’s probably fine.”

“Probably?!”

“She’s fine, Mom.” He took his protein shake and headed for the living room. “Have you checked with Dad?” he called over his shoulder.

As it turned out, Jocey had gone to her father’s house. When their mother got in touch with her, Jocey said she was moving in with her father.

“Oh, yeah?” their mother said into the phone. “Well, that’s not going to happen.”

Except it did. Jocey spent the next few years living with her father, visiting only so often. Kyle actually grew closer to her in those years, despite the distance, mostly because they talked on the phone every day. Years would pass, he’d go off to college, and they would fall out of contact for weeks at a time. Then he stopped hearing from her altogether, and he wrote it off to Jocey getting a new group of friends or maybe starting to play some kind of sport. He was too busy with school and frat parties to think much of it.

Until one day his father called, asking simply: “Kyle, what do you know about a drug called heroin?”

After that, things never were the same.

CHAPTER 10

He followed the light of one hundred candles. They stood in a circle, alongside the lake, where Andrea had told him they would be. Kyle couldn’t believe there were this many people.

Someone handed him a candle. He looked around at the strangers. He didn’t even know what Andrea looked like. When she’d called on the phone earlier, saying she’d gotten his number from Corina and that a bunch of Jocey’s NA friends were getting together by the lake, Kyle had expected to find a half-dozen people. He expected nothing like this.

The first person to speak was a beautiful woman with shoulder-length, blond hair. She did not look like the kind of person who would hang out with these people. She wore an expensive white blouse and designer jeans. Next to her stood a bearded guy with a hoody pulled up over his head, weaving with grief as he stared at the ground. On the other side of her, a woman with a tattoo on her face stared up at the sky.

As soon as the pretty blonde started speaking, he knew it was Andrea. He had never met her, but he recognized the voice.

“Welcome, all,” she said. “Thank you for coming. Jocelyn would appreciate all this love.”

Kyle looked around the circle, at all those people that were nothing like him. He looked at their candles, at the small bursts of light that, when put together, lit up the sky around them. He could actually feel the collective grief around him. He wondered why someone who had so many people who loved her could feel so alone.

“Let’s start with a reading,” Andrea continued. “’ JUST FOR TODAY I will be unafraid. My thoughts will be on my new associations, people who are not using and who have found a new way of life. So long as I follow that way, I have nothing to fear.’”

Kyle looked down at the candle in his hand. He remembered when Jocey’s light shined brightly. When she was a child, she was the one person who could pull him out of a bad mood every single time. Guaranteed. Somewhere along the line, that light went out. Like God had pursed his lips and blown a breeze into the flame.

He turned to the guy next to him, a short dude with piercings in his nose and lips. The guy nodded and looked down at his candle.

“Jocelyn lived with no fear,” Andrea said. “For good or for bad, that’s how she lived.” She smiled. She had a beautiful smile. Kyle couldn’t imagine her using drugs. He couldn’t imagine her ever being unhappy. “As her sponsor,” Andrea continued, “that could be difficult. They say that absence of fear is faith, but it can also be vulnerability.” Around the circle, all the others were dressed in dark. They looked like shadows. They looked less like people than ghosts. But Andrea, she was something different. Kyle’s eyes kept going back to her. “As many of you know,” Andrea continued, “Jocelyn was doing well for a while. She had six months; we all saw her at the meetings, out there soaking up recovery.” Her lip began to quiver. Kyle could see tears bubble up in her lower eyelids. “It’s such a fucked-up disease,” she said. “We just can’t be vulnerable. We can’t be blind. It will come back to us, out of darkness.” She took a few seconds to compose herself. Kyle could see what Jocey liked in her, why she’d chosen her to be her sponsor. She was about Kyle’s age, and she carried a confidence and calmness that set Kyle at ease. There had been a time when he’d wanted to blame this person for Jocey’s death, wanted to hate her for not keeping his baby sister in line. But watching her now, Kyle could feel her powerlessness. “I don’t know how this happened,” she said. “I wish I did, but …”

Andrea dropped her head, and Kyle felt the need to go to her, to dry her tears. He’d never actually met her, but in that moment he felt closer to her than he did to his own wife. Claire didn’t know Jocey like this woman did, she never would. Kyle imagined himself lying next to Andrea, telling stories about Jocey to which this woman would immediately connect. This woman knew Jocey in ways that not even Kyle did.

After a long silence, someone else spoke. The people around the circle shared their memories. They talked about Jocey’s joy, her smile, her laugh. He’d seen very little of these things over recent years, had forgotten how much he’d missed them.

When the people were done talking, they blew out the candles and dropped them in a bucket at the center of the circle. Kyle started to walk to his car but stopped, turning to look at Andrea. He went to her. He introduced himself. Her dark eyes sparkled, even in the darkness.

“Nice to meet you in person,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry. Jocelyn was … she was so many things. To a lot of people.”

“I miss her,” Kyle said. It was the first time he’d said it out loud. He could feel the lump in his throat rising. Andrea smiled.

“I miss her too,” she said. Kyle reached out for her, embracing her in a hug. He was operating on autopilot. Doing what felt good. She smelled good. She felt comfortable. Claire had become cold to him, someone who didn’t understand his pain. This woman was right there with him.

“How’s your family?” Andrea asked.

He thought of his crazy father and his drunk mother. “Y’know,” he said, shrugging.

“She was such a great woman,” Andrea said. “So happy on the outside, but I could never understand why she wasn’t always happy on the inside.” She rubbed her arm. “There were so many people who were there for her,” she continued, her head down. “Near the end, when she started to drift away, we all reached out to her.” Her voice choked up. “But she wouldn’t take our hand.” Kyle wanted to hug her again.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I don’t know. She had these other people, the ones who didn’t necessarily have her best interest in mind, the ones who didn’t give a shit about her. That’s who she was hanging out with at the end.”

*Rico*. The name popped into Kyle’s head again. He thought of asking her about him. But he didn’t want to push her away.

“She really respected you,” he said instead. “Don’t blame yourself for this. It’s not your fault.”

She looked up at him suddenly. She had a strange look on her face, as if this possibility had never occurred to her before. She was about to say something, then two girls came up and gave her a hug. They started talking, and Kyle turned to walk away.

“Hey,” Andrea called out to him. In the darkness, he turned toward her. “Sometimes you can’t save the caterpillar,” she said.

He could no longer see her face. The light from the candles was gone.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“There’s a story,” she said. “We use it a lot in recovery. It’s about a man who comes up on a cocoon that’s shaking and squirming. The man realizes that there’s a butterfly trying to get out. He reaches up, rips it open, and this half-caterpillar, half-butterfly things falls to the ground. It’s covered in slime, and its wings aren’t fully formed. It tries to fly but can’t.”

Kyle waited. She sat in the silence. He wanted to ask what that meant, what it had to do with Jocey. But she just went back to her friends, talking about catching a meeting together or going out for coffee.

Kyle reluctantly walked away, thinking about the parable. Imagining a limp of slimy insect that couldn’t fly. He walked to his car but still couldn’t figure it out. The image faded, and another word appeared in his mind: *Rico.*

He sat in the driver’s seat and looked at his phone. A string of texts from Claire, asking him where he was and when he was coming home. He’d never felt so distant from her. He pulled out Jocey’s phone. He looked up Rico’s phone number and typed it into his phone. He looked out the window toward a couple of guys in hoodies who were smoking cigarettes and leaning on a car. Kyle channeled their personalities and started typing a text to this guy Rico:

HEY, MAN. I HEARD YOU GOT SHIT.

A few minutes passed. The phone dinged with a response.

WHO DIS? I KNOW YOU?

A rush of adrenaline swept through him. He stared at his phone. The murderer was right there. In the palm of his hand. Kyle took in a deep breath. He couldn’t sound like a cop. He needed to sound authentic, if this was going to work. He looked at the messages on Jocey’s phone. His stomach turned. He felt light-headed.

I GOT MY GIRL WITH ME, Kyle typed. SHE’S HURTIN. NEEDS TO GET WELL.

A few seconds, and then: WHAT YOU GIRL’S NAME? I NO HER?

Kyle took in another deep breath.

SHE DON’T WANNA SAY, NOT OVER THE PHONE, he typed. HER USUAL GUY, HE GOT ARRESTED.

Rico immediately responded. HER PLUG GOT HIT? LEMME GUESS … J-MONEY?

THAT’S HIM. Kyle couldn’t believe it. The guy was buying it. SHE HURTS BAD. MEET US 2MORROW? ROOSEVELT FIELD?

SOUTH PARKING LOT, Rico responded. SHE’LL BE GLAD SHE HIT ME UP. U?

Kyle didn’t want to sound square. If this was going to work, he was going to have to sound legit.

I QUIT THAT SHIT, he typed. MORE OF A COKE MAN. YOU GOT?

HELLS YEAH, I GOT. SEE YOU AROUND 10 A.M.?

Kyle smiled. His heart was beating through his skin. SEE YA THERE.

He looked at the clock. It was 3 p.m. He had a bonfire to go to. And he had to swing by the gun shop. He’d never been there before.

Only 19 more hours before he’d get his sweet revenge. He could hardly breathe.

CHAPTER 11

Kyle was in no hurry to get home. He’d never answered Claire’s texts and wasn’t really looking forward to talking to her. He considered going out for a drink but thought of where that had gotten his mother.

He was driving through a familiar neighborhood, on the way back from the candlelight ceremony at the lake, when it dawned on him that he was only a couple of blocks away from his father’s house. Jocey had moved back in with him a couple of years ago, in the depths of her addiction. Their father supported her and gave her a place to stay because he didn’t want her living out on the streets.

In retrospect, that hadn’t helped her.

He turned the corner onto his father’s street and saw that the house was dark except for one lamp in a window. Kyle leaned forward, trying to see inside. He could see his father, sitting at a table, near the lamp. His father was holding up a small sign.

WELCOME BACK, JOCEY. I MISSED YOU.

Kyle drove by slowly. He considered stopping. Going inside and talking to his father. But what was he going to say? He wasn’t a psychologist. He wasn’t a grief counselor. Kyle didn’t know what he could tell his father to snap him out of his funk.

He sped up and swallowed hard. Kyle had already lost his sister, and now he felt like he was losing his father. And his mother. And his wife. Everything was slipping away.

He turned the corner, went out to the highway, and drove out toward the suburbs.

Kyle remembered his father as a younger man. His first memory was when Kyle’s mother was pregnant with Jocey. Kyle remembered the feeling of betrayal that came from his parents bringing another child into his life. He used to hide from his parents as a form of protest – in the bathroom, the closet, the furnace room. He remembered wishing he could hide and never be found.

One afternoon, he was hiding under the kitchen sink. He could hear his parents opening and closing doors, looking all over the house for him. His mother was starting to yell, so much that Kyle was too scared to come out. Fifteen, maybe 20, minutes passed before his father finally found him. Chuck Hartvigson say on the kitchen floor and looked in on Kyle, without any anger in his voice.

“Hey, kiddo,” he’d said. “What’s going on?”

Kyle, his head in his hands, said, “You no love me enough.”

“Why would you say that, Ky?” his father asked, with patience in his voice.

“You want another baby so you can get rid of me.”

Chuck Hartvigson moved closer. He took Kyle’s hand into his large, warm hand.

“We’ve never loved you more,” Kyle’s father said. “You make us so proud that we want another Ky.”

Right then, Kyle’s mother came around the corner. “There you are!” she shouted. “Do you know how crazy it makes us when you disappear like that? You come out from there right now and –“

“Hon,” Kyle’s father said patiently, “give us a minute.”

Kyle looked up at his mother, who wanted to say something else. But she didn’t. She just walked away.

Kyle remembered how his father was his best friend during the first year of Jocey’s life. But over the years, she became Kyle’s best friend, and he was there for her when their parents started fighting and eventually got divorced. Kyle was always there for her, but who was there for his father?

He turned the car around. It was past 11 p.m. He drove back into the city, into his father’s neighborhood, and parked in front of the house. The light was still on. His father was still holding the sign. But he was asleep. Kyle sat and watched him, his head back and his chest rising. He thought about that flat stare and that empty smile he’d carried on the day of Jocey’s funeral. Like the life had been sucked out of him. Kyle wished he knew how to breathe the life back into him. Jocey had always been a Daddy’s girl, had moved in with him as a teen and again as an adult, and she’d become an even bigger part of him. Kyle couldn’t imagine the void his father must feel without her.

Kyle nodded off in his car for an hour before leaving and heading out into the suburbs. He didn’t necessarily want to go home, but he needed to.

Claire was asleep when he arrived home and crept into the bedroom. He did his best not to wake her. He knew an argument would wake the kids. He didn’t want his kids to have the same experience he’d had with Jocey as a child. He snuck under the sheets and stared up at the darkness. He thought of Andrea. He imagined the conversations she’d had with Jocey. He wondered if Jocey had ever told Andrea anything that might have tipped her off, that might have explained why she kept going back to drugs. Kyle remembered the thing Andrea had told him, that story about the caterpillar, but he still couldn’t figure out what that had to do with Jocey. Why couldn’t she just fly? Why couldn’t he help her?

He fell asleep and dreamed of butterflies. It was the first night he’d slept without dreaming of Jocey as a child. He saw himself running through a field, chasing the most beautiful butterfly he could find. He chased it across a street. The other butterflies were all gone now. He didn’t want to let it go. The sky was getting dark. It was hard for Kyle to see. He ran, crossing another street. A car slammed its brakes and honked at him. He kept running, watching the butterfly disappear in the darkness. He wished it was a firefly. When he could barely see the butterfly, a bright light emerged in the distance. Kyle stopped running and walked toward it. He could see a lamp in a window. A bright lamp, so bright that it blinded him. He used his arm to shadow his eyes. He walked closer, trying to see inside. He could hear his father snoring. He could see the sign.

WELCOME BACK, JOCEY. I MISSED YOU.

CHAPTER 12

He awoke with a headache and the taste of sleep and alcohol on his breath, which was strange considering he’d spent most of the previous night at a candlelight NA meeting. Claire was stirring net to him, and he considered sneaking out of bed and going on a weekend drive rather than facing the music. But his head hurt, and his body ached, so instead he lied in bed and waited for the storm.

Claire rolled over, blinked one eye open, and smiled.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

“They kids up?” Her voice was strangely even – no trace of anger, nor of avoidance.

“Haven’t heard them,” Kyle said. Then he waited. Of course, she would ask. The inevitable question. *Where were you last night?* It’s right there on Page 1 of the wives’ handbook. He waited. One of the kids called out for the other to “Stop!” Claire started to get out of bed.

“Listen,” he said. “About last night.”

Claire pulled on a pair of yoga pants. “Waffles?” she said, distracted.

Dez called out. “Mom!”

*I’m sorry.* The words were in his mouth, and he knew they could fix so much of the damage, but he just said: “Yes, waffles would be great.”

The kids ran out into the hallway, poking and yelling at each other like old times. The heaviness that had come with the grief of losing Aunt Jocey seemed to have lifted, if only for a morning. Claire used her calm voice to separate them, then she mentioned waffles and the peace treaty was signed.

“Who wants to help me make them?” Clair asked. Dez and Nolan, in unison, shouted: “Me! Me! Me!” The soundtrack of a family. Kyle imagined his father lying in bed, listening to the same scene twenty-something years earlier. He lied back and closed his eyes, basking in the first semblance of normal life since Jocey died.

Kyle rolled over to check the time on his cell phone. 8:56. He flipped over to the messages, trying to remember what time he’d agreed to meet with that kid Rico. His heart started pounding. Adrenaline washed through him. He scrolled through the messages but couldn’t find the one he sent Rico. Had he not pushed SEND? He remembered a few texts back and forth. The guy actually agreeing to meet him. Kyle kept scrolling through the messages but found nothing. Had he deleted the string?

He set down the phone and started getting dressed. He thought he could recall agreeing to 10 a.m. That was just over an hour away. He hadn’t even planned yet how he would go about getting his revenge.

Kyle went to the garage, found an aluminum baseball bat, and put it in the trunk of his car. He imagined taking a swing at Rico’s head. He wondered if he’d feel any guilt as he watched the guy’s brains bleed all over the pavement.

He realized he’d been smiling at the thought.

“Daddy!” He heard his name being called and went inside, into the arms of two bear hugs. Claire was next to the stove, pouring batter into a waffle maker.

“Don’t forget about tonight,” she called out. “Dinner with the Spitowskis.” Her voice was cheerful. Maybe a little tired, as expected, but still no sign of vindictiveness. He replayed the previous day, how he’d pushed her away, ignored her pleas to stay home, then stayed out all night without returning her texts. She had either miraculously forgotten or was incredibly good at masking her anger around the kids.

“Sure,” he said. “Listen, I’ve got this thing. At 10. Since I’ve missed so much work lately, I’ve got to go in for a couple of hours.”

She stopped and turned to him.

“You missed work?” she asked.

He stared back at her. Claire was starting to remind him of his father. That blank stare of denial. Everyone around him was either dying or going crazy.

“The last couple of days,” he said. She tilted her head, as if she was hearing this for the first time. “Look,” he said. “About yesterday. I wasn’t working. I was just … I was having a hard time.”

Claire washed her hands and came to him. The kids were playing with toys. She sat on a chair and put a hand on his leg.

“What’s wrong?” she said, softly, so the kids couldn’t hear. Kyle stared back at her. The concern on her face looked like a mask. He couldn’t tell if she was mocking him. He ran his fingers through his hair.

“I don’t know what’s going on, Claire,” he said, his head down. “This whole Jocey thing, it’s got my brain going haywire.”

“Jocey?” she said, her voice dripping with curiosity. “Your sister?”

He looked up at her. Claire’s face was glowing. She was smiling. *Smiling*. His face must have shown something, because the smile faded. Concern washed over her eyes and mouth.

“Did you talk to her?” Claire said. “Is she okay?” Her hand moved to his forearm. Rage rushed over him, and he pulled it away.

There was a crash, and then Dez started crying.

“Sorry!” Nolan shouted as he ran out of the room.

“Dez!” Claire shouted. “Are you okay?”

There was a small piece of glass in his daughter’s hand. Blood was coming out. Claire rushed her into the bathroom.

*Have you talked to her? Is she okay?* Kyle couldn’t figure out what the hell she’d meant by that. This weird, passive-aggressive bullshit was wearing on him.

He realized he’d never actually read the texts that Claire had sent him the previous night. He pulled out his phone. He looked at the messages, but those, too, were gone. The last message on his phone was the one from Jocey. From two weeks ago. All the ones after it had been deleted.

R U OK?

As he stared at it, his phone buzzed. His mother.

“Kyle,” she said. Her voice was frantic. “Have you heard from Jocey?”

Kyle pulled the phone from his ear and looked at it. Everyone around him had officially gone insane.

“Mom, *what*?” he said into the phone.

“She was asking for money yesterday, but I told her no,” his mother said. “She said she was gonna just call you. Kyle, she sounded bad. I think she’s been –“

“Mom, stop it!” Kyle shouted. “Why are doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Acting like Jocey’s okay. Why is *everyone* acting like she’s okay?”

“Oh, no. Kyle, what are you talking about? What’s happened?”

“Damnit, Mom! Stop it!”

Claire came into the living room with a bloody towel.

“Kyle, please,” she said between her teeth. “The language. Dez can hear you!”

Kyle stared back at her. Everybody was getting so out of whack.

“Fuck it,” Kyle mumbled, and he hung up the phone. He put it in his pocket and went to the car, ready to go to Roosevelt Field. Everyone dealt with grief in a different way. Some people went crazy, some developed amnesia, and some decided to take matters into their own hands.

He pulled out of the driveway, and his phone rang again. He expected his mother’s name to pop up on the screen, or maybe Claire’s, but what he saw made him slam on the brakes.

JOCEY.

Someone was calling from his sister’s phone.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered. He clicked the ANSWER key.

“Who is this?” he shouted. There was silence. And then, a miracle. Now Kyle was the one going crazy.

“What the hell got up your butt?” a voice said. A voice that couldn’t be anyone else’s.

It was Jocey’s voice.

“Holy …” he whispered. But he couldn’t say anything else. A car honked at him from behind.

“Ky?” his sister Jocey said. The sound of her voice sent a warmth through his body that made him want to climb under a blanket and go to sleep. “Did you forget how to talk?” she said. The question was rhetorical, but Kyle felt the need to answer, if only because he was wondering the same thing.

“No,” he whispered. “I can talk. I just can’t …” He suddenly remembered something. He reached into his pocket. Her phone wasn’t there. “Holy shit,” he whispered. “It was all a dream.”

“Ky, you’re totally freaking me out,” Jocey said. She did sound a little desperate, like his mother had said, but it was still *her voice*. Kyle got the same feeling hearing it that he imagined she got out of heroin. “Anyway, I need twenty bucks. I’m out of gas, y’know?”

“Jocey, I love you so much,” he said suddenly. “Have I ever told you that?”

“Ky, are you drunk?”

“I don’t tell you that enough, not nearly.” He pulled the phone from his ear and looked at the date. February 12. One day before she died. *A dream*. It was all a dream! “Jocey,” he said. “I’ve got cash. Plenty of it. Come over tonight, have dinner with Claire and the kids. You can stay the night. You can stay for a few days. A few weeks, whatever. Just come over. Let me see you. Dez and Nolan miss their Aunt Jocey.”

“Ky, this is really getting weird. What’s going on?”

“Where are you, Jocey?” he asked. “Right now.”

“I’m on my way back to Dad’s. I’m almost there. Why?”

He hung up the phone, and a sick feeling washed over him that he might never speak to her again. That *this* was the dream. That *he* was the one going crazy now. But at least he’d said what he’d wanted to say. He’d told her he loved her. He got his second chance, and he told her what he needed to her to hear.

He drove fast, forgetting about that Rico asshole for a little – if there even was such a person. He couldn’t decide what was part of the dream and what wasn’t. The candlelight vigil. The argument with Claire. His drunk mother. His amnesiac father. His feelings for Andrea. His phone conversations with Corina. His talk with Bear in her bedroom. Could all of this have happened in a single dream?

He pulled up to his father’s house. Jocey’s car was parked across the street. His heart was beating with anticipation. His lip was quivering.

Kyle looked over at the house, at the window where he’d seen his father sitting with a sign in his hand. It was daylight now, and Kyle couldn’t see inside.

WELCOME HOME, JOCEY, the sign had said. I MISSED YOU.

Part of the long, fucked-up dream.

Kyle turned off the engine and reached into his pocket. He felt the piece of paper. His heartbeat seemed to stop. He pulled the folded paper out of his pocket, took a deep breath, and opened it.

WEEP NOW, IF YOU MUST, BUT OUR JOCEY’S COMING BACK. In his father’s writing. He stared at it. That didn’t make sense. If it was all a dream, how did the note get here?

He looked at the date again, there on his cell phone. Feb. 12. The day before Jocey died. He went to the messages on his phone. The last one sent from Jocey, on Feb. 12. He looked back at the written note.

WEEP NOW, IF YOU MUST, BUT OUR JOCEY’S COMING BACK. Written on, what, the 15th?

What the hell was going on?

Kyle was startled by a tap on the passenger side window. He turned and saw Jocey’s face. Six feet away. She looked like shit, all gaunt and tired, probably 20 pounds lighter than she should be, but it was her. In the flesh.

OUR JOCEY’S COMING BACK …

A miracle was happening.

He opened the car door, walked around the car and wrapped his arms around her frail, fragile body, feeling a sense of comfort that he’d not felt since he was a child. A sense of comfort he thought he’d never feel again.

“Hey, baby sis,” he whispered. He promised not to ever let her go. Not ever again. He closed his eyes and breathed her in. He felt the life inside of her emanating through his body.

“Ky, what the …?” she said, holding her arms at her sides.

When Kyle opened his eyes, he saw his father standing on the lawn. Grinning like a groom on his wedding day. His eyes were sparkling. His face was glowing. He wasn’t speaking, but Kyle could tell what he was trying to say.

*I told you so.*

Jocey had come back.

PART 2: EUPHORIC RECALL

CHAPTER 13

*Don’t wake up. Don’t wake up.*

Kyle kept reminding himself, through the three-word mantra, to keep the dream alive. If that wasn’t the dream, then this was. It was the only way to explain what was happening. His baby sister sat across from him – *alive*. Yesterday, she was dead. Now, here she was. Flesh and bone. He couldn’t stop touching her arms, her hair.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, sitting inside his father’s house.

She pushed his arm away. “Am *I* okay?” she said, scratching at her arms. She wiped her face with the back of her forearm. Their father sat next to her, too close, his hand on her shoulder. His grin had not faded. “I’m fine, Kyle,” she said. “Jesus.” She shrugged off her father’s massage. “What’s with you guys, anyway?” She looked to Kyle and then to her father. “You guys are creeping me out.”

Kyle realized he’d probably been grinning like his father. He wanted so badly to ask her more questions. The important questions. Did she know she was dead? Was she ever dead at all? Was she afraid?

He thought of the candlelight vigil, of what Andrea had read: *I will be unafraid*.

“Okay, I know what you’re thinking,” Jocey said, standing up. She kept rubbing her arms and face. “I’m not high, if that’s what this is. If that’s why you’re staring at me. I’m just a little … I think I have a touch of the flu, maybe.”

“You’re coming home with me tonight,” Kyle said. It was not a question.

“I don’t know, Kyle,” she said. “I don’t want to get Dez and Nolan sick, y’know?”

“They’ll be fine. Kids have better immune systems than the rest of us. If you should be worried about getting anyone sick, it’s Dad.”

“She’s fine here, Kyle,” their father said.

“Yeah, I’m good. I’d rather sleep in my own bed, y’know?”

“Claire already made dinner.” He was lying. *Claire*. He didn’t even know what she was doing. Probably worrying about him.

“My stomach’s been really …” Jocey paused. Her eyes looked hollow. Her skin had lost its color. Looking at her, Kyle thought only two possibilities: that she was going through heroin withdrawal, or that she’d come back from the dead.

In this rare case, maybe both were true.

“Excuse me,” Jocey said. She headed toward the bathroom. Kyle watched her to, not wanting her to leave his sight. Two possible catastrophes flashed in front of his eyes: that he’d snap out of his dream and never see her again, or that she’d sneak out and go find that Rico asshole.

“You didn’t believe,” his father said, the voice startling Kyle.

“Didn’t believe what?” Kyle was still staring at the hallway that led to the bathroom.

“C’mon, Ky. You know. We both know.”

Kyle turned to look at him. His father’s eyes were still sparkling. Kyle leaned forward. “No one else does?” he asked.

“Not as I can tell. Your mother, Bear, all the neighbors, they just carry on like she was never gone.”

“Was she?”

His father shrugged. “We can’t have the same dream, can we?”

As he looked around, Kyle couldn’t figure out why the house had gone so quiet.

“Dad,” he said, looking down the hallway where Jocey had gone, “do you know what’s happening?”

His father reached out and grabbed his arm, squeezing tightly. Kyle’s eyes met his.

“All I know,” his father said, “is that when the miracle comes, you don’t ask too many questions.”

Kyle’s first thought was to question that, to ask *why not*? But wasn’t that just another question?

“I’m gonna go check on Jocey,” he said. His father wouldn’t let go of his arm. His grip tightened. “Dad,” Kyle said. “I need to check on her.”

“She’s back,” his father said, smiling.

Kyle nodded. “It’s February 12th, right?” he asked, looking his dad in the eye. “And Jocey died – *dies* -- on the 13th?”

Chuck Hartvigson shrugged. “I’ll tell you what, Ky,” he said. “I’ll be damned if I remember much from that period of time. With every passing hour, with every day –“ he snapped his fingers – it disappears from my memory. Poof, it’s gone.”

“Well, I remember,” Kyle said. “She dies on the 13th. *Tomorrow*.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means we’ve got to stop it from happening again.”

His father released his arm. Kyle ran toward the bathroom, and the door was locked. He said her name, twice. No answer. He pictured her, lying on the bathroom floor, with a syringe sticking out of her arm. He threw his shoulder into the door. It slammed opened, splintering inside the frame.

“Kyle,” his father called out. “What on earth …?”

There was no one in there. Kyle ran to the back door. She left it wide open.

She was gone.

CHAPTER 14

When Jocey was 20, she totally disappeared. By that time, her father had grown used to not seeing her for two or three days at a time. Jocey had discovered crystal meth, in addition to her existing heroin habit, and she often spent three days without sleep. She would finally come home and crash for a day or two – and sleep straight through.

But this time, when Jocey was 20, was different. She hadn’t come home for a week. Nobody had seen or heard from her. Kyle was in his senior year of college, off at Central, when his dad called in a panic.

“Did you check with Corina?” Kyle asked, rubbing his head after a long night of frat partying.

“Hasn’t seen her.”

“You ask Mom?”

“Emailed her,” his father said. “Nada.”

Kyle sat up in bed. He was 23 years old. Hadn’t yet lost anyone except for two of his grandparents. The thought of Jocey dying flashed through his mind for the first of what would be many times.

“So what do you want from me, Dad?” he asked exasperated. “Do you want me to come home every time she’s off doing whatever it is she does?”

“This isn’t about you, Kyle. It’s about Jocelyn. I’m worried about her.”

“Have you checked the hospitals? The jails? Shit, Dad, why don’t you drive up and down Aurora, see if she’s out –“

“Damnit, Kyle!” his dad shouted. “This is Jocey. Not some two-bit prostitute!”

Kyle had only heard his father use that tone of voice when arguing with their mother. It was his backed-in-a-corner response. Chuck Hartvigson was like a water balloon – quietly filling with water until one day it bursts.

“Dad, I don’t want to think about that either,” he said. “Jocey’s my sister, for Chrissakes. But you’re not gonna find her if you’re unwilling to look under every rock.”

“She’s not under a *rock*, Kyle. She’s addicted to this stuff, and she’s hanging out with all the wrong people. That’s the problem. She’s got a place to stay. I’m letting her live *here*, Kyle, so she won’t have to live under a *rock*. She’s got a bedroom. She’s got a fridge full of food. Why the hell doesn’t she just come home?”

Kyle had a final coming up in three days. He’d planned to spend the day studying and writing a term paper. He’d started dating a girl who he wanted to take out for dinner. They had a fraternity all-house meeting at 8, mandatory for all members.

“I’ll be there in two hours,” Kyle said. His father started to protest, but Kyle hung up the phone and packed an overnight bag. His sister needed him.

CHAPTER 15

Kyle called Corina from his car, but she hadn’t heard from Jocey. Kyle drove through the back roads of the city, looking for her car. She couldn’t have gone far. Only five, maybe ten, minutes had passed since she said she was going to the bathroom and slipped out the back door. This was Feb. 12; tomorrow, she would die.

How many times had he chased her through this goddamn town? He hated that he had the thought, but Kyle actually found himself musing: when she was dead for that week, at least I hadn’t had to worry about her.

He heard a siren in the distance and drove toward the sound. A cop car? An ambulance? For fourteen years, Kyle had gotten a sick feeling in his stomach every time he’d heard that sound. The addict’s cowbell. That, too, would disappear when Jocey was gone.

For a second – one horrible, regrettable second – Kyle craved the sense of relief that had come with Jocey being dead.

“You asshole,” he whispered to himself as he drove 45 miles per hour through a 30 zone. He remembered what his father had said: *When the miracle comes, don’t ask too many questions*. He recalled something else he’d heard over the years: *Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth*. All those goddamn edicts: Don’t do this, and don’t do that.

The sound of the siren was only a few blocks away. Another *don’t* popped into his head: *Don’t tear apart the cocoon.* Was this what Jocey’s sponsor had been trying to say?

Andrea. Suddenly, he thought to call her, to see if she might know where Jocey might be headed. But then he remembered that he no longer had her number, that in *this* reality (that is, the one in which Jocey never actually died – not yet) he hadn’t yet met Andrea. If he saw her in the streets, he’d recognize her immediately – the blonde hair, the dark eyes, the perfect skin – but she would look past him like the stranger he was.

Kyle had information from the near future that he might be able to use to his advantage. He had another thought at that moment: Rico. He might not have the guy’s number anymore, but he knew where the guy liked to meet Jocey to peddle his drugs.

Kyle came upon the sirens – a firetruck responding to a fire in a dumpster – and drove past, out toward the highway and on past the lake where he’d attended the candlelight vigil. How stupid he’d been not to know exactly where Jocey would go.

When he arrived at Roosevelt Field, Kyle drove slowly, looking for the south parking lot. He passed a clump of trees and could see her car waiting there. Bingo. He parked on the street and went to his trunk, looking for a bat that, of course, was not there. His two realities were confusing him. He wished he could erase the memory of the other one.

Kyle walked through the trees and watched her car. She was blowing cigarette smoke out of a crack in the driver’s side window. He thought about calling the police, to take care of this Rico jerkoff once and for all, but he didn’t want to risk Jocey going to jail too.

He continued between two bushes and into the parking lot. He could see her face, lit up by the screen of her phone. He was 10 feet from the car when she noticed him. Her eyes got big. She dropped the phone. In a panic, she tried to start the car. Kyle ran to her, reached through the cracked window, and grabbed her keys.

“Goddamnit, Kyle! What the fuck?”

He held the keys out, backing away from the car slowly.

“Waiting for someone?” he asked.

“What the fuck?” she said again, louder this time. “What are you, my probation officer? Fuck, Kyle! I’m just chilling out, okay. I needed some space. You and Dad, you’re like vultures.”

“Get out of the car, Joss.”

“Really, Kyle?” She slammed her fists against the dashboard. “Dude, I’m not a child. I don’t need a big brother to protect me anymore. Got it? I’m thirty years old!”

“Well, you sure don’t act like it.”

Jocey stared at him from 15 feet away. Even her eyes looked sick. He was starting to believe that she’d lost something inside of her during that once-dead period, that this version of Jocey was just some kind of afterlife zombie. He felt like he could press his face against the opening of the window, blow a short burst of air, and she would evaporate in front of his eyes.

“That’s such a Dad thing to say,” Jocey said. “Why don’t you go father your own family, for Chrissakes. You have your own kids. Why are you all up in my shit?”

“I don’t *want* to be up in your shit,” he said. “You’re making me. By the decisions you make.”

“Decisions,” Jocey said, flatly. “Like I *decided* to be like this. You think I *chose* this life? You think this is the way I *want* my life to be? Like I choose to be a goddamn heroin addict?”

“Well, then stop,” he said. “You have the choice.”

She slammed the back of her head against the headrest. She opened the driver’s side door but she did not get out.

“You totally don’t get it, Kyle,” she said. “You never have.” She laughed, not in a funny way, but in a dismissive way. “You think I stick a needle in my arm, in my leg, in my goddamn neck, because I like it? Because it gets me high?” She let out that dismissive laugh again, like Kyle was the biggest moron to ever set foot on earth. “It stopped being fun a *long* time ago, trust me,” she said, leaning her head against the headrest again. “I stopped *getting high* a long time ago.”

“Then why do it?” he said. “Why not get out of the car, come home with me, and we’ll have dinner with the kids?”

Still leaning back on the headrest, she looked at him without turning her head.

“I’d love that,” she said quietly. “If I had a choice, I’d choose that. But I lost my ability to choose a long time ago.” She closed her eyes. Like a woman inside a casket.

Kyle was about to question that, but all of a sudden a car pulled into the lot. It slowed and eased toward them. Jocey opened her eyes and sat up in her seat.

“Shit,” she whispered.

“The cops?” Kyle asked, standing there with her keys in his hand.

“No,” she said in a loud whisper. “The opposite. Get the fuck out of here.”

CHAPTER 16

The car crept closer. Kyle moved slowly toward Jocey’s car. He could see two guys. The driver had a shaved head and wore sunglasses and a tank top, with a gold chain hanging around his neck. The guy next to him looked to be asleep.

As the car pulled to within 50 feet, Kyle whispered: “Is that your drugs, Joss?”

“Just go,” she whispered back. “Please. Leave.”

The driver lowered his sunglasses onto the end of his nose so that he could get a good look at Kyle. Seeing the deadbeat up close, Kyle could tell why they called him Rico. The name fit, for some reason. *You killed my sister*, Kyle wanted to say. *In another life, you killed her. And you’re trying to do it again*. Right there, a few feet away, was the murder weapon, inside a pill bottle or already crushed into a powder.

The guy Rico must not have liked what he saw, either, because he pushed his sunglasses back up over his eyes and tapped the gas, driving past Jocey’s car, doing a U-turn, and speeding out of the lot.

She got out of her car quickly and called for him. “Rico! Wait!” Kyle felt the adrenaline leave his body, replaced by relief. Jesus Christ, he’d just saved his sister’s life.

She walked over to him, pulled back her arm, and smacked him across the nose with a closed fist. It was the first time she’d ever hit her brother – an amazing streak, considering the history of American sibling habits. Her frail condition lessoned the impact, but Kyle still felt a rush of pain.

“You jackass!” she screamed. “There goes my fucking plug! Thanks a lot, Kyle!”

Kyle looked down at his hand and saw some trickles of blood that had dripped from his nostril.

“What the fuck?” he shouted. “I just saved your life!”

“Oh, don’t be overdramatic, asshole,” she said. “Seriously, I’m already sick as shit, and now this. No way. No goddamn way. I can’t believe you …”

She slammed her fists on the hood of the car. She was the one being overdramatic. He had, after all, saved her life – had he not?

She turned toward him, staring with angry eyes. She walked toward him, and Kyle covered his face in anticipation for another blow. It didn’t come, and when he moved his hand from his face to look at her, she was slowly dropping to one knee. Sweat poured down from her face. If she looked like death a few minutes earlier, now she looked like something even worse.

“My stomach,” she groaned. “I don’t know whether to shit or puke.” She dry-heaved.

“What’s wrong?” Kyle gasped. Nothing hurt more than seeing his sister in pain. Even watching his own children suffer wasn’t this excruciating.

“What’s *wrong*?” she said, parroting his words. “I’m in heroin withdrawal, you dumbshit!”

“Shit,” he mumbled. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“God, no,” she moaned. “The only thing I need,” she added, looking up, “just drove away in that car.”

Kyle turned his head. The car was long gone. He twirled Jocey’s keys around his index finger. He used his other hand to pinch his nostrils and adjust his sore nose.

“Jocey,” he said calmly, standing over her like a parent looking down on a child, “listen to me. What was in that car was going to kill you.”

“Thanks, Nancy Reagan,” she said between clenched teeth. “You don’t know shit, do you?”

*More than you know*, he thought.

Like a child, Jocey dropped her head in her hands and started weeping. Kyle knelt down and wrapped his arms around his sister. They would stay like that for several minutes, then he would walk her to his car and take her home. To his home. Claire would make a meal for them, as promised, and although Jocey was unable to fall asleep until about 4 a.m., when she woke up the next morning, she was alive.

Alive. It was Feb. 13, again, and this time Jocey was *alive*.

CHAPTER 17

March 2020

Jocey had become impossible to contain. She was a car chase through rain-soaked streets. A tiger escaped from the zoo. An angry hornet. Kyle came to realize that, short of wrapping his arms around her and holding on 24/7, there was no way to control his sister.

She’d go three, sometimes four, days without using – pitiful, painful, lost days, when she’d alternate short bursts of sleep with trips to the bathroom and fevery sweats – but she kept on falling back to her old ways and chasing the needle.

Kyle offered his guest room for three weeks before finally changing the locks because she’d become such a strain on the family. She’s stolen money from Claire’s purse and scared the kids with her zombie-like condition. Kyle had missed too many days at work chasing her around town, and he had started drifting away from Claire and the family.

The battle was becoming an exercise in futility. Jocey was a girl in the war, and Kyle was out of artillery. He didn’t want to let go because he knew where heroin was going to lead her, but he felt like he had no more defense. While he couldn’t bear to say goodbye again, Kyle had come to learn that he wasn’t helping her by enabling her heroin use by giving her a place to stay and by loaning her money. He finally came to the decision to close the door on her, hoping that she’d hit a bottom that wasn’t as rocky as death. And if death was the only thing that would stop her rolling stone of chaos, then maybe that’s just what would have to happen.

So when she called on a Friday night begging him to let her come back and hang out with the kids, he told her what any drug counselor would suggest.

“Jocey, I love you,” he said, as if reading off a script, “but I can’t be a part of your life if you continue on this path. I’ll help you get into treatment. I’ll even help pay for treatment. But short of that, I cannot offer you anything but love – from a distance.”

He hung up the phone, and for several days he lied in bed at night, awake and afraid, waiting for the phone to ring. Would it be Corina? His father? The police?

Inevitably, someone was going to make that fateful call again.

Jocey went back to their father’s house, coming and going in her junky waltz. Kyle was watching and loving from a distance, but his father’s inability to even try to control her weighed on him. Finally, when Kyle had had enough, he drove over to his father’s house and found him sitting at the kitchen counter, his eyes glued to CNN.

“Where’s Jocey?” Kyle asked upon entering through the open side door.

“When I grew up, people knocked before they entered,” his father said, without taking his eyes off the television.

“You might as well put in a revolving door,” Kyle said, “the way you let people come and go.”

“By people, you mean Jocey,” his father said flatly.

“Yes, I mean Jocey.” Kyle sat down across from him. “Where is she?”

“You see this on the news about this virus?” his father said. “Killing people all over the world. It’s scary.”

“Yeah?” Kyle said, trying to hide his exasperation. “Well, there’s a virus in this country called opioid addiction. And it’s killing your daughter.”

His father looked at him for the first time. He leaned back and took a bite out of an apple. After chewing and swallowing, he set down the apple, folded his hands behind his head, and leaned back.

“Already killed her once,” he said, looking incredibly relaxed for a man who was talking about the death of his daughter.

“Exactly.”

His father leaned forward. “Think about it,” he said. “The miracle happens, she comes back, then you really think she’s going to just … y’know, *die* again? Two weeks later? You think that’s how fate works?”

“Dad, she’s doing the same thing. Nothing’s changed. Of course she’s going to die again. Unless we can get her to stop.”

“It’s not up to us,” his father said, leaning back again and folding his arms across his chest.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

His father’s jaw muscles tightened. He’d lost the perma-grin that he’d carried around in the days after Jocey’s death.

“I already told you once,” his father said, sternly. “When the miracle happens, don’t ask too many questions.”

Kyle ran his fingers through hair that was already feeling thinner than it had a few weeks ago.

“This is crazy, Dad,” he said. He stood up and started pacing. “Jocey coming back –it’s a miracle, yes. But it’s also a second chance.”

“Course it is.”

“It’s a second chance for all of us, Dad.” He leaned on the counter, next to his father. “We didn’t do enough for her, Dad. Now we *can*.”

“Speak for yourself,” his father said. He grabbed an empty milk glass, stood up and went to the refrigerator.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His father opened the fridge, pulled out a carton of milk, and stood with his back to Kyle.

“I did my part,” his father said. “I brought her back.” He turned around to look at Kyle, with an empty glass in one hand and a carton of milk in the other. “I brought her back, Kyle,” he repeated. “It came with a price, but I did it. I brought her back.” Chuck Hartvigson’s eyes glazed over. He was staring at something above Kyle’s head. “Unbind her, and let her go,” he said, out of nowhere.

“What does that mean?”

His father poured the milk into the glass, put it back into the fridge and took a long drink from the glass.

Turning to Kyle, with a milk mustache, Chuck Hartvigson said: “No more questions, please. That’s the one thing I’ve asked.”

Kyle stared at his father. The man who, just three weeks earlier, was frozen in some state of melancholic madness. Now he exuded confidence and carried a fearless demeanor.

“I’m going to find Jocey,” Kyle said. “With or without your help. And when I do, she’s coming back to live with us.”

“That’s not fair, Kyle.”

“Not fair? She’s my sister, Dad. I’m trying to save her. I’m not interested in just sitting around and letting fate take its course. Especially after already seeing where fate is going to lead.”

“She’s fine here, Kyle. I like having her around.”

“Is she ever even here?” Kyle asked. “Christ, she’s got more freedom than a pack of wolves.”

“What am I supposed to do, Kyle, chain her to the kitchen table?”

Kyle grinned. “It would beat letting her roam the goddamn streets all day and night.”

“Kyle, you don’t get it.”

“Yeah?” Kyle said. “Well, I understand this. She’s my sister, and I’m going to do anything and everything to protect her.”

Kyle slammed the door on his way out.

CHAPTER 18

Two days later, Kyle quit his job. Taking care of Jocey was going to be his full-time endeavor. Whatever it took. Claire was furious, but he had no regrets. He spent the whole morning looking for Jocey, and when he found her hunched over on a park bench, he carried her to the car and took her to his house.

He led her to the bathroom, drew a cold bath, and helped her undress to a T-shirt and underpants. Claire came to the doorway and he slammed the door in her face.

“Kyle!” she shouted. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Get the guest room ready,” he said through the closed door.

“Kyle, we have to talk. We can’t afford –“

“Just get the guest room ready!” he shouted. He helped Jocey into the water. Her eyes were half-open.

“Goddamnit, Kyle!” Claire shouted, opening the bathroom door.

“Can she get some privacy?” Kyle said, now leaning over the bathtub and squeezing a soap bottle into the water. “Please?”

Jocey was fully awake then, her eyes fluttering open.

“What are you doing?” she mumbled. “Shit, Kyle, where are my clothes?”

“Jesus, Kyle,” Claire muttered, he hand over her mouth. Jocey’s half-naked body was so frail that her hips protruded and the outline of her ribs was visible beneath her shirt. Dirt rushed off her skin and clothes as if she hadn’t bathed in weeks. Kyle opened the drain and led Claire into the hallway.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Claire asked.

“She’s got one foot in the grave, okay?” he said. *I’ve seen this before*. “If I don’t do anything, she’ll be … I could never forgive myself, Claire.”

“She can’t stay here,” Clair said, folding her arms across her chest. “Kyle, the kids.”

“They love their Aunt Jocey,” he said.

“Not like *this*.”

Jocey came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her body. Kyle handed her basketball shorts and a sweatshirt.

“Claire’s right,” she said. “I can’t stay here. I don’t *want* to stay here. This is bullshit.”

“Jocey, you’ve lost the right to make decisions,” Kyle said. “Your best thinking got you this far. I care about you more than you care about yourself, so how about you just listen for once.”

Jocey held the clothes to her chest, her hair dripping wet, and looked at the floor.

“Jocelyn,” Claire said patiently. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Gladly.” She turned and glared at Kyle. “I’ll go get dressed.”

Once she was out of their view, Kyle and Claire went at it. Claire talked again about the kids, and about how dangerous it was for them to be around “someone who’s acting like that.” Kyle countered that Jocey was only “like that” because nobody care enough to “keep her in line.” Claire reminded Kyle that no one was paying him to “keep her in line” and that they still had a mortgage and bills. Kyle said they had enough in their savings account to get by for a few weeks and that his boss would happily take him back once Kyle got things under control. They went on like that for 20 minutes before Kyle went to check on Jocey.

The point was moot: she was gone again, along with $120 from Claire’s purse.

CHAPTER 19

In the days that followed, the deaths from the virus increased beyond expectations. The tension between Kyle and Claire also escalated. And the pursuit of Jocey continued.

It had become a game of cat-and-mouse. Twice, he saw Jocey and she ran away. He even saw Rico’s car once, following it for six blocks before giving up his pursuit.

Jocey’s addiction didn’t seem to be slowing down. Kyle was finally ready to give up chase and go back to work when the governor made an announcement that the virus was spreading so quickly that the safest thing to do would be to shelter in place.

Begrudgingly, Kyle abided by the new rules. He couldn’t risk getting infected and bringing his germs back to the house. His fears for Jocey intensified. He’d lost her once and couldn’t bear to lose her again, but her chances of surviving on the streets were decreasing with each passing day.

He called Corina. She hadn’t seen her.

“Kyle,” Corina said. “Just keep yourself safe. Keep your family safe. Stay home. That’s the best thing you can do.”

“I can’t stop worrying about her,” he said.

“I’ve been worrying about her for 15 years,” Corina said. “That hasn’t changed. But she’s a survivor. It hasn’t killed her yet.”

*Oh*, Kyle thought, *yes it has*.

He called his father next.

“She’s safe,” Chuck Hartvigson said when he picked up the phone. “She’s downstairs, sleeping.”

“How long has she been there?” Kyle asked, sitting up in his office chair.

“She came back last night. She comes, she goes. I think it’s important she’s got someplace to go when she needs it.”

“What about you, Dad?”

“What about me?”

“Jesus, Dad. The Coronavirus? It’s all over the news? People like you are most susceptible.”

“Oh, that,” his father said. “I don’t go anywhere. I’m staying home.”

“Dad, Jocey’s bringing germs in and out of your house. You think street junkies wash their hands and socially distance?”

Kyle’s father chuckled. “Well,” he said. “Quite the worrier you’ve become. You’re starting to remind me of your mother.”

“I’ll take that as a complement, Dad,” Kyle said facetiously.

“It certainly wasn’t meant to be one.”

“Do me a favor, Dad,” Kyle said, ignoring the comment. “Have Jocey call me when she wakes up.”

“If you wish.”

His father called back an hour later.

“She’s up,” he said. “But she can’t talk. She’s feeling pretty sick.”

“*Sick* sick?”

“Coughing, probably has a fever –“

“Dad, shit! Stay away from her. She might have … Dad, she needs to get tested. Are you washing your hands?”

“Good Lord,” Kyle’s father said with a chuckle. “Did I raise you to be so *soft*?”

A week later, Charles Wayne Hartvigson was admitted to the hospital with respiratory failure.

He died alone. The family couldn’t even hold a funeral to say goodbye.

CHAPTER 20

April 2020

Kyle had no choice but to move into the house with Jocey. He set some ground rules. She’d have to do at least two NA meetings on Zoom every day. She’d have to get on Suboxone. She’d have to check in with her sponsor every day.

“It’s not even your house,” Jocey said. “I’ve lived her most of my life, Kyle, not you.”

“You’ve lived on the streets most of your life, Jocey.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Kyle couldn’t even remember the time he’d gotten along with his sister, or his wife, much less both of them. The more Kyle thought about the past, the most pressure he felt to create a different future.

“Listen, Jocey,” he said, standing in the doorway of her downstairs bedroom. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“By *shaming* me? By making me feel like a piece of shit?”

“Well, somebody’s got to say it,” he said. “I mean, Dad, for all his wonderful qualities, he enabled the fuck out of you, Jocey.”

“Don’t talk about Dad like that,” she said sternly. “What are you, anyway, an expert on addiction now?”

“I might as well be, all the shit you’ve put me through.”

Jocey stared at him, her skinny arms folded across what was left of her chest. Her clothes hung off her like a tattered flag on a pole. Her jaw tightened on a sucked-in face that had lost most of its color and shape. The sight of her, which had brought such incredible relief just a few weeks earlier, now only made him feel as tired and hopeless as ever.

Jocey’s eyes burned through him as she stood silently, for almost a minute, before storming out of her room, brushing against his shoulder on the way. He followed, thinking she was going to leave again. He trailed her up the basement stairs, fully prepared to tackle her, to drag her back into the house, if that’s what it took. He’d even throw her back in a bathtub full of ice water, if needed.

She stopped near the front door of the house, grabbing her coat and digging through the pockets. She produced something that looked like a ballpoint pen with an orange cap on it. She turned and threw it at his chest. The thing bounced off and landed at his feet. He looked down and realized it was a syringe.

“Go ahead, smart guy,” Jocey said. “Slam it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Pick it up and slam it into your fucking arm.” She walked over to him and rolled up his sleeve. “Look at those fat, juicy veins. What I’d pay to have those,” she said. She held out her arms. Track marks lined the insides of both of them. “See that?” she said. “Like a night club – no room for any more pricks.”

He rolled down his sleeve.

“Jocey, what the hell?”

“So, go ahead,” she said, stepping back and folding her arms across her chest. “Show me how it’s done. You’re the goddamn expert. Show me.”

Kyle smirked. He shook his head slowly. “I’m not that weak,” he said, defiantly. “I have *will power*, Jocey. Google it.”

Her jaw muscles twitched. She looked 50 years old, maybe 60. Kyle would swear that whatever miracle happened to bring her back, it also sped up her aging process.

“You don’t have a clue,” she said weakly, shaking her head. She leaned over to pick up the syringe, but Kyle beat her to it, stepping on it gently. “Don’t you dare,” she said, with panic rising in her voice.

“Is it the only one you’ve got?”

She nodded. He put all his weight on it, hearing a crunch under his foot. A sense of triumph washed over his body as Jocey’s face went flush.

Her nostrils flared. She dropped to her knees. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. Kyle couldn’t even remember seeing her cry when their dad died. She was too goddamn high to show emotion. Now, after her precious drug paraphernalia had been crushed, she was weeping like a baby.

She stood up. Her face was an inch from his. He could feel the breath of her nostrils pounding his face.

“Well,” she said. “Shows what you know.” She spit in his face. It was warm and gummy. He immediately thought about the Coronavirus, whether she was still contagious. She might have had Hep-C, HIV, who’s to know?

Jocey turned away from him, grabbed her coat, and flipped back around so she could look him in the eye.

“Do you know what a piece of shit junky with no will power does when someone crushes her rig?” she asked. “Bet you don’t, smart guy. Well, I’ll tell you. She hits the streets, and she does whatever she needs to do to get well. She’ll go down on an old man for dope. She’ll share a needle with a homeless guy. She’ll slam a needle in her eye socket. *Whatever* it takes.” Jocey pointed a finger and pressed it against Kyle’s Forehead, adding through gritted teeth: “Whatever it takes, Kyle.”

Kyle wiped the spit from his face and felt the adrenaline seeping out of him. That familiar droll of unspoken defeat took him as he dropped his head and spoke softly.

“I don’t even recognize you anymore,” he said, looking down at the floor. “You’re a stranger. A person I’ve never known.”

“Well, you got that right,” Jocey said, turning to open the door. “You never knew shit about me.”

She started out the door.

“You leave now,” Kyle said as firmly as he could, although all the emotion had drained out of him. “Don’t bother coming back.” She turned toward him and smirked. “I’m serious, Jocey. I’m not Dad. I’m not playing your games. I’ll change the locks. I’ll call the cops.” He took a step forward. Just one step. “I might not know addiction like you do, Joss, but I understand desperation. I’ll do *whatever it takes* to get you clean.”

She turned all the way to face him. Her eyes hadn’t changed over the years, even though they were now bloodshot and surrounded by a face that looked twice her age. They were still a child’s eyes.

“Then just be here for me,” she said, the anger no longer audible in her voice. “As much as you want to push me away, don’t stop trying. Don’t ever give up. That’s what it’s going to take.”

She walked out the door, closed it behind her and was gone. He did not go after her. He swam in her words, realizing that what she was asking him to do was the most difficult request she could make. But Kyle promised, in that moment, that he would abide by her rules. If that’s what it was going to take.

No matter what, he wouldn’t give up on his baby sister.

CHAPTER 21

Jocey kept coming back. Everything else in his life was falling apart, but she was, in her own way, his one constant. She kept coming and going; she had become indestructible.

Jocey was the eye of the storm, while the rest of his world was collapsing in a mass of glass and metal. Kyle called about getting his job back, but his boss said they were in the middle of layoffs. “If you want to work here,” his former boss said, “it’s gonna be at least two or three years.” Kyle tried filing for unemployment but was denied because he had quit his job. Claire was calling every day, begging for help with the kids, saying things like, “They *need* their father. I can’t do this alone.” He made empty promises: a few more days, a few more weeks. When it was safe. The higher the Coronavirus count soared, the more scared he was to go home; if Jocey had already infected their father, who knew how much more time he had before the virus would take him too?

There were so many times when Kyle wanted to give up. If Jocey was going to live the junky lifestyle, she was going to live it – with or without his pleas to quit. What could he do to stop it? She was definitely on her way to another overdose, and he didn’t want to let that happen, but what could he really do? There were so many times, in the past reality, that Kyle had questioned what he could have done better. He’d come to so many conclusions, but now none of those came to him. Now, he felt even more exasperated than he had after her death.

Yet every time he decided to pack his things, to head home and leave her to her own devices, he thought of what she’d said to him: “Don’t stop trying. Don’t ever give up.”

He couldn’t do much, but he could do *that*.

One night, after he hadn’t seen Jocey in a couple of days, he reached out to Corina. In many ways, she’d been like a second sister to him. Her mother, who’d been the city’s first African-American law professor, worked a lot and always seemed to be training for marathons in her spare time when Corina was young. Corina’s white father was a stage actor who worked nights. So Corina spent most evenings at the Hartvigson house -- watching TV or playing board games or singing on Jocey’s mini karaoke machine. Kyle watched her grow through adolescence and the awkward teen years and wasn’t surprised she’d grown into such a thoughtful, independent woman.

“So sad about your dad,” she said into the phone when Kyle called. “He was a sweet man.”

“Thanks,” Kyle said, because he couldn’t think of much else to say. Between the worldwide pandemic, being unemployed, a dwindling bank account, a struggling marriage and trying to save his sister from dying again, Kyle had barely had time to even process his father’s death.

“How’s Joss?” Corina asked.

“The same,” he said. “Unfortunately, Corina, the way she’s going, she’s going to die soon. That’s not a hunch; that’s a factual statement.”

“You can’t predict the future, Kyle.”

*Yes, I can*, he thought. *I’ve seen it once.*

“Corina, I don’t know what to do anymore,” he said, sitting down to rub his forehead. He was on the couch at his father’s house, where he’d spent most of his nights because it gave him a view of the front door, where he could keep an eye on Jocey’s comings and goings.

“Is there still a spare bedroom above the garage?” Corina asked.

“I think,” Kyle said. “I haven’t been up there in awhile, why?”

“I’ll be over in an hour.”

And so Corina moved into the garage. Together, they scrubbed the entire house with disinfectant. Corina and Kyle took on a tag-team approach to helping Jocey. Kyle appreciated the company. He and Corina would socially distance in the house, eating dinner at opposite ends of the kitchen table or watching CNN from chairs ten feet apart. Mostly, they told stories about Jocey and waited.

Three days after Corina moved in, Jocey returned. She looked like she’d been in a fight. Her face was scratched, and she was missing a tooth.

“Jesus Christ,” Kyle said, standing up at the same time as Corina. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?” Jocey asked, barely able to hold her head up. “Oh, hey, Corina. What’re you doing here?”

“Jocey, who beat you up?” Kyle asked, stepping toward her with the concern of a father.

Jocey touched her face, feeling around, then a finger went into the space where her tooth used to be.

“Oh, that,” she said. “That’s from Crystal.”

“Crystal who?” Kyle asked, his jaw tightening.

“Who’s Crystal?” Corina said at the same time.

“Crystal meth,” Jocey said, then she smiled a hockey-player smile. Kyle couldn’t tell if she was kidding. “Comes with the territory,” Jocey added with a shrug.

“Where the hell have you been,” Kyle asked. The sound of his own voice reminded him of his father.

“On a bender,” Jocey said with nonchalance. She giggled. “Duh.” Jocey walked over to Corina and gave her a one-armed hug. Corina initially looked like she would turn away, but she accepted it, scrunching her nose to reflect the odor of Jocey’s condition.

“Was the bender, by chance, in a vat of cow manure?” Corina asked.

“You funny,” Jocey responded, stepping back. She didn’t laugh or even smile. “What’s a girl got too do to find a bed?” she asked, yawning. “This girl needs some *sleep*.”

Kyle looked her up and down, feeling a myriad of emotions.

“Jocey,” he said, “how long have you been up?”

She dropped onto the couch, wiped her nose with the back of her hand, and tilted her head as she looked up at him. The sight of her face made his chest hurt. Sweet, beautiful Jocey. Decaying before his eyes.

“Depends,” she said. “What day is it?”

“Tuesday,” Corina offered.

“Oh,” Jocey said, dropping her head. “Three, four days, I guess.” She closed her eyes.

“You’ve been out running the streets the whole time?” Kyle asked, exasperated. “Out getting high?”

She opened one eye. “Honey, I haven’t gotten high in ten years,” she said. “All I do now is try to get not sick.” She picked at her face, opening a small pock that squirted out a droplet of blood.

Kyle started to say something else, but Corina put up her hand and shook her head. She grabbed a blanket and covered her best friend’s frail body.

Kyle picked up a loose sheet from the floor and carried it over to the front door, curling up on the floor to block the exit. He fell asleep there. Corina slept in the chair a few feet away. The invisible virus was all but forgotten – an rumbling earthquake beneath the pounding hurricane.

Jocey didn’t wake up until 4 p.m. the next day. But at least she woke up.

CHAPTER 22

MAY 2020

Corina was just the thing Jocey needed. Kyle’s sister actually stayed home for two straight days, laughing and enjoying her friend, and at the times when Jocey did leave, she promised to be back in an hour – and was good for her word.

Corina talked her into quitting the meth as a compromise that Kyle and Corina wouldn’t hassle her about her heroin use. They let her come and go from the bathroom every six hours. Jocey’s appearance didn’t improve, and she barely ever ate – “Heroin constipates the hell out of you,” she said, and Kyle resisted the obvious follow-up question about why the hell she did it then – but she was starting to act more like herself again. She played cards with Corina and Kyle, laughed at stories from their childhood, and talked about the career she was going to begin when she finally got clean. “I’m gonna be an addiction counselor,” she bragged, and Kyle could see the gleam in her eye. “I’m going to help other people so they don’t have to go through this shit alone.”

But, of course, the getting clean part would be the key. And Kyle didn’t see her getting any closer to getting off heroin than she was when he’d first moved in.

After about a week of this, Corina and Kyle convinced Jocey to get on Suboxone. Kyle read up on the medication on the internet, learning that it was a safe alternative to heroin and would take away both the cravings and the painful withdrawal.

“It says here you just have to go two days without using before you start,” he said.

They were two long, excruciating days – for all three of them. Jocey’s cramping and vomiting, her feverish sweating, her runny nose and chills, it was all painful to watch. Kyle could only watch helplessly as Jocey lived on the bathroom floor, writhing, and moaning, and drifting in and out of sleep, and shivering and crying out in pain. She’d stay up all night, not because she was on another meth bender but because the prickly skin and twitching legs from heroin withdrawal were keeping her awake. Kyle read on the internet that people didn’t die from heroin withdrawal, but watching her suffer like that, he had to wonder. Finding out she’d been dead was one kind of pain; watching her suffer was another.

In the end, Jocey did it. She made it through two days of self-detox, and the doctor gave her a week’s worth of Suboxone.

She took one strip and said: “It tastes like shit.”

“Yeah?” Kyle said. “Well, so does the inside of a coffin.”

“Maybe you should be a drug counselor, Kyle,” Corina said sarcastically, her face still wincing from the aftertaste.

Almost immediately, Jocey said her head hurt. Corina sat down on the couch and faced her, patting her friend’s thighs.

“Lie down,” she said. “We’ll get through this.”

Jocey lied on the couch with her head on Corina’s lap.

“Social distancing is overrated anyway,” Corina said, stroking Jocey’s hair.

Kyle sat in a chair next to them and smiled, feeling at peace for the first time in months. The world outside was so quiet. All the television images were of people wearing masks over their mouths and of empty shopping centers. The world had gone into pre-apocalypse since Jocey’s second act started, yet in this moment Kyle felt absolute peace.

He moved to the other end of the couch, took Jocey’s feet onto his lap, and started to softly sing.

“*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*

*Take these broken wings and learn to fly …”*

CHAPTER 23

Although Jocey continued to complain about the headaches and steely taste, she kept taking the Suboxone. She put together three weeks without heroin or meth. Kyle couldn’t remember the last time she’d had that much clean time She’d even started doing NA meetings on Zoom and was checking in with Andrea, her sponsor, via telephone every night. Kyle tried to enjoy the progress, but in some ways he felt even more anxious, as if waiting for the ice to break beneath him. The waiting, Tom Petty once mused, was the hardest part.

One morning after Jocey had made veggie omlettes and English muffins with jam for the three of them, Kyle’s phone buzzed. He still tensed at the sound, after all that time. He saw a text from Claire. He hadn’t talked to her in three days.

OPEN THE FRONT WINDOW, the text said. After Kyle read it aloud, Jocey and Corina looked at him.

“Well,” Corina said. “Do it!”

Kyle walked over to the front window and pulled open the shade. There, on the front lawn, stood his family. Except for a handful of Zoom sessions, he hadn’t seen Dez and Nolan in weeks. They already looked older, and more serious. Dez’s eyes lit up as soon as she saw Kyle. Nolan’s approval was more reluctant, coming in slow motion as he unfolded his arms and forced a grin without teeth.

Kyle immediately felt the swell of emotions within him burst. He had been pushing them down for so long that the weight of release almost dropped him to his knees. He pressed one hand gently against the window, holding himself up as the tears flowed from his eyes. Dez, wearing her favorite Dora the Explorer shirt, came forward and put her hand against the outside of the glass, up against his. Kyle placed his other hand on the glass, and Nolan walked cautiously toward him. He, too, held a hand to the glass.

Behind the children, wearing yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt, and with her hair pulled up in a bun on top of her head, Claire stood with pursed lips. She played with her ear, then looked away and folded her arms across her chest.

Kyle and the kids stood like that, separated by a quarter-inch of glass, and eventually Jocey walked up and stood next to him.

“Aunt Jocey!” the kids shouted in unison. Dez clapped her hands together. Nolan waved cautiously.

“I love you!” Jocey shouted through the glass. Kyle looked at her, and she put her arm around his shoulders, resting her head on the closest one.

Kyle took in a deep breath and felt the warmth of family, a feeling that he’d forgotten in recent weeks. They say that tragedy brings people together, but Kyle couldn’t help thinking that the real connection came on the other side. The real healing came in triumph.

He looked out at his children, leaned down and mouthed: “Daddy will be home soon.” His eyes went to Claire, who was now staring back at him with a reluctant look in her eye, as if she wasn’t sure if she wanted to have him back.

Dez kissed her palm and blew it toward Kyle. Nolan just turned and walked back to his mother. When the three of them were out of sight, Kyle closed the shade and went into his father’s room to weep in silence. He could hear Jocey and Corina cleaning the breakfast table in the dining room. He wanted so badly to be able to snap his fingers and take Jocey’s addiction away forever – not just for her, but for himself. He wanted a guarantee that this was the end of it, that she was finally cured, so he could go back to his wife and kids and be free of that buzzing insect called worry. So much was happening – in this house, in his neighborhood, in the world – that he’d neglected his family. He could see that now. These tears had washed away his blindness.

Kyle closed the bedroom door and sat down on his father’s bed, taking in a deep breath. He realized for the first time that the only other person who knew the biggest secret of his lifetime – that his sister had died, and been brought back to life – was now gone. The secret was Kyle’s alone, his burden to carry. If he could find a way to erase it from his memory, the alternate future never would have happened. Like a fiction writer who’d written a terrible story, one that he threw away before anyone saw it, Kyle felt like he could somehow make the secret disappear. And yet, Kyle could not imagine a time when he wouldn’t look at his sister and see a miracle. A true, walking miracle.

He turned his head and saw a piece of paper sticking out from under a Bible. He pulled it out and saw a business card, with his father’s writing on the back. The words “JOHN 11:44” and “LAZARUS” were written on one side. On the other side, the name MADAME DELILAH, a phone number and an address. At the bottom of the card, it said: *Have FAITH in Delilah …*

Kyle tucked the card into his pocket. He tried to remember who Lazarus was and why he was so important to history. Kyle was never much into the Bible, and he couldn’t come up with an answer.

He walked out of the bedroom. Corina was loading the dishwasher.

“Where’s Jocey?” he asked.

“Bathroom.” Kyle felt a familiar weight in his chest. Corina turned to look at him. She must have seen something in his face. “Kyle,” she said. “Don’t be like that. Have some faith in her.”

“*Have FAITH in Delilah …”*

“Faith in who?” Kyle asked.

“Jocey, of course. Who did you think I meant?” She closed the dishwasher and walked toward him. “You can’t live like this, Kyle. Freaking out every time she goes to the bathroom. Staying up at night worrying about you. Have some faith in your sister.”

Kyle turned toward the hallway leading to the bathroom door.

“They say faith is absence of fear,” he said. “I’m scared as hell. Still.”

“She’s on Suboxone now. She’s doing better.” She placed her hands on his shoulders, looking up at him with blue eyes. “There are no guarantees, Kyle,” she said. “I might walk out the front door and get hit by a bus. The stupid virus might multiply and kill us all tomorrow. Nothing is guaranteed. But she needs us to believe in her.” She took his hands off her shoulders and looked at the floor, adding: “Maybe that’s all we *can* do.”

Kyle nodded. His chest was still tight. He took in a deep breath and tried to let the worry go, but it wasn’t that easy. Years of phone calls will trump a few weeks of sobriety.

The hallway was quiet. Was she even in there?

And then he heard a retching sound. Jocey was getting sick.

CHAPTER 24

Lazarus was, according to biblical lore, a friend of Mary and Joseph who one day fell ill with an unknown disease. He was rushed into their home amid a state of panic. His life in the balance. Each breath might be his last. The townspeople, in a state of panic, tried attending to his medical needs.

Jesus walked into the room where Lazarus lied in bed and told the others to back away. He instructed the townspeople to let Lazarus die.

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” Jesus said, according to the Book of John, “but I go awaken him.”

The townspeople parted, and Lazarus was abandoned. They watched helplessly, as Jesus had instructed, but only because they had faith. When Lazarus took his final breath, they bowed their heads. All but Jesus. He lifted his toward the heavens, crying: “Come out!”

Come out.

Kyle held up the business card, turning it over to see his father’s handwriting. *John 11:44*. He looked back at the Bible and whispered the words aloud:

“’The man who had died come out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”

Kyle shut the Bible, closed his eyes and saw Jocey’s face. Not her face now, but her face as it would be without the binds of addiction. There were still some childish elements. She was smiling. A freedom radiated from her eyes. The way she was supposed to be.

“Unbind her,” Kyle whispered, “and let her go.”

Kyle set the Bible back on the shelf and thought of another religious story, this one from the Buddhists. The story is of a woman named Kisa Gotami, who gave birth to a son, only to have the boy die shortly after childbirth. Distraught, Kisa Gotami went to one of her elders and pleaded that he do something.

“Kisa Gotami. We cannot help you,” the elder stated, according to the legend. “But you should go to the Buddha. Maybe he can bring your son back to life.”

She then went to the Buddha, who told her he may be able to provide some relief of her pain. He told her that she should go to every house in the village and collect a mustard seed from each family, “but it must be taken from a house where no one residing in the house has ever lost a family member. Bring this seed back to me and your son will come back to life.”

Kisa Gotami returned hours later, without any mustard seeds, of course. The lesson was that grief in an unforgiving bastard that spares no one. It was one of those lessons that didn’t necessarily make people feel any better. It was more about acceptance than hope.

We need to accept when people are gone, because they are not coming back.

Kyle thought about that day at the cemetery, about all those people walking past him in the assorted stages of grief. Some sad. Some angry. Some still trying to figure out why. All working toward a state of acceptance.

What he thought he’d seen in his father’s face was denial. What he really saw was faith.

Unspoken, unguarded, unbending, unrelenting faith.

Kyle looked at the business card, but it back in his pocket, and went to find Madame Delilah.

CHAPTER 25

Jocey was asleep on the couch, having been awake hours earlier throwing up in the bathroom again. Whether it was dope sickness or the Coronavirus, Kyle was starting to believe that Jocey was back on a path toward the inevitability of death. A road he had so helplessly watched her travel before.

He grabbed his car keys and snuck out the front door, out into the mysterious frontier of COVID-19. He drove through empty streets, past restaurants with chairs on top of tables, past department stores with CLOSED signs in the windows. The world was eerily quiet, as if the virus had wiped out all of humanity while he was inside his father’s house trying desperately to save his sister.

Then he saw a couple walking a dog. He wanted to roll down the window and wave at them, shouting: *I’m here! We’re alive! We’re in this together!* But Kyle just kept his head down and drove on. A few blocks later, he saw a man sitting on a park bench drinking coffee. An Amazon truck passed, then a UPS truck. A woman in hospital scrubs stood at the bus stop, her eyes weary with exhaustion. Kyle was not the only one whose will was broken. He wasn’t the only one clinging to strands of hope.

He pulled up to a red light, and an older man crossed the street with a walker. The man was alone. Kyle immediately thought of his father. Being stuck inside his father’s house had not brought on the intense pangs of longing that he felt there, at the stoplight, watching the old man shuffle across the street. The man even looked a little bit like Chuck Hartvigson.

Kyle had never been able to get as close to his father as he had wished. Through his teen years, he spent some weekends there but mostly avoided the man, carrying around a simmering anger because his father could not have found a way to work things out with Kyle’s mother. As Kyle moved on to college and then to a family of his own, he always felt a need to reconnect with his father in some way but never had the time. There would be more days, more decades, to talk. They would have the rest of their lives to work things out, right?

Kyle wiped a tear from his eye and drove on, suddenly heading toward the neighborhood where his adult house was. Claire and the kids were undoubtedly isolating there, in the house he had bought with Claire before they had become a family. A teenager rode by on a bicycle as Kyle turned the corner and saw his house up the street. He slowed as he approached, looking out toward the shutters he had painted, the lawn he had mowed, the fence he had fixed. The house where he used to wake every morning, and go to sleep every night, in the arms of a woman who loved him. The house where he read stories to his children, where he had shot baskets in the driveway with Nolan and danced with Dez in the kitchen. A man only gets so many days with his children. Kyle’s were slipping by.

He missed his father, but he missed his family more.

Through the living room windows, he could see Dez jumping on the couch. Nolan threw a pillow at her. Kyle couldn’t see his wife. It was as if the two kids were stuck home alone, with nowhere to go. He wanted so badly to park the car, to go inside and to take his children into his arms, to smell them and feel them and tell them that they are loved.

But he could do none of those things. Because of that stupid virus, the best thing he could do for his children was to remain at a safe distance and hope that he didn’t catch whatever had killed his father.

He drove on. He picked up Jocey’s Suboxone prescription at a drive-thru pharmacy. He pulled out Madame Delilah’s business card and headed to a part of the city he’d never even known existed. The streets were filled with garbage, and the closed shops no longer Starbuck’s and Whole Foods but hair salons, bail bondsmen and liquor stores. An African-American man walked bare-chested down the edge of the street, with a T-shirt slung over one shoulder. He eyeballed Kyle as he drove past. Two African-American kids were throwing tennis balls toward a broken window on the second floor of an abandoned building. A woman walked out of an IGA grocery store with a shopping cart piled high with rolls of toilet paper. She wore a mask to protect her nose and mouth.

The scene looked more appropriate for *after* the apocalypse than before it. Kyle did not know on which side mankind was.

He came to a Burger King with a blinking DRIVE-THRU ONLY sign. Behind it, he could see a small house. The address matched. He parked on the street and got out.

The front door was closed, and no one answered, so he went around back. The only sound was a gentle wind chime until Kyle accidently stepped on a crushed empty beer can. A chicken flew out of a bush, startling him. Kyle could feel his hands shaking. He felt eyes upon him. At a time when humanity was coming together as one, he felt more fear about other people in that moment than he did about some invisible disease.

A smaller house was in back, with a small sign that said MADAME DELILAH hanging off the fence. It rocked back and forth, squeaking quietly through the silence. A small stairway led him down to a brown door with chipped paint. Before he knocked, an eyeball appeared around the curtain of a window to his right.

“What you want?” a woman asked, with an accent that Kyle took for the Caribbean. “Don’t you know,” she added, “the devil’s breathin’ his stuff out there? Spreading particles of evil and death. Don’t you touch nothin’ now.” The curtain fell. The eye was gone.

Kyle cleared his throat. His heart was beating. He pictured two black men coming from inside the house and beating him senseless. He hoped there was a cop nearby to hear him call for help.

“Are you, um, Madame Delilah?” he asked, his voice weak and quivering.

“Who want to know?”

Kyle looked around and up the small stairway.

“My father,” he said, “he had your business card.” She peeked around he curtain.

“Course he did,” she said. The curtain closed, and he heard her move to behind the doorway. She opened an eyehole and looked out at him.

“It’s dangerous out there,” the woman said. “You shouldn’t be out there. Nobody should.”

“I know, yes.”

“You ain’t even got a mask on.”

“My bad,” he said. “Listen, I just-“

“No, you listen,” she said briskly. “You go home. You leave now. Be safe.”

“I’ll go,” he said. “I just wanted to ask-“

“You go,” she said. “Now.”

Kyle nodded. He turned and started back up the stairs. He heard the door unlatch behind him. He looked down and saw her face, looking at him from behind a screen door.

“Wait,” she said. “Your father. I know him. I see the way you walk, and I know.” Kyle turned toward her. “Yes,” she said. “I see it in your face. He tell you, huh?”

“Tell me what?”

“This his fault,” she said. “All this.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your father, he the one with the daughter who die, no?” Madame Delilah said, opening the door a little more.

“Yes,” Kyle said. “She died. She *was* dead. But now-“

“He do this,” the woman said sharply.

“Ma’am, I don’t understand.”

“I tell him there will be consequences,” she said. “I tell him this. He no listen. I say, ‘You get something, you give something.”

“Are you talking about my dad?” he asked. He took a step down the stairway. She slammed the door quickly.

“Back away!” she called out from behind the door. “You take his devil breath, you go blow it somewhere else. You hear?”

Kyle saw the curtain to the window open a crack, only this time he saw the small face of an African-American child looking out at him. Kyle looked down at the kid and could read the fear in his face.

“He do this!” Madame Delilah said. “All of it! He make deal, he suffer the terms! No take back, you hear?”

Kyle nodded and stared down at the child, who let go of the curtain so it closed.

Kyle turned back up the staid, went back to his car, and drove through the empty streets, watching an occasional person walk by with a facemask protecting them from the conditions. It was lunch time on a weekday, when the streets were often filled with cars and clusters of people. The flood of humanity had become droplets of people in masks. The most vivid image of 2020: a woman in a mask. It had been stretchers being rolled out of nursing homes by the dozens, but now the picture of a single human walking down the empty street in a protective mask was what told the story of this god-awful year.

And Kyle couldn’t imagine that this had all been his father’s fault. He’d made a deal with devil. He’d gotten his Jocey back.

But at what cost?

CHAPTER 26

MAY 25, 2020

While three cops were accomplice to the death of an African-American man on the streets of Minneapolis, Kyle played a game of chess with Corina as his sister Jocey slept on the couch a few feet away.

Kyle watched Corina as she pondered her next move. She was more like a sister to him than Bear – or even Jocey, in some ways. Corina had always been available to him, could always be trusted. She was reliable and was a woman of her word. Coming from a functional family, with happily married parents, Corina had a lot of advantages that Jocey never got. Sure, her parents were busy a lot, but at least they were together. At least they never tore apart the stability of her childhood.

Corina moved a black queen diagonally and called out: “Check.” She looked at Kyle and tilted her head. “You okay?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re hardly ever here anymore,” Corina said. “I mean, you’re *here*, physically, but I can tell something’s on your mind.” She smiled. “What’s up?”

In this moment, Kyle wanted so badly to tell her everything. While being the last person alive with knowledge of Jocey’s “other” destiny felt freeing in the days after his father’s death, it now weighed on him like a dark secret. He wondered if maybe this was how murderers, or cheating husbands, or criminals, felt. Like unloading their secrets to another human being might be the only path to freedom. And if Kyle was going to throw his unbending trust in a single person’s direction, Corina would be the only one worthy of it.

But, instead, he simply said: “I just miss my family, that’s all.” There was some truth in that, of course, but only a cup full of truth in an overflowing bucket. Meeting Madame Delilah, an accomplice in his secret, made the weight on his chest even heavier.

Kyle knew that, no matter his sister’s current state, Jocey was Corina’s priority. She was, and always would be, her best friend. He respected that. If Kyle were to tell Corina a secret, about Jocey, she would owe it to Jocey to tell her.

And so he kept it as his own. As heavy as it was, Kyle would carry it for as long as necessary. Maybe one day he could tell Claire, after he earned her trust back. He couldn’t even imagine when that might be.

“Yeah, that has to be hard, being away from Claire and the kids,” Corina said. “You know, I can keep an eye on Jocey. From now on. This doesn’t have to be your burden.”

“It doesn’t have to be yours,” he said.

“She’s my best friend, Kyle.”

“She’s my *sister*. You didn’t have any siblings, Corina. So maybe you don’t understand. But from the day she was born, I became a different person. I’ve spent the rest of my life as a protector, not just a person.”

“That makes sense,” Corina said. “I’ve never walked in your shoes, so maybe I don’t totally understand. But the way you describe it makes me understand a little better.”

Kyle looked down at the chess board, realizing he had only one move available. One that made sense.

“You could quarantine,” Corina said. “For two weeks. We’d switch spots. You take the garage bedroom, I sleep in here. Then after two weeks, when you’re definitely virus-free, you’d go home to your family. You owe them that.”

Kyle moved his white king and looked at Jocey sleeping on the couch. He sighed.

“What about you?” he said to Corina. “You’re already in enough danger. Why risk it?”

Corina shrugged. As if he were asking her to trade seats at a table in a restaurant, not risk her life by being exposed to a virus.

“I’m her best friend, Kyle,” she said. “That’s a choice, not a designation. When you choose to be someone’s best friend, you do anything for them.” She moved her pawn and added: “She would do the same for me, Kyle, you know that.”

Kyle looked up from the table. Corina was such a sweet, innocent girl. Addiction ate up people like her, even if they never touched a drug. All addiction has collateral damage, and Corina would be covered in shrapnel if Jocey kept on this path.

“Corina, my sister loves you,” Kyle said. “You know that, right?”

“Of course.”

“But she loves heroin more,” he said, looking her right in the eye. “I hate to say it, but that’s the truth. That’s her best friend now.”

He moved his bishop.

“Check mate,” he said.

CHAPTER 27

JUNE 2020

The video started as a drop of water. A trickle that would lead to the flood.

The first time Kyle watched George Floyd get suffocated by a police officer’s knee, he was sitting between Corina and Jocey on the couch in his father’s living room. Corina was speechless. Her mouth was open, and her eyes were watery. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees and her fist under her chin.

“Oh, shit,” Jocey said.

“Pretty intense, huh?” Kyle said, staring at the images.

“Not that,” Jocey said. “I think I’m gonna … puke!”

She ran to the bathroom, barely making it so that her vomit went into the toilet.

Kyle turned and looked down the hallway.

“This is strange,” he said to Corina. “She’s back on her Suboxone. She’s not using, I don’t think. I mean, why is she still getting sick?”

Corina, still leaning forward on her balled-up hand, did not respond. Her stare did not waver from the television. Kyle watched her, his sister’s mixed-race friend, a term he had never applied to her before, had never even *thought* about her as black, or white, or both, and could see something awakening in her.

“This is so sad,” she whispered. “So scary.”

Kyle went to go check on Jocey. Her head was inside the toilet seat, and she was gasping for air. Kyle knelt down and pulled her dark hair back, tucking it into the back of her shirt. He rubbed her back.

“You poor thing,” he said. Jocey nodded. “Does it ever get better?” he asked. Jocey took a deep breath and wiped her mouth.

“It’s not that,” she said.

Kyle looked around the bathroom. How many times had she sat on that toilet lid, sticking a needle into arm while their father sat clueless in the other room? He kept rubbing her back. Despite the regular vomiting sessions, she actually looked like she had gained some weight. She was beginning to look healthy. He’d seen her high so many times over the years that he’d become something of an expert on what intoxicated Jocey looked like -- and he hadn’t seen his sister like that in more than a month. And yet, all this vomiting. It didn’t make sense.

“Jocey,” he said. “If I ask you something, will you be one hundred percent truthful with me?”

She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, resting her chin on the toilet seat.

“Goddamnit, Kyle,” she whispered. “Don’t even …”

“Jocey,” he said patiently. “I need to know. None of this makes sense. Can you just look me in the eye and tell me, give me your word, that you haven’t used anything but Suboxone since April?”

Jocey just sat there, her chin against the seat, breathing steadily. He’d stopped rubbing her back. This episode of vomiting appeared to be over. But Kyle had learned, over the past few days and over the past 14 years, that a calm sea only meant the hurricane was coming.

“I’m so tired of fighting,” she said calmly.

“I’m not trying to start a fight, Joss. I’m just –“

“No, not that,” she said. “I’m tired of fighting the past. Tired of fighting for everyone’s trust.” She wiped her mouth again and started to stand up. Kyle grabbed her elbow and helped her to her feet. She turned and looked into his eyes. “No, Kyle,” she said softly. “I have not used. Believe me, or don’t. Either way, I understand. I’ve been playing this game for – Jesus, half my life. You have no reason to believe me, based on my past. But you asked the question, so there.”

“Okay,” he said calmly, taking her by the shoulders. “I believe you. This time, I do.” She looked away. “I do, Joss.”

“Whatever,” she whispered.

“It’s just that …” Kyle removed his hands from her shoulders and began rubbing them together. “Why are you puking all the time? It’s kind of freaking me out. Do we need to try something other than Suboxone?”

Jocey looked down at the floor. She took in a deep breath. “First of all,” she said, “*we* don’t have to do anything. This is *my* disease. Not *ours*. I know it’s affecting you, but I hate it that it does. Now that I’m doing better, I’m asking you to try not to take so much of this on.”

“I’m your brother, Joss.”

“Exactly,” she said, looking at him, her breath still smelling of vomit. “You’re not me. You have your own life. People who need you more. I’m a big girl, Ky.” She took another deep breath, let it out, and stared into his eyes. He wondered what was going on in her head. She looked back down at the floor. “About the puking,” she said softly. “I think I might be pregnant.”

Suddenly, Kyle felt like he might throw up.

CHAPTER 28

The people packed the streets. Buildings burned. Police cars were turned over. Cops in riot gear threw tear gas. Corina, Jocey and Kyle watched together on the television. Corina sat in one chair, while Jocey and Kyle sat a few feet away on the couch. The pregnancy test he’d picked up for her at Walgreen’s had come up positive, a development that would change her life forever.

“The country is falling apart,” Kyle said.

“It needed to happen,” Corina said, her eyes never leaving the screen. The images glowed across Corina’s face.

Jocey stared down at her hands, lost in thought. She was a thousand miles from this spot – maybe 10,000 miles from what was happening all over the country.

“I don’t get how this is solving anything,” Kyle said. “Violence doesn’t solve violence.”

“Peace doesn’t either,” Corina said. “Those Black Lives Matter signs people have had in their lawns for five years might as well be ‘Merry Christmas’ signs, considering what’s still happening all over the country.”

“Yeah, but this,” Kyle said. “This is overkill. I just don’t get it.”

Corina looked at him for the first time. “It’s not for you to get,” she said, then her gaze returned to the television.

“I don’t think I can do it,” interjected Jocey, who hadn’t spoken in almost an hour.

“Do what?” Kyle asked, watching the protests.

“Be a mother,” Jocey said. “It’s a lot. Shit, I can’t even take care of myself.” She stood up and grabbed a pack of cigarettes off the table. “Exhibit A,” she said. “I can’t even quit these.” She pulled out her lighter and went outside. Kyle watched her leave.

“Those stupid cops,” Corina said. “I mean, tear gas? I thought that was still illegal. Haven’t they done enough damage?”

“Corina, seriously?” Kyle said, pointing at the screen. “There’s a cop car on fire, they’re breaking windows and looting stores, and the cops are outnumbered fifty-to-one. What are they supposed to do – throw water balloons?”

“You’re seriously defending the cops?” Corina asked.

“I’m not defending anyone. I’m defending order.”

“Yeah, well,” Corina said, still enraptured by the images, “order ain’t working.”

Kyle had known Corina almost her entire life. He’d seen her get through puberty and middle school and breakups with boyfriends. He’d never seen her this upset, and he’d certainly never heard her use the word “ain’t.” A vein stuck out on her forehead he’d never noticed before.

“I’m going outside to check on Jocey,” he said.

His sister was sitting in a lawn chair, a cigarette dangling between her trembling fingers. Kyle gazed out across the lawn and cleared his throat.

“I don’t know if I’m allowed to ask this, or if I even should,” he said.

“About the father,” Jocey said, finishing his thought. She waved her cigarette in the air. “Non-factor,” she said. “Could be any one of three or four guys, none of which mean shit to me or have any clue how to be a father.” She took a long drag off her cigarette and held in the smoke. “I was making some bad decisions, and there at the end of my using it caught up with me.” She exhaled, creating a cloud of smoke in front of her face, then she placed a hand on her stomach. “I’m already starting to show some,” she added. “It’s been a couple months.”

“Got it,” Kyle said, thinking of all those deadbeat assholes out there who would eagerly give a desperate girl drugs in exchange for sex. “That complicates things.” Of course, he had fifty other questions, beginning with the cigarette in her hand. None of the questions, spoken, would lead to anywhere good.

“Course,” Jocey said, “who am I to judge those dudes? Who am I say who’s not fit to be a father? Not like I know how to be a mother.”

“You’ve got family to help,” Kyle said, “and you’re clean now.”

Jocey finished her cigarette and dropped it into an empty soda can.

“Being clean is one of about a thousand things it takes to be a good mother,” she said. “The other nine-hundred ninety? Not me.”

Kyle sat down on a chair across from her and rubbed her ankle.

“You ever think of adoption?” he asked.

“That. And abortion.” She closed her eyes. The stress was all over her face. That she would even consider abortion hurt Kyle deeply. Now did not seem like the time to get into a philosophical debate.

“You have Claire and me,” he said, “to help in any way you need.”

She pulled her knees to her chest.

“Speaking of,” she said, “How *are* you and Claire?”

Kyle imagined the same stressed look crossing over his face. The true answer was that he didn’t know. He didn’t know if he’d ever be able to win Claire back. If his role as the father would ever be the same.

“We’ll be fine, Joss,” he said, not because he believed it but because sometimes lies are necessary.

CHAPTER 29

The following night, Corina stood in front of them, wearing a BLACK LIVES MATTER T-shirt and a mask that bore the words I CAN’T BREATHE. Her hair, which had been flattened or pulled back into a ponytail for most of her life, was set free into a thick afro that surrounded her head.

“What do you think?” she asked, her voice muffled by the mask as she held out her arms.

Kyle forced a smile. The truth was that he was distracted. He kept looking at Jocey, who was scratching her arms.

“You look great, Corina,” he said, half-heartedly.

“So,” Corina said, “who’s coming with me?”

“Where?” Jocey asked, rubbing one eye. Kyle hated what he was thinking. He tried to ignore the obvious. Maybe Jocey was just tired. Over-stressed.

“The march starts in two hours,” Corina said enthusiastically. She pulled the mask up onto her forehead. “Supposed to be huge.”

“Jocey, what do you say?” Kyle asked. He needed the distraction. All three of them needed to get out of the house. “I’m up for it.”

“Oh, crowds are okay now?” Jocey said sarcastically, her eyes half-open. “Sorry, but …”

Corina put her hands on her hips. She smiled.

“C’mon, Joss,” she said. Her smile faded. “This is important to me.”

Jocey sat up and yawned.

“Corina,” she said. “You’re hardly even black.”

Corina’s lips pursed. Her eyebrows closed in. Her whole face changed, as if she were watching that George Floyd video for the first time again.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she said, hands still on her hips. She shifted her weight to one leg. Kyle could feel the tension.

“Corina, we’re known each other all our lives,” Jocey said, her voice passionless. Kyle was really having trouble ignoring the obvious: that she was high. “Thirty years, Corina,” Jocey continued, “and never once have you been into the whole black-power movement.”

“Really, Joss?” Corina said, her voice rising as she folded her arms across her chest.

“Your dad’s white, Corina. You grew up around white people. I know more about Chinese people than you do about black people.”

“Jocey,” Kyle said sternly. “What the hell?”

“Whatever,” Jocey said. She waved a hand and stood up unsteadily. “Do what you gotta do, Co.”

“Fuck you, Jocelyn,” Corina said, the first time that Kyle had ever heard her swear or use Jocey’s real name. Jocey turned and headed for the bathroom. “Who are you to tell me about my experience?” Corina called out.

Kyle held out his hands, the way someone does when they’re telling a car to slow down.

“Corina,” he said softly. “She didn’t mean it like that.” Jocey disappeared out of view. The bathroom door closed. Kyle wrapped his palm across his forehead.

“No,” Corina said. “She did. It’s okay. I know where she stands now.”

“Corina, don’t be like that,” Kyle pleaded.

“Don’t tell me how to *be*, Kyle. You’re being just like your sister.” She pulled the mask down over her nose and mouth and started toward the door. He grabbed her arm.

“Corina,” he said. “I’d go with you. I would. But I don’t want to leave Jocey here alone.”

Corina looked at him with sad, hurt, angry eyes. “Of course you don’t,” she said briskly. She pulled her arm free. “Of course you don’t.” She walked out, leaving the door open. As if inviting them to follow. Kyle watched her disappear, then he closed it. He felt himself being pulled in two directions. The two women with whom he lived needed him, and he was letting both of them down. A typical feeling. He thought of his family, of the woman he loved the most. She needed him too, although he had been too busy trying to save his sister to understand that. He turned to the closed front door, feeling regret about letting Corina go alone. He looked toward the hallway, feeling guilty for not confronting Jocey for the way she looked. He went down the hall and tried the bathroom door. It was locked. He knocked, but there was no answer.

“Jocey?” Silence. He knocked again. His heart was beating. He couldn’t swallow. “Jocey, please,” he said. He tried the doorknob again, then used his shoulder. His father had fixed the frame before he’d died. Kyle had to give it a little more effort. He slammed into it three times before it finally gave way.

Jocey was on the floor, her arms splayed out. A syringe was lying a few inches from her head.

She had overdosed again.

CHAPTER 30

The best thing Kyle did in the days after he moved into his father’s house was to buy a package of Narcan and hide it under the bathroom sink.

Narcan nasal spray was developed in 2015, derived from the medication Naltrexone, as an emergency opioid blocker. Originally used almost exclusively in ER’s and by the police, it start becoming easier to obtain within a year of its inception, for the sole purpose of reversing overdoses. As opioid addicts slowly succumbed to the decreasing heartbeat caused by heroin and pain pills, a shot of Narcan would block the effects of the drug immediately and bring the victim back from near death.

His hands shaking, Kyle jammed the Narcan stick into her nostril, shot the medication into her nasal passage, and immediately she sat up. She was breathing and swearing. Her eyes looked around the room in a panic. They fell on Kyle, and she winced in pain.

“You *asshole*,” she said. Jocey cringed. The only negative side effect of Narcan was that the opiate-blocker sent addicts into immediate withdrawal. The effects of the opiate were canceled out, including the relief from withdrawal. It wasn’t dangerous, but it was excruciating. “This is bullshit! What the fuck?”

“Oh, my God,” Kyle gasped between breaths. He was sweating and leaning against the bathroom counter, feeling as if he might faint. He took her hand. She pulled it away and gave him the finger. “Joss,” he said. “I saved your life.” *That’s twice in a few weeks*, he thought.

“You asshole,” she said again, whispering as she curled up into a ball. “If you had any idea how bad this hurts.”

“Damnit, Jocey,” he said quietly. “Not again. I thought you were …”

He didn’t finish the thought. He didn’t know how. He had thought a lot of things in recent, and he felt like an idiot for not calling her out. Of course, she would relapse. Of course, she would go back to doing the only thing she knew. He thought maybe the pregnancy was just what she needed to keep her on path. Why hadn’t he seen that it was just the thing that would send her backward, back to something familiar, something she could control?

Kyle dropped the Narcan pen onto the bathroom floor, next to the syringe. He stood up, looked down at her, then picked up the pen and syringe and went into the living room. He threw them both away, sat down on the couch, and wept like a child.

CHAPTER 31

Jocey was off and running again. She had a child inside of her, a human life, but that didn’t stop her. Kyle was so tired of fighting, of caring, of trying to turn the proverbial tide of destiny with the equivalent of a tennis racket, that he started thinking it might be time to get out. He’d go back to his family, to the people who actually listened to him. People who supported him back.

Corina was one of those people. He eventually took Corina up on her offer to attend a march. She’d been marching daily, through the streets, through Capitol Hill, through the parks and neighborhoods that just two weeks earlier had been lifeless. When they shut down the interstate, Corina had been there with the marchers.

Kyle joined her for a Juneteenth march through MLK Park. He held up a sign proclaiming “Defund the police!” -- mostly out of solidarity, as there was a part of him secretly hoping that the police were at that moment arresting Jocey and sending her off to the safety of a night or two in jail. Or better, to a treatment center that could help get her back on track. He honestly doubted either would happen; despite his promise, he’d all but given up on her. The rollercoaster was too dizzying. Every man had to give up after that many twists and turns.

If loving an addict was this exhausting, he could only imagine how difficult the ride was for the actual addict.

He stopped trying to imagine where she was at that moment and instead focused on the march. He’d never been surrounded by so many black faces, and yet he felt no fear. He walked the same main street that had led him to Madame Delilah’s a few weeks earlier and was now overcome with guilt for having been scared of getting mugged when he’d gone to see her.

He looked over at Corina and saw something that told him she was more comfortable here, among her people, than she’d ever felt in her life.

“Whose lives matter?” they chanted. “Black Lives Matter! Whose lives matter? Black Lives Matter!”

Kyle chanted right along with them, feeling connected to the human race. They’d been forced to socially distance for so long that coming back together felt even more cohesive. He wanted to hug people, to shake hands, to tell everyone he saw how much he loved them.

At one point, Corina put her arm around his shoulders. He looked into her eyes and saw a euphoria that Jocey probably never experienced from heroin. The human experience was the greatest high known to man. For two months, the world had been buckled over in withdrawal.

Here, away from Jocey, Kyle felt that connection again. A connection he’d craved. He was realizing that helicoptering Jocey, that trying to protect her from inevitable death, was like the old cliché about a dog chasing its tail. Or a child looking for a four-leafed clover.

They continued on up the streets, into the neighborhood that Kyle immediately recognized. He stood on his tiptoes and stretched to see past the marchers. He turned to Corina, telling her that he had to go find a bathroom and that he’d catch up with her at MLK Park.

Kyle cut through the protesters and saw the Burger King. He made a line toward the restaurant, went behind it and found the small house. He walked into the backyard, feeling more brave this time. He saw the familiar sign, which led him down a stairway.

Kyle knocked at the door. Madame Delilah opened it a crack, keeping the screen door between them closed. He could see then that she only had one working eye. The other appeared to be made of glass.

“I knew you’d come back eventually, child,” she said. “Even a half-blind woman could’ve seen.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know why you’re here,” she said. “But let me tell you, and I’ll just tell you once. So listen close.” She leaned in more close. “You can’t reverse it. Not now.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to,” Kyle said.

“Then why you here, baby? You want to talk about George Floyd? The corrupt police? What?”

“I didn’t say I wanted to reverse this,” Kyle said, “necessarily. I just wanted to, I guess, ask if it was possible. What it would take.”

Madame Delilah smiled, but then her smile quickly faded. “Your sister’s not doing well, huh?” she said. Kyle shook his head. “I told your father,” Madame Delilah said, “I told him: ‘You sure about this?’ He wasn’t backing down none. He was talking about Lazarus, reading me some Bible verses I already knew by heart. Reading the Bible, like for the first time.” She stood up straight. “You know what I tell him?”

“What?”

“I tell him, ‘Lazarus come back at the hands of Jesus.’ Then I tell him, ‘You, sir, ain’t the Lord and Savior. For you? There’s gonna be consequences.’” She stopped and listened to the marchers, turning her head. “People, dying, people protesting, the world going to the devil,” she continued, “those weren’t the consequences anyone expected. Obviously. Yet here we are.”

“Okay,” Kyle said, “but what about this. If my sister was to die, if we were to make some kind of agreement to make it happen, would all of this go away?”

Madame Delilah stared at him, the way a mother looks at a confused child. The sounds of the march were fading in the distance.

“Baby,” she said, “listen to me.” Madame Delilah blinked her eyes and twitched her nose. “The miracle, it only come once,” she said. “Ain’t no sense trying to recreate it, because it can’t be re-created. You’ve just got to let it play out.” She grinned and tilted her head. “Even Jesus Christ, they only brought him back one,” she said in a high-pitched, sing-songy voice. The voice adults use with children. She started to close the door, then she stopped, looked him in the eyes and added: “Let it play out, child. For now, save your sister. Do what you’ve got to do. If all this is the cost, the whole world going to hell, it’s important that you keep trying. Don’t give up.” She nodded. “Do what you gotta do,” she said again. Then she looked past him. She raised her chin up, like she was sniffing something. “Shhhh,” she said softly. “You hear that?”

Kyle turned and looked around. “The protesters?” he asked.

“Nah,” she said. “Listen more close.”

Kyle couldn’t hear anything other than the fading din of the march.

“What you hear,” she said, “is the sound of listening.” She looked at him and pursed her lips. “You got to live in this world, with all this garbage going on? Well, you better start listening.”

Then she closed the door.

Kyle rushed to MLK Park, catching up to Corina when the march was over. She had a look of enlightenment in her eyes so powerful that Kyle could feel it emanating off her. He could see how much the experience meant to her and how much she wanted to share it with someone.

They talked on the walk back to the car. They talked the entire ride home. Rather, she talked and he listened. He listened like he’d never listened before. He’d never realized how ostracized Corina felt in society. How lonely she felt growing up in a part of town where “there weren’t very many people who looked like me.” How she felt like a minority in the white community, and shunned by the black community; she was too black for one group of people, too white for the other.

He listened to her as they got out of the car and walked up the walkway into his father’s house and imagined the long-overdue conversation going on until sunrise – if not a couple more days.

They talked until she opened the unlocked door to his father’s house, and then the conversation stopped suddenly.

Sitting in a chair, a few feet from Jocey, was a sketchy-looking guy.

“What’s going on here?” Corina asked, standing behind the couch. Jocey looked shocked to see them. She also looked loaded. Her pupils were tiny, and one of her eyeballs drifted as she tried to look at them.

Kyle didn’t have to wait for an introduction. He recognized the sketchy guy right away.

Rico.

CHAPTER 32

The dude had one foot on the small table in front of the couch, which somehow made his presence even more maddening. That he didn’t bother to pull it off when Corina and Kyle walked in the door heightened Kyle’s anger.

“Hey,” Jocey said groggily. “Chill.”

Kyle walked toward the guy menacingly, but still Rico didn’t remove his foot.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Kyle shouted, even though he knew exactly who the guy was.

“I said chill,” Jocey said, standing up to move between them. She was off balance and wiped at her face. “He’s a friend,” she said. “I invited him.”

Kyle looked down at the table, where a spoon, a lighter and a torn piece of aluminum were laid out. Then he looked back at Rico.

“Coming into *our* house,” Kyle shouted, pointing at him, “to get high with *my* sister?”

“Oh, hey,” Rico said. “I didn’t mean to-“

“Shut the fuck up,” Kyle said sternly.

Rico started to tense up. “Look, man, sorry if we surprised you, but-“

“I said, shut the fuck up!”

Rico stood slowly. He was taller than Kyle had expected. He was wearing a baggy collared shirt with thick stripes and basketball shorts. He had on a gold chain and a backward hat tilted to the side. Another stupid white kid trying to be black. He was right there within Kyle’s reach, the man who’d killed Jocey.

“Look, bro,” Rico said, “you say that shit one more time, we’re gonna have a problem.”

“Calm down, Rico,” Jocey said half-heartedly.

“We already have a problem,” Kyle said, staring at Rico. He pointed to the drug paraphernalia on the table. “Jocey’s got one hell of a problem, thanks to people like you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rico asked, staring back at Kyle from a good four inches above him.

“C’mon, Rico,” Corina chimed in, her I CAN’T BREATHE facemask pulled down on her neck. “Everybody knows you’re a dealer. Scum of the earth.”

“Dealer? Yeah, right,” he said, unconvincingly. “Hey, we’re just having a good time here. Nobody’s forcing nobody to do nothing.”

“Cut the bullshit,” Kyle said. “How ‘bout I call the cops and let them figure it out.”

Rico held out his arms, turning his palms up.

“Do it, snitch,” he said. “I got nothing to hide.”

Kyle felt his muscles tighten. The last time he’d been in a fight, he was 19 years old and got clocked for accidently cutting in front of some loud-mouthed dude at a bar near the Central campus.

Kyle folded his arms across his chest.

“Well, how about this?” he said. “I bet Joss here didn’t even tell you she was pregnant.”

“Kyle!” she shouted. She had on a baggy sweatshirt, pretty much all she wore lately. “That’s nobody’s business!”

“So in addition to trying to murder my sister, you’re also murdering an unborn child. How do you feel about *that*, Rico?” Just saying the douchbag’s name made Kyle’s muscles twitch.

“Hey, I ain’t trying to murder nobody,” Rico said. “And I ain’t making her do nothing she wouldn’t do on her own. I walk out that door, she’s still gonna get high. With or without me, Dude. She’s an independent woman.”

“Kyle, seriously,” Jocey chimed in. “If anybody’s telling me what to do, it’s you. How dare you burst in here and –“

“*Burst* in here?” Kyle yelled. “I *live* here, Jocey!”

“Do you?” she said. “Because I don’t remember inviting you.”

“Jocey, c’mon,” Corina chimed in, trying to make peace while wearing her protest outfit. “He’s here to help you. We both are.”

Jocey turned to her best friend. Kyle could see the hate in her eyes.

“I didn’t ask you to come here, either, Corina,” she said. “In fact, you’re not helping me at all. You’re too busy protesting and hanging out with the only people who ‘*matter,*’” she said, condescendingly. “At least that’s what your shirt says.”

“Jocey, stop,” Kyle said, turning away from Rico. She didn’t stop.

“Seriously, Corina,” Jocey said. “It’s like you go from one charity case to the next. You’re done with this lost cause, so let’s just move on to the next.”

“Black Lives Matter is not a lost cause,” Corina said. Then, as if catching herself, she quietly added: “Neither are you, Joss.”

“Give me a break,” Jocey said dismissively. “I’m seriously starting to wonder if you ever cared about me. Or if I was just another one of your movements. ‘Ooh, save the drug addicts!’ ‘Save the black people!’”

“How can you say that, Joss?” Corina said. “I was there for you because I *care* about you. Can you say the same about me? Were you there when I needed someone? A person of color gets murdered, and you won’t even march with me because you’re too damn high.”

“Please. You didn’t know George Whatever-His-Name. He’s in freaking Minneapolis. As if that affected you directly.”

Kyle could see a tear welling up in Corina’s eye.

“Jocey, stop,” he said calmly. “Now you’re saying things that you’re going to regret.”

“No,” Corina said. “Let her continue. It’s about time she got real.”

Jocey rolled her eyes. “’Got real,’” she said, mockingly. “Now you’re even trying to sound black. For once.”

“Jocey!” Kyle shouted.

“No,” Corina said again, reaching for a sweatshirt. Her voice, so powerful in the protests, had gone weak. She’d lost her fight. “It’s okay. I know when I’m not wanted.”

Kyle ran his fingers through his hair. Things were falling apart right in front of his eyes. He felt helpless, an emotion that was becoming all too familiar -- again. “Damnit, Jocey,” he said. “You see what’s happening here? Do you see how you’re pushing Corina away, just like you push everyone away?”

“Go to hell, Kyle. I don’t push people away,” Jocey said. “They leave. They see somebody who’s struggling, and they run for the hills. I get it. I’d probably be the same way.”

Corina continued to gather her things.

“Just because you’re struggling, that doesn’t mean you have to be such a bitch,” Kyle said.

“Hey,” Rico said. “Don’t disrespect her like that.”

“She’s my sister.”

“She’s my friend,” Rico said. “Don’t talk to her that way. I don’t care who you are.”

Kyle turned back to him, picked up the aluminum foil and held it up.

“She’s your customer, asshole,” he said. “And you’re not going to be in business long if you keep killing off customers.”

The door closed. They barely even noticed Corina leave.

“Why you keep saying that?” Rico said, puffing out his chest. “Ain’t nobody getting murdered? Got it? I ain’t killed anyone in my life. You keep talking all this shit, you may be the first.”

With that, Kyle lunged forward and took Rico by the front of his shirt, balling it up with his fists.

“You listen to me, dipshit,” Kyle said, his emotion spilling over. “You already killed my sister once. I’ll be damned if you’re gonna do it again.”

“Take your hands off me.”

“What the hell are you talking about Kyle?” Jocey shouted. “Killed me? I’m right here!”

“You stay the fuck away from my sister,” Kyle said, ignoring her.

“I said, take your hands off me, dawg,” Rico said, his nose almost touching Kyle’s.

“Or what?”

Kyle barely finished the question when Rico slipped his hand under Kyle’s armpit and, in one quick motion, flipped him over in the air. Kyle hadn’t seen it coming and was flying through the air without any way to stop it. He came crashing down on the table, sending glass shattering and wood splintering all over the carpet.

He heard his hip shatter as well, as soon as he hit the floor.

CHAPTER 33

DECEMBER 2020

He made it through three months of rehab on the hip. A spike in the Coronavirus cases and another shelter-in-place. He made it through the shutdown of baseball, basketball and football seasons. A presidential election that left half the country crying foul.

He made it through Claire calling to tell him that she needed space, that she was taking the kids across the state for the summer – even though they never came back. His only role had become taking care of Jocey, and he was her sole caretaker after Corina left and never looked back.

He walked with a limp, his hair was starting to fall out, and he was so desperate for money that he’d starting borrowing from his mother. That was his only contact with her, and Bear had totally stopped returning his calls.

But one thing hadn’t changed. Jocey. She never did.

Jocey was still stuck in neutral, not growing or evolving while the world around her continued to change. The only thing different about Jocey was her belly, which protruded out with an unborn child but hadn’t slowed down her heroin and meth use.

Kyle kept telling himself that he wouldn’t leave her, but it was getting more and more difficult. If he was being honest, the only thing that was keeping him there was the lack of available alternatives.

The change in weather had forced Kyle and Jocey to spend even more time indoors together. While their initial seclusion brought them closer, the past few months had only pulled them apart. Kyle twice caught Jocey stealing the pain pills he’d been prescribed as part of his rehab from hip surgery, and eventually he’d forced himself to try to go without. Jocey introduced him to marijuana as a pain medication, and while it wasn’t as effective as Percoset, it did provide some relief.

Smoking weed together was the only thing Kyle and Jocey shared. Otherwise, they avoided each other in the small house their father used to own. Kyle spent a half-hour a day going on walks out in the cold and rain, just to avoid atrophy in the hip, but he mostly lied on the couch and watched old movies or television news. The pain was getting worse and worse, had become excruciating when he wasn’t under the influence of the short supply of marijuana that Jocey would supply for him.

Kyle also spent ample time sitting in darkness, just waiting for Jocey to come home, wondering while she was out on her binges if she was even alive. He’d plan speeches and ways to get her clean, but none of them ever worked. With each passing day, her stomach sticking out a little more, Kyle would feel more and more desperate.

One afternoon, while he was falling in and out of sleep on the couch, Kyle heard a knock on the door. It startled him. He ascended from his haze, and the knocking continued.

The whole house smelled like weed. He sat up, started for the door and went through the list of possible visitors. Maybe his mother had decided to check on her daughter. Maybe Corina had come back. Maybe Rico had come to peddle his drugs or to finish Kyle off.

“Who is it?” he called out as he hobbled to the door.

“Um, I’m looking for Jocelyn?” A female voice. One Kyle vaguely recognized. “Does she, like, live here?”

“Depends,” Kyle said as he arrived at the door, waiting to open it. “Who’s asking?”

“Um, yeah. My name’s Andrea. I’m Jocelyn’s sponsor.” Kyle immediately remembered her, even if she wouldn’t remember him. “Well, I was Jocelyn’s sponsor,” she said. *I know who you are*, he thought. *We’ve met before*. Except that they hadn’t, not in this reality. “I guess you could say I’m just a friend,” Andrea said.

Kyle looked down at his apparel. He was wearing plaid pajama bottoms, slippers and a T-shirt with holes in the armpits.

“Uh, hang on,” he said. “Let me see if I can find her.” Although Jocey was not in the house, he needed to buy some time. He ran to the bathroom, undressing on the way, and took his first shower in – what, six or seven days? It was quick, but it was something. He got out, applied deodorant and cologne, and parted his hair carefully in front of the mirror. He dressed quickly, opting for one of the casual workday outfits he’d left in his closet even though he hadn’t worked in months. He rushed to the front door and pulled it open.

She was as beautiful – no, more beautiful than – he remembered. The blond hair perfectly straightened and down over her shoulders. The stylish jacket. The bedroom eyes. He wanted to move closer to her, but he saw her mask and stepped back. Social distancing.

“Hey,” he said, “Kyle Hartvigson. Jocey’s brother.”

She smiled with her eyes. “Oh, hey, Kyle.” She started to put a hand out, offering a handshake, but then she pulled it back. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “No, um, touching.” Kyle was stuck in a perma-grin. She tilted her head. “You kind of look familiar,” she said.

*From the funeral*, Kyle almost said. Except that there hadn’t been a funeral. Or a candlelight.

“Maybe from a past life,,” Kyle said, trying to sound charming while not straying from the truth.

She looked past him, around the interior of the house.

“That took awhile,” she said. “I almost left.” Her eyes were breathtaking, even if he could only see half her face. The mystery almost made her even more pretty. “Is Jocey here?”

“Um, she’s not,” Kyle said. “But, please, come in. She should be here any minute.”

“Um, I shouldn’t,” Andrea said. “The social distancing thing.” She looked past him again. “Besides, the smell of weed, it’s kind of a trigger for me.”

Kyle felt his face go flush.

“Oh, that,” he said. “I have these pain issues. Personally, I don’t even like the stuff.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Andrea said sarcastically. “So, if I may, how is she?”

“Jocey?” Kyle said, feeling the situation slipping from his grasp. He really didn’t want her to leave. He was lonely, and he couldn’t stop staring at her. “Listen, I’ll come out.” He grabbed a jacket, and they went out on the lawn, where two lawn chairs were underneath a cover with an ashtray in between. Jocey’s favorite spot.

“Can I get you something?” Kyle said. “Water? Soda? Beer?”

“I’m in recovery,” she said. “Just like Jocey … was.” She sat down on one of the chairs, looking like a princess sitting on a haystack.

“I’m sorry,” Kyle said. “The beer, the recovery. I mean, I should have realized …”

“No need to apologize,” she said. “I never apologize for my recovery.”

Kyle stared at her. The thought of her sticking needles in her arms or smoking meth in a dirty bathroom seemed unfathomable. But maybe one day Jocey would clean up and they’d say the same thing about her.

“So,” she said. “How is Jocey? I haven’t heard from her in months. She stopped returning my texts.” In a quieter voice, she added: “I heard through the grapevine that he might be pregnant.”

Kyle nodded. “Unfortunately,” he said. “It’s not good.”

“How far along?”

“Eight months.”

She put her hand over the mask covering her mouth. “That’s, um …” She shook her head. “Is she still using, I assume?”

Kyle nodded. “She had a few weeks,” he said. “Then the pregnancy, it just became too much, I guess.” He stared at her.

“Eight months,” Andrea said, still shaking her head.

“Have you ever been pregnant?” Kyle blurted out. “I mean, any kids? A husband? A boyfriend?”

Andrea’s posture tightened up. Her eyes looked more nervous. He could tell he’d made her uncomfortable. Too many questions, all at once, and every one of them, he quickly realized, was inappropriate.

“I, um …” she cleared her throat.

He held up his hand. “No,” he said. “Stop. I’m … I’m a dick. Please, forgive me.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s just such a, you know, guy move,” he said. “Pretty girl walks in, and within two minutes I’m asking if she’s single.” He could tell by the way Andrea was looking at him that she was listening. “As a big brother, you see that crap a lot,” he said. “From the outside. I absolutely hated it when guys did that to Jocey.”

Andrea tilted her head.

“’Hated it,’” she parroted. “You say that like it’s in the past tense. Like Jocelyn … like she passed away.”

“Did I?” Kyle said, looking out at the yard. “Yeah, I guess I did. Not because she’s gone but because … well, because *THAT* Jocey’s gone. The pretty girl with the infectious smile. I guess, now that I think about it, that girl did pass away. The Jocey I knew is gone; the one I know is a trainwreck.”

“It’s that bad, huh?”

He nodded. “Her face is all scabbed over,” he said. “She weighs 100 pounds, maybe, even with the baby inside of her.”

Andrea put her head in her hands.

“God, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I was afraid of that.” Andrea raised her head and looked up toward the sky. “I used to be like that,” she said. “On the wagon, off the wagon. Hurting everyone who loved me. Thank God – to answer your question – I never had any kids.”

“How long have you been clean?”

“Eight years in February,” she said. “It hasn’t been easy.”

A breeze picked up, blowing leaves across the lawn. Andrea shivered and wrapped her arms across her stomach.

“Can I get you a blanket?” Kyle asked.

“No, that’s okay,” she said. “I really should be going.”

“Hang on,” Kyle said suddenly. “Let me ask you something.” He leaned forward. “What makes you different?” he asked. “From Jocey, I mean. Why did you get it, and she didn’t?”

“Hasn’t,” Andrea corrected. “She hasn’t gotten it. Yet.” The wind died down. The sun cracked through the clouds, a rarity this time of year. “It’s Kyle, right?” He nodded. She looked up toward the sky. “Kyle, we don’t get to choose when they get it. I wish we could, but we can’t. They’re ready when they’re ready. We can try to force them, but … Well, I think you know how it goes.”

“Like a caterpillar,” Kyle said suddenly. She looked at him. Whatever wall she’d been keeping between them started to lower in that moment. “We don’t get to pick when they’re ready to come out of their cocoon,” Kyle added, nodding eagerly.

Even behind the mask, he could see her smile. “That’s right,” she said, nodding. “Where did you hear that?”

Kyle shrugged. “A wise woman told me,” he said. “Maybe you, in another life.”

She laughed at that. Her gloved hands came up and slapped her thighs. When the laughing died down, she shrugged and looked at him.

“I do believe in reincarnation,” she said.

“For caterpillars?”

“For everyone. We all get another chance. If life doesn’t turn out the way we’d wanted, we can always be hopeful that we’ll get another chance.” Her eyes glazed over. “Without hope,” she added, “we’re nothing.”

Kyle nodded. That was just what he’d needed to hear. He was starting to lose hope that Jocey would ever get clean.

“So let me ask you,” Kyle said. He could feel his heart beating, not because of her beauty but because he’d been waiting to ask this woman a certain question for a long time. “If we can’t rip the cocoon open before the chrysalis happens, then what are we supposed to do? Just wait until the caterpillar flies?”

Andrea looked up at the sun, squinting. A cloud passed over, and she shivered.

“That’s a good question,” she said. “And I’m not sure I know the answer.” She looked at Kyle. “What I do know is that, in recovery, impatience and expectations are very dangerous. We need to exercise patience, and we need to let go of expectations.”

“And how do we do that?” Kyle asked.

Andrea took in a deep breath. She stared into his eyes for several seconds. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She looked down at her lap.

“That’s what the 12 Steps are all about,” she said. “There are things we can control, and there are things we can’t. The hard part is knowing which is which.” She stood up. “Listen,” she said. “This has been good. I’m sorry to hear that Jocey’s struggling, but it’s nice to know she’s got someone who cares so much. That’s half the battle.”

“Thanks,” Kyle said. “I’ll walk you to your car.” They started walking, side by side. Kyle’s hip hurt. He limped as he went. “I’ll tell her to call you,” he said.

“Yes, do.”

“I could use all the help I can get,” he said. “I’ll definitely tell her your worried about her.”

Andrea stopped. “Don’t do that,” she said. “She doesn’t need to hear anyone tell her they’re worried about her. We addicts, we have this innate understanding of stuff like that. We know when we’re letting people down. We know when we’re not living up to our potential. We know when we’re making people worry. Hearing that, it just makes it worse. Kind of like piling on.” She smiled with her eyes. “Just tell her I’m here for her,” she added.

He walked her to her car, which was parked next to the curb. She turned toward him and took her elbow in one hand, keeping a safe distance but still feeling close.

“Kyle,” she said. He nodded. “Just protect yourself. That’s the most important thing you can do.”

“I’ll try,” he said..

“And know this,” Andrea added. She jingled her car keys. “Not all caterpillars,” she said, “are meant to fly.”

As she stared at him, her dark eyes hypnotizing him under the graying sky, Kyle could see himself one day falling in love with her. He could see a life where he’d look into those eyes whenever he needed warmth or strength or hope, much like he once had with Claire. He found himself thinking that there were multiple realities for every life, like branches of a tree. In one reality, Kyle would still be with Claire, happily married and dutifully raising two children that would know how to cope with their emotions and how to say no to drugs. In another reality, he would marry Andrea and would be able to give into his urges and hold her and kiss her and smell her hair, be able to look into those eyes and find the hope that had so long eluded him.

In this reality, as it would turn out, he would never see her again.

PART 3: CHRYSALIS

CHAPTER 34

JANUARY 2030

Kyle and Jocey are standing outside a Denny’s in the north part of town, counting their spare change. A rotund waiter with the name tag BUTCH keeps stealing glances toward them through a large window. Butch does not look excited to see them out there.

“I got 68 cents,” Kyle says. One eyelid is drooping. He’s taken too many of his painkillers – again – but they don’t kill the pain like they used to.

“Buck twelve,” Jocey says, pouring the dirty coins into his even dirtier hand. Since the whole Coronavirus scare 10 years earlier, Kyle is still a bit of a germophobe --- then again, isn’t everyone?

Jocey is hunched over, chewing at her bottom lip with the only three teeth that remain.

“How much you think pancakes are?” Kyle asks.

“Do I look like a fucking menu?” Jocey says. Her eyes are closed, and she’s struggling to balance.

“You’re about as thin as one. Christ, you need about three dozen pancakes.”

“We can’t all be blessed with your middle-aged belly,” Jocey retorts.

Just as she says it, Butch appears behind her, his hands on his hips. When he speaks, his voice is more effeminate than Kyle had expected. “We’re gonna need you to, like, y’know, clear the sidewalk,” he says. “There are customers who are like *right there*. They can see you. They’re, like, trying to eat and such.” The end of all Butch’s sentences rise up like he’s asking a question, even when he’s not.

“We’re about to come in,” Kyle says. When he sees the way Butch is looking at him, Kyle adds: “To buy something.”

“I bet you are,” Butch mumbles sarcastically.

“Hey, um.” Jocey squints and looks at his name tag. “Butch,” she says. “How much are your pancakes?”

“You want pancakes,” Butch says, his voice flat as he stares with eyes of judgment. “Like, inside of our establishment.”

“It’s a special occasion,” Kyle says. Although he has spent a good part of the past few years perfecting the art of B.S. – on the streets, hustle is the most important form of currency – this one time he’s actually telling the truth. Today is the ninth birthday of a boy named Charlie Enderling. His birth name was Charles Wayne Hartvigson III, but Jocey had decided before birth to give him up for adoption. It turned out to be a wise choice because, given her drug history and inability to sustain sobriety, he probably would have spent his entire childhood in Foster care had she kept him. Charlie was born a few days early, and Jocey only got to hold him for about five minutes before he had to whisked off and taken to the ICU to be detoxed off all the opiates that were in his system. Neither Jocey nor Kyle would ever seen the child again, and yet every Jan. 4 they have gotten together to go out for pancakes and hot chocolate in his honor. On many Jan. 4s, Jocey has been too dope sick to enjoy the meal, but she’s forced down the pancakes and hot chocolate out of duty.

“Yeah, well, you’re better off taking your special occasion somewhere else,” Butch says. “By the way, you know this street is crawling with cops, right? So you’d better not try anything funny.”

“Funny?” Jocey says. “Like, eating pancakes? Is that so funny you can get arrested?”

“Defund the police!” Kyle shouts, holding up a fist. Both he and Jocey laugh.

“Yes, that’s clever,” Butch says passive-aggressively. “Well, it might have been funny ten years ago.” He clears his throat. “So, if the comedy routine is about wrapped up,” he says, “how about you Laurel and Hardy wannabes move it along?”

“Look, smartass,” Kyle says. “Just answer the question. My sister and I have only so much money. You know, flying a sign on Aurora and 80th isn’t what it used to be.”

“So what’s the question?” Butch says, his voice showing that he’s losing his patience.

“How much for pancakes?” Jocey asks.

“Our deluxe short stack is eight ninety-nine,” Butch answers.

“For *pancakes*?” Kyle says. “Well, what about a regular old stack?”

“Six ninety-nine.”

“Jesus,” Jocey says. “Are they made of solid gold?”

“Just flour and eggs, Ma’am,” Butch says. “Now, are there any other questions?”

Kyle fishes through the change in his palm. “What about one pancake?” he asks.

“One pancake,” says Butch.

“Yeah,” Jocey says, “how much is a pancake?”

Butch smirks. “Well, you’ll have to go to an establishment where they sell single pancakes,” he says. “Maybe the Pancake drive-thru?”

“Is there such a place?” Kyle asks quickly.

“Not as I’m aware,” Butch says. “That was supposed to be a joke. Know your audience, right?” He smirks. “Now,” he says, “if you don’t mind. I have actual customers. So you’ve get back to … um, whatever it is you people do. Move along to wherever it is you’re going.” He turns and walks away.

Jocey gives the guy the finger, but he’s already inside the building. A tear runs down her face.

“This is such bullshit,” she says. “A human life doesn’t mean shit to an asshole like that.”

Kyle puts the change in his pocket. “He’s just doing his job,” he says. “At least he’s lucky enough to *have* a job.” He starts walking. “C’mon,” he says. “He’s just the kind of dickhead who would call the cops. Let’s get out of here.”

“The cops?” Jocey says, following him. “What are they gonna do? Arrest us for standing on a public sidewalk?”

“Well, I’m sure if they check our pockets, they’ll have plenty that warrants an arrest.”

“Illegal search and seizure, dude.” Jocey is 40 years old. She’s still using words like *dude*. She’s still making anti-cop comments. She still hasn’t worked a proper job for more than a month or two in her entire adult life. She looks sixty years old, but in a lot of ways she acts fifteen.

She’s holding her head down. Another tear falls.

“You sad about Charlie?” Kyle asks, putting an arm around her.

“Something like that.”

“Yeah, me too. Maybe you’ll see him one day. It’s never too late.”

“Not in this condition,” Jocey says. “’Hey, kid. I’m your mom. Got Hep-C and an abscess the size of a softball under my armpit. Want a hug?’”

Kyle’s hip is hurting. He needs to sit down. “Maybe we can round up some more change and at least get a couple hot chocolates,” he says. “You know, to honor Charlie.”

“Oh, my god,” Jocey says suddenly. She stops walking. Her eyes are big and she’s staring at something across the street.

“What? What is it?”

“Is that that dude Rico?” she says, pointing. Kyle looks across the street and sees a clean-cut guy, with sunglasses and sparkly earrings, now looking at them. The guy pulls down his sunglasses and grins. Kyle recognizes him now. His stomach tightens. The guy’s older, but he looks better. He looks younger, in some ways. His face is clean-shaven. He walks with more confidence.

Rico crosses the street, heading toward them.

“Oh, shit,” Kyle says.

“Shit is right,” Jocey says. “You sure we only got a couple of bucks? I’m gonna be dope sick in a couple hours, and I bet he-“

“Jocey?” Rico calls out. He’s smiling. Kyle, his hip hurting, sizes the guy up. He wonders if he can get in a cheap shot that will lay him out flat. “I thought that was you!” Rico calls out. He doesn’t recognize Kyle, or if he does, he’s not saying anything. As Rico gets closer, he says: “Wow, you look like … Have you lost weight?”

“Thanks, Rico. I’m not working at Amazon, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“No, no,” he says. “You look great.”

“Look, dude,” Kyle says. “Why don’t you -?”

“Wait,” Rico says, looking at Kyle as if seeing him for the first time. “I know you, don’t I? Wait, are you the guy …? Are you Jocey’s big brother?”

“He still has hip problems, if that’s what you’re asking,” Jocey says.

Rico’s face shows genuine concern. “Shit,” he mumbles. “I feel so bad about that. Listen, man. I should’ve done this a long time ago. I owe you a huge apology.”

“Yeah, well, you can take your apology and shove it up your ass,” Kyle says.

Rico’s smile doesn’t fade. He shrugs. “I’m not asking for forgiveness,” he says. “I just needed to say I was sorry. It’s a Ninth-Step thing.”

“Like, as in, the 12 Steps?” Jocey asks.

Rico pulls out a keychain. He grins proudly as he holds up a badge that shows he’s got three years clean and sober. “Hey,” he says to Jocey. “Listen, if you ever need to go to a meeting or something. I know a good one that’s got some amazing women with some really strong recovery.”

“Haven’t you done enough damage, baby killer?” Kyle says.

“Baby killer?” Rico looks at her stomach. “Oh, shit,” he says. “I forgot …”

“Nah, the kid’s fine,” Jocey says. “Gave him up for adoption. Don’t want him ending up like his old lady.”

Rico nods. “Listen,” he says. “It was good seeing you. Both of you.” To Jocey, he adds: “I meant what I said. About the meeting. Tenth and Pine. Every Sunday night. You’ll thank me.” He turns to walk away, then Rico stops, turns back toward her and adds: “You know, getting clean isn’t easy. It’s totally worth it, though.” And he walks away.

Kyle watches him. When he’s out of ear shot, he says: “That guy’s lucky I didn’t wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. I wish I’d have killed him when I had the chance.”

“Right, Kyle,” Jocey says. “As if you have it in you to kill someone.”

Kyle starts walking again and winces. He has to sit down. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a bottle of Percoset.

“How many you got left?” Jocey says, sitting down next to him.

Kyle looks in the bottle with one eye. “Four,” he says. He takes one out, pops it in his mouth. “Three now.”

“Man,” Jocey says. “And I could really use one.”

“My next prescription’s not filled for two more weeks,” he says.

Jocey stands up. “Well,” she says, “we better get out there. We’ve got some hustling to do.”

Kyle strains to get up. Sometimes he wonders if shooting heroin would just be easier. It’s cheaper, lasts longer and doesn’t involve a doctor who’s always monitoring how much he uses. As Jocey has often reminded him, it’s basically the same as pain pills, just easier to find on the streets.

When he stands up, Jocey is frozen in place. She’s staring at someone else across the street, only this time it’s someone he does not recognize. A girl of about 30 years old is drinking coffee at an outside café. Her hair is straightened, and although she looks to be African-American, her skin is light. Kyle turns to Jocey, sees the longing look on her face, and realizes what she’s thinking.

“Kind of looks like Corina, huh?” he says. Jocey nods.

“I miss her more than I miss Charlie,” she says. They start walking. Kyle continues to wince with every step. Pain pills don’t kick in as fast as IV heroin – or, at least, that’s what Jocey tells him. “I don’t get it, Ky,” Jocey says. “We spend our whole lives together, and I never once saw her as black. Then, out of nowhere, that was all she wanted me to see.”

“It’s not for you to get,” Kyle says. “It’s not for either of us to get. It’s just for us to respect.”

They walk up Aurora, in search of a store where they can steal a few gift cards and flip them for money. Boosting, they call it. The constant hustle. When they do, they’ll buy two hot chocolates and maybe $20 worth of heroin. They might end up sharing that, too, all in the name of Charlie Enderling.

They move along to wherever it is they’re going.

CHAPTER 35

September 2037

Kyle Hartvigson spends his 50th birthday in an NA meeting. A guy in a beanie is talking about his “spiritual awakening” he had in jail, how he never again had an urge to shoot dope. If only it was that easy. Kyle has been trying to kick the pain pills for 15 years. on desperate days, he’ll even smoke heroin off a foil with jocey -- pain medication being pain medication, whether it’s out of a pill bottle or spread on aluminum foil.

When kyle had promised to always be there for jocey, this wasn’t what he’d had in mind.

He looks over at her, sitting two chairs away, her hands in her lap and her chin forward. She sits like a student in class, like the kid at the front of the room, taking it all in. She’s been telling Kyle over and over that she’s finally had enough of this life – but she’s been saying that for thirty years. He thinks about what she’d once told him, about how she’d stopped getting high a long time ago.

As he looks at the other 14 people sitting in a circle in the church basement, he understands what she’d meant. These people all look like beaten-down soldiers, fighting a war that has already been lost. Soldiers go to war because there was a cause on the line, but over time that cause is long forgotten. When you went to war, it is kill or be killed. When the guns start firing, that sense of patriotic responsibility is the first to go, replaced by the basic need to survive. Most heroin addicts aren’t getting high; they are surviving.

A young woman speaks next, and kyle thinks not of jocey but of barrett. His other sister, bear. She is in her thirties by now, and last he heard she had three kids and a lawyer husband who was never home. Kyle remembers when his marriage went from sanctity to survival, too. His own kids are probably grown and on their own as well, barely aware of their father’s existence.

“I just don’t know how much longer I can go on like this,” the young woman is saying. “I’ve been trying to get clean for almost FIVE years.”

Kyle resists the urge to roll his eyes. He looks at Jocey, expecting her to flash him that wtf look. Instead, she is leaning forward on her fists, taking in the woman’s every word.

“I have a 2-year old now,” the woman is saying, her eyes tearing up. “Please, don’t judge.” She wipes at her eyes. “People think I’m choosing heroin over him, but it’s not that simple. Not at all.”

She bursts into tears. Jocey stands and walks over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I understand,” Jocey says. “I do. God, what I wouldn’t give to be your age.” She smiles as the girl looks up at her. “It’s never too late,” Jocey says. “You have a future. You’re still in your child’s life. Get clean now, and never look back. Don’t end up like people like me.” Then she asks the woman if she can have a hug.

The others, mostly men, are silent. After Jocey sits back down, the room goes silent. After almost 60 seconds, the guy running the meeting points toward Kyle.

“What about you?” he said. “Would you like to share?”

Kyle looks around awkwardly.

“Me?” he says. “Uh, no. Thank you. I’m just here to support my sister. I don’t really, you know, have a problem like you guys.”

Because if Kyle has a problem, then how could he possibly help Jocey with hers? He’s been dealing with her problems for so long that his own needs have become secondary.

He’s become so desperate that one night, when they were both full of so much fentanyl that he couldn’t even feel his hip, he finally told her. He’d looked at his sister and let her in on his great secret: that she’d overdosed and been given a second chance. In an act of desperation, he’d told her that she owed it to her destiny to get clean.

She’d just looked at him, her eyes nearly shut, and said: “Damn, Kyle, you’re high as fuck.”

He’s convinced himself since then that she’s right, that the drugs have messed with his brain and made him remember things that were never really there. He can’t bear to think that he’s been given a second chance and that it’s come to this: 20 more years of the same bullshit.

In the church basement, Kyle wishes he has some fentanyl. He’d snorted a pain pill before the meeting, but his tolerance is so high that the effects are already starting to wear off.

The silence returns. Then a voice rises from among the soldiers.

“I’ll go,” Jocey says. “I’m ready to speak.” She clears her throat.

As she begins to speak, Kyle hardly recognizes her.

He sees the cocoon opening. After all this time, she is ready. After all this damage, she’s ready to surrender.

He cannot believe she’s wasted so much of her life – so much of *their* lives. The phrase “better late than never” penetrates his mind, but he’s not sure he believes it. If not then, when his father had given up everything to bring her back, then why now?

CHAPTER 36

*I gotta girl in the war, Paul, I know that they can hear me yell  
If they can't find a way to help, they can go to Hell*

*--Josh Ritter*

MARCH 24, 2047

Kyle Hartvigson lies in the dirt, looking up at the sky, wondering how it’s possible that he’s seeing what he thinks he sees. His hip is throbbing now – the shot of heroin he took before getting out of the car is already starting to wear off.

About 10 years earlier, their roles reversed. Jocey did end up getting clean in the end, her body getting so worn down by the Hep-C and litany of abscesses that she decided to get on methadone and quit using heroin altogether. She was in a wheelchair for the final two years of her life, but for a short time she knew what it meant to be happy again. Just about the same time, as his pain-pill prescriptions continued to run out faster than his body could keep up with, and the doctors turned down his pleas for stronger medication, Kyle slammed a needle into his arm for the first time. And the pain went away.

Now, he’s hooked. Heroin doesn’t pick and choose its prisoners.

For most of Jocey’s final few years, Kyle had found himself asking a single question: Was it all worth it? Kyle could not say. All he knows is that he got a glimpse of what Jocey was like without heroin. He got to spend more time with her, even if that time was filled with pain and regret. He got to really see what her prison was like.

The story was supposed to have a happy ending. Most of Stephen King’s novels did. All those Netflix movies they watched during the Coronavirus all those years ago wrapped up with some sort of cheerful message. But this? This spiraling, spinning, out-of-control passenger jet that had been heading for the earth for years? The one that finally crashed down? This story has left Kyle with no sense of closure, no sense of meaning. Jocey getting clean in the end almost left him less hopeful, as if the end of journey had only led to a hilltop that looked down upon him mockingly. The devil laughing from above.

And Kyle, he just lies in the dirt, staring up at the blank sky.

As he sits up and looks over toward the two gravediggers, he thinks maybe he’s having some hallucinogenic reaction – rare in heroin, but with all the fentanyl that’s in the brown he’s using these days, it’s not unheard of. One of the gravediggers continues to throw dirt on Jocey’s grave, while the other lights another cigarette and spits into the air. Kyle rubs his eyes and leans forward, looking down at the flat gravestone that’s surrounded by leaves.

JOCELYN GRACE HARTVIGSON

JAN. 26, 1990 – FEB. 13, 2O20

He tries to stand, but his hip is too weak. Kyle looks toward the diggers in the distance, then back at the gravestone. Twenty-seven years have passed. Twenty-seven useless, painful years, which have made him question time and again whether they were even worth having. Things somehow got worse. Nothing, really, got better.

And yet now, as he turns his head back and forth, he wonders: How is it possible that one person can have two gravestones? Not even Lazarus earned that distinction.

Kyle rolls onto his good hip and then turns over onto his knees. The pain is blinding. If he could just have one more shot of heroin – or better, a bump of fentanyl. He thinks maybe the pain is making him see things that aren’t there. He believes that when he gets to his feet, either the gravediggers or the flat gravestone will be gone. Only one can be real.

He sits there, on all fours, powerless, as he tries to figure out what to do next. He realizes he cannot stand up, that he is stuck in this ridiculous position, here in the cemetery where his sister is buried. Twice, it turns out.

He hears the gravediggers laughing about a joke one of them has told. He considers calling out but isn’t sure they’d even hear him; his voice is too weak. He imagines the indignity of slowly dying here, in a cemetery, and then he realizes that the thought actually feels freeing.

“So we’ve got ourselves in a pickle, hey?” a voice says, startling him. He recognizes the Caribbean accent right away, but when he turns to look at Madame Delilah, he does not immediately recognize her. She is older, of course, and she is hunched over with a cane in each hand. Then he sees the glass eye, glittering in the daylight. She hobbles toward him and holds out one of the canes. “Take it,” she says. “I’ve got plenty.”

Kyle reaches out. He takes the cane, uses it to stand, then he balances on it. “Thank you,” he mutters, wobbling and wincing.

“Okay,” she says. “One problem solved. Now, ’bout that other pickle.”

“Where did you come from?” Kyle says, breathing heavily as he balances himself. “What are you doing here?”

“Good questions, but not the problem I mean,” she says. “You sure ask a lot of questions, huh, child?” She nods her head toward the gravestone. “So,” she says, “I’ve got a question for you.” She’s still nodding, now staring at him, as if already waiting for an answer. “That woman there,” she says, using her cane to point at Jocey’s flat gravestone. “She appears to be in two places at once, no?”

“Do you know anything about that?” Kyle asks.

“I know a little bit about everything, hon,” Madame Delilah says.

He looks over at the gravediggers. They’re using their shovels to flatten the earth above Jocey’s most recent grave.

“So my question to you is: you ready to choose, boy?” Madame Delilah says.

Kyle turns to look at her. Another murder of crows passes overhead, and the shadow darkens Madame Delilah’s glass eye before it sparkles again.

“Excuse me?” he says.

“Which destiny?” she says. “You get to pick.”

“But I thought …” Kyle’s head feels light, as if he might pass out. It’s not from the pain, but from the weight of the past 27 years. “You said you couldn’t …”

“I said nothing of the sort, child,” Madame Delilah says. “What I said was: You’ve got to let it play out.” She looks over at the gravediggers, who are finishing their work, and points her cane in that direction. “Looks played out to me,” she says, then smiles. It’s the first time he’s seen her do that. She’s missing at least two teeth, and the ones she has are discolored and at odd angles. “So,” she says, “which is it?”

“I don’t understand.”

Madame Delilah nods to a white car, idling on the street about 100 yards away. Kyle shades his eyes to see a man sitting in the driver’s seat fiddling with his phone.

“Is that …?” Kyle says.

“It is,” Madame Delilah says. “Your son. Nolan. He dropped you off to see your sister’s grave. In the other reality. The one where your sister dies at 30.”

“I haven’t seen Nolan in months,” Kyle whispers.

Madame Delilah turns toward the gravediggers, who are now leaning on their shovels and wiping sweat from their brow.

“And over there,” she says, “on past that new grave, is a path that leads back to your car, and back to the life you’re currently living. The life that allowed you to get all those extra years with your sister.” She looks him up and down. “And the one that’s left you … well, like this,” she says. Grinning again, she holds out one hand. “The choice,” she says, “is yours.”

CHAPTER 37

One of Kyle’s earliest memories of Jocey was when they were at their grandparents’ cabin, sitting in the patch of sand by the lake. The water would rise a few inches and tease them every time a boat passed, leaving a wake of ripples.

Jocey was 2 years old, dressed in swim trunks and a bright pink swim shirt that had a picture of a watermelon across the front. She wore a floppy, white sun hat, which was tied under her chin, and yellow sunglasses.

“Okay, kids,” their mother said, reaching into a cooler. “Choose one. You can either have a juice box, or a popsicle.”

“Popsicle,” 5-year-old Kyle said. “Easy choice!”

His mother handed him a popsicle and turned to his baby sister. “Jocey?” she said, holding a juice box in one hand and a popsicle in the other.

“Juice-sicle!” she said clapping her hands together.

“Juice box?” their mother asked.

“And sicle!”

“Popsicle?” their mother asked.

“Mom,” Kyle said, licking at his root beer popsicle, “she wants both. Greedy girl.”

Their mother leaned down. “Jocey, hon,” she said patiently, “you can only have one.”

“But I want both!”

“Yes, but you have to choose,” their mother said.

“But I want BOTH! I DO!”

“Honey. Popsicle or juice box?”

“Both! Both! Both!” Jocey was starting to turn red in the face. Kyle sucked on his root beer popsicle triumphantly.

“Jocey,” their mother said. “I’m telling you that you have a choice to make. You can either choose the popsicle in this hand, or the juice box in this hand.”

Jocey’s eyes got real small. Her eyebrows curved inward, then rose on her forehead.

“I get to choose?” she said.

“Yes!”

“Okay,” Jocey said, all sing-songy. “I choose … both!” She grabbed them both out of her mother’s hands.

*I choose both!*

That became a mantra for Kyle and Jocey well into adulthood. They’d joke about any choice that needed to be made: “I choose both!” And Jocey would laugh that laugh, the one that made everyone around her smile.

A few days later, during that same childhood trip, they were sitting on the patio by the cabin when Kyle discovered a caterpillar crawling on his arm. “Jocey,” he said. “Come check it out.” He watched as the caterpillar’s body hunched into the shape of an upside-down U, then flat again, helping it to move across his skin.

“It hurt?” Jocey asked, standing a few inches from his arm.

“Nah. Feels kind of cool.”

She placed her hands on the arm of his chair and rested her chin on them, watching carefully.

“Where he going?” she asked.

Kyle shrugged. “Caterpillar band practice,” he said, giggling.

“He play music?”

“I don’t know what he does, Joss.” Kyle flicked the caterpillar, which flew through the air. They didn’t see where it went, or if it came down. “Well, we know one thing,” Kyle said. “It’s not flying to Paris.” He giggled again.

“Why not?” Jocey asked, the curiosity dripping from her voice.

“Because, dummy,” he said, “caterpillars don’t fly. Everyone knows that.”

He stood up.

“Why not?” Jocey asked, looking up at him with wide eyes.

Kyle just shook his head. “You ask a lot of questions,” he said. “You know how to find the answers?”

“How?”

“You grow up,” he said. Then Kyle went back into the house.

CHAPTER 38

They are driving through the north end of town, with the windows open. Kyle hangs his head out the window and opens his mouth, taking in the air. What’s left of his hair flutters in the passing wind. He is free again.

He pulls his head back into the car and looks down at his legs. He feels no pain.

They pass a sign promoting equality. All these years have passed, and still that war rages on. Another sign asks: “Hungry? For the best dining experience in town, try Harvey’s!” They drive past a cop, who glances at them briefly but is focusing most of his attention on two African-American men who are hanging out outside a convenience store.

“Gramps is a trip,” Nolan says, snapping Kyle out of his trance.

“Excuse me?”

“Gramps,” Nolan says, turning to him. “Your dad. Personally, I can’t believe they didn’t lock him up sooner. Last time we saw him, he kept telling Little Nole about these invisible bugs that were flying through the air. Nole couldn’t sleep for three days.”

Kyle smiles and looks back out the window. Absence of pain is the greatest high a man can achieve.

“So,” Nolan says, “how’s Aunt Jocey?”

Kyle has this pang of hope. Jocey has only been gone a day, but he misses her. He was the only one at her side at the end. He was the only one there to push her around in her wheelchair, to see the transformation, to see her drug-free. Everyone else had given up on her, but Kyle never did. He was good to his promise, and there was some satisfaction in that. But hearing Nolan’s question, he wonders if maybe she’s still around. If maybe, in this reality, he’ll get to see her again.

“What do you mean?” Kyle asks.

“Back there,” Nolan says, pointing a thumb toward the back window. “Your little ‘chat’ at the cemetery.” He uses his fingers to make air quotes, taking his hands off the steering wheel momentarily. “Y’know, with your dead sister?” Nolan smiles.

Kyle feels hope leave his body, as he has so many other times in his life. His head drops.

“It was okay,” he mutters.

Nolan turns a corner and looks at his father.

“What was she like, anyway?” he asks.

“You don’t remember?”

Nolan shrugs. “Not really. I remember she had black hair. But probably just from pictures.”

“You don’t remember anything else?”

“I was pretty young, Dad. I guess I remember this one time we had to go to see Gramps on his birthday. Jocey was asleep downstairs the whole time. She was sick, I think.”

*Of course, she was.*

“You okay, Dad? You seem lost in thought.” Kyle nods. “Hey,” Nolan says, “check it out. I’ve got tickets for the Mariners game tomorrow. I’m taking Little Nole.” He smirks. “Poor Little Nole. It’ll probably be another 27 years before the Mariners win a World Series.”

“Yeah, well, I’m 60,” Kyle says, looking out the window, “and I’ve never seen it.”

Nolan is silent. Kyle can feel him staring at him. Kyle turns to see his adult son with a quizzical look.

“C’mon, Dad,” he says. “I might not remember Aunt Jocey, but I remember *that*.”

“Remember what?”

“Game 6? At Safeco Field? Man, when Kyle Lewis hit that shot off Kershaw, I thought the city was going to collapse.”

“The Mariners won a World Series?”

“Really, Dad? In 2020. You don’t remember? The 105-win season, out of nowhere? C’mon. You’re starting to sound like Gramps.”

“There was a full baseball season in 2020?” Kyle asks. “What about the Coronavirus?”

Nolan turns to him with a blank face as they idle at a red light.

“The what?” Nolan says. “Corona? A virus? Was that some kind of beer e coli or something I was too young to know about?”

Kyle can feel his heart beating. This is news even better than the Mariners ending their World Series draught.

“Holy shit,” he whispers. “It never happened.”

“Dad, are you, like, drunk?” Nolan asks.

Kyle smiles, remembering how he’d asked his father the same question when he was Nolan’s age that day at the funeral. Kyle was high on Percocet less than an hour ago, and yet now, in this reality, he’s probably never even touched the stuff. Why should he? The hip injury never happened. A lot never happened.

“Listen, Nolan,” he says. “How’s Dez?”

“You haven’t talked to her?”

“Not in … awhile.”

Nolan pulls the car into an unfamiliar driveway. Nolan’s house.

“She’s the same,” he says as the engine shuts off on its own. “Busy as hell, trying to save the world. I guess CNN is trying to do some profile on her. About the Jocelyn Project.”

“The Jocelyn Project?”

Nolan stares at him. He opens the car door.

“You’re funny, Dad.” He gets out.

A woman appears in the doorway, holding a 1-year-old while another kid – Little Nolan, by the looks of him – comes running out with a plastic baseball bat.

“Daddy!” he calls out, running into Nolan’s arms.

“Claire,” Kyle whispers, staring at the woman in the doorway.

“Did you thank Grandma for babysitting?” Nolan asks his son.

“Thanks, Gram!”

Claire smiles. Kyle has almost forgotten how beautiful her smile was. It’s been years since he’s seen her – maybe a handful of times since the divorce. A divorce that, in this reality, never happened. Kyle smiles.

“How was the cemetery?” Claire says, bouncing the baby on her hip. She’s got gray hair and wrinkles around her eyes, but otherwise she’s not entirely different than she was at 30. “Did you tell Jocey hi for me?”

Kyle is staring, unable to speak. She’s older, but she’s still beautiful. Kyle is mesmerized by her, like he was when they first started dating.

“Kyle?” she says. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“He’s been acting like a crackhead ever since we left the cemetery,” Nolan says, throwing an underhand pitch to Nolan Jr. “Must be smoking whatever Aunt Jocey was on all those years ago.” Nolan lets out a laugh.

Kyle turns his head quickly. “Nolan!” he shouts.

“Oh, sorry, Dad,” Nolan says, holding up his hands. “Too soon?” He laughs some more, shakes his head and walks over to Claire to take his baby. “Thirty years, apparently, is too soon,” he whispers, loud enough for Kyle to hear.

Claire walks across the lawn, to where Kyle is standing, and reaches out her hands.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she says. “Are you okay?”

He takes her hands. He pulls her into a hug. The smell of her, the way she feels. It’s all so comfortable, like everything is okay. He holds her, breathing her in, then he steps back.

“Claire,” he says. “Do you remember the Coronavirus? COVID-19?”

“What on earth are you talking about? I’m starting to think Nolan was right – what are you on?”

Kyle smiles. “Holy shit,” he says. “It’s true. It never happened.”

“Kyle,” Claire says softly. “There are children present.”

She puts her arm around him, and they walk toward the front door, where Nolan is holding the baby. Kyle’s grandchild.

“Yeah, Dad,” Nolan says. “You’re kind of freaking us all out. But hey.” He laughs. “thanks to Dez and the Jocelyn Project, you’ll be cured in a week!”

Claire laughs along with him. Kyle forces a smile. Nolan takes the baby inside and Nolan Jr. drops the bat and runs in behind them, yelling for a snack. Claire starts to follow, but Kyle grabs her arm.

“Claire,” he says, “I am a little bit out of it. Could you remind me: What’s the Jocelyn Project?”

Her gaze sharpens. She looks deep into his eyes.

“You’re serious,” she says. “You can’t remember. Dear Lord, you’re becoming your father.”

“No, I just fell,” he says. “At the cemetery. Just bumped my head.”

“Oh, my God, Kyle. Are you alright?”

“Fine, Claire. Just refresh my memory. The Jocelyn Project?”

She tilts her head. Rubs his arm, as if he were a child.

“It’s only been Dez’s life project since she started pre-Med,” Claire says, smiling. “The pill. Remember?”

“What pill?”

Claire leans forward and looks into Kyle’s eyes.

“The one that cures addiction,” she says. “For Pete’s sake, Kyle. Google it!”

And then she breaks out in laughter. Kyle loves the sound, so he laughs along with her, not necessarily because it’s funny but because he can’t stop smiling.

A cure for addiction. What a world this has become.

Kyle takes her hands in his. So soft and familiar, even after all these years. Hands he should have been holding all along. Eyes in which he can’t stop swimming. He had forgotten how wonderful it was to be in love. An even better feeling than absence-from-pain.

He squeezes her hands and asks her a long overdue question, the one he should have asked over and over during the past 25 years.

“Claire,” he says, “how are you?”

She smiles. But it’s a smile that’s trying to cover a pain he can see. A pain he does not understand.

“I’m okay,” she says. “All things considered.” She looks down at the ground. “The chemo,” she says. “I’m not looking forward to it. Not at all.”

Kyle feels something like a kick to his stomach, similar to the sensation that overtook him all those years ago, when he’d first heard about Jocey’s overdose.

“Cancer,” he whispers.

“I just wish,” Claire says, still looking down, “that I didn’t have to go through this. I don’t know why I have to do this.” She lifts her head. Their eyes meet. “It’s just delaying the inevitable,” she says.

“It’s terminal,” Kyle says. He does not ask, because he knows this would only hurt her more.

“Think about it,” she says. “Without chemo, I’m gone in … what? A month? Maybe two? With chemo, I’ve got six – tops.” A tear wells up in her eye. “It happens so quick.”

Kyle’s first thought is that he cannot believe how much time has passed without a cure for cancer. They’ve found a cure for addiction, for Chrissakes. But not for cancer?

Kyle reaches out and wraps his arms around her. He pulls her in, feeling her warmth. Part of him wishes he could change this, that he could find Madame Delilah and make some kind of deal. To take away the cancer. To give himself more time with his wife. Time he’s lost. Time he never thought he’d get back. With one deal, he could buy more time.

But Kyle has learned the hard way that altering fate is not the answer.

“I love you,” he whispers in her ear. “I always have. And I always will.”

Claire buries her cheek in the nape of his neck.

“I know you do, Ky,” she says. “I know you do.”

He holds her for however long he can.

CHAPTER 39

Kyle walks down a long corridor, following a man dressed in blue scrubs. A large window at the end of the hallway brings in bright rays of light.

“This is the White Wing,” the guy in the smock tells him. The man is of Asian descent but has no trace of an accent. “We try to limit the visitation as best we can.”

Kyle hears someone shouting behind a door as they pass it, screaming to be let out.

“A lot of these people, they’re so far gone that they’re a danger to themselves and to others,” the guy says. He stops. His name tag says TONY. “I don’t think you have to worry too much about him harming anyone other than himself, though.” He smiles. He nods toward the door. “Room 319, Hartvigson,” he says. “You sure you want to see this?”

“Of course. He’s my father,” Kyle says. But he isn’t sure.

“We got him from the senior living facility, where they moved him to the dementia wing but couldn’t handle him,” Tony says. “Then he came here. it was pretty apparent that he wasn’t fit for the general population.” Tony pulls out what looks like a gun. Kyle steps back. Tony cocks it and looks at Kyle with a grin. “He’s pretty unpredictable, you know?”

“What do you need a gun for?” Kyle asks.

Tony looks at the gun and smiles. “It’s just a dart gun, bud. Chill-lax.” He turns it over, makes sure it’s on. “As for why I need it? You’ll see soon.”

The guy fumbles with his keys. Kyle takes another step back. Tony finds the key then turns to look at Kyle.

“You sure you’re ready for this?” the guy asks. Kyle nods reluctantly. “When is the last time you saw him?” Tony asks.

Kyle doesn’t know how to answer. So much has happened and, apparently, hasn’t happened, that Kyle can’t quantify an answer. So he says: “It’s been a minute, I guess.”

The guy opens the door.

Chuck Hartvigson sits in a chair in the middle of the room, his back to the door. He’s a shell of his former self, but at least he’s alive. Kyle wants to run and give him a hug, to take his Daddy into his arms and feel his warmth. But he’s too frail. His body shakes. His back is to Kyle and the Tony the RN, and he’s mumbling.

“Well,” the RN says. “There he is. Good luck with that.”

Kyle takes a step forward and leans in.

“It’s killing them all,” Chuck Hartvigson is saying, his voice weak. He has age spots all over the back of his head. “The germs,” he’s saying. “They’re killing them all. Don’t let anybody in. Stay home. Goddamnit, stay home!”

“That’s it,” the RN says from behind Kyle. “All day, every day. Nonsense and more nonsense.”

Kyle ignores him and steps forward.

“You’ve given it to me,” his father is saying. “Now the streets are empty. Where are all the people?” Kyle sees now that his father’s arms are strapped to the metal chair. A horrible existence. “Where is Lazarus? Is this the miracle? I’m responsible for this,” his father says. “This is all my fault.”

“Dad?”

Chuck Hartvigson stops talking and turns his head. “Who’s there? Is somebody there?”

“It’s me, Dad. Kyle.”

His father is silent. His body is so thin, barely holding up the hospital smock. His restrained body shakes. A barred-up window in the corner is open an inch, providing Chuck Hartvigson with a crack of fresh air.

“Who?” Chuck says.

“Your son.”

His father stays like that, his head turned a notch, and for a moment he appears to be sniffing.

“My child,” he says, “she died. I brought her back. Nobody believes me, but I did.”

“Dad?”

His father tries to turn his head more but can’t.

“If you are who I think you are,” his father says calmly, “and you’re here, then that must mean one thing. That must mean I’m alive. And the only way that could …” His voice trails off.

“Dad, listen to me,” Kyle says.

“No!” his father shouts. “You listen to *me*! I did not sacrifice myself and put this upon mankind just so you could … could … could … *reverse it*!” His chair starts to shake. “You killed her, didn’t you?” Chuck Hartvigson shouts. “*You killed my girl*!”

“Mr. Hartvigson, please calm down,” Tony interjects, although he’s barely paying attention.

“Is that that Chinaman?” Chuck Hartvigson shouts. “The one who’s spreading all this shit that’s killing everyone?!”

Tony, still looking at his phone, says: “Filipino, Mr. Hartvigson. I’ve told you a thousand times. And I was born in the Bay Area. Go, Dubs!”

“Get the Chinaman out!” Kyle’s father screams suddenly. His chair is moving more ferociously, shaking like an earthquake.

“Dad, relax,” Kyle says. “He’s here for you.”

A small shadow catches Kyle’s attention. He looks up to see something, perhaps a large insect or a tiny bird, flying around in the dim light of the room.

“These people come over and infect us all with your Chinese disease!” Kyle’s father is yelling, his chair shaking so much that it’s starting to move from its spot. “Why can’t you people keep your disease over there!”

“Dad!” Kyle shouts. “This is embarrassing!”

Tony, one hand still holding his phone, waves his other hand gently. “It’s cool,” he says, looking down at the phone. “Racist threats are all part of the delirium. Pretty common, actually.”

“The president should’ve dropped a bomb on you fuckers for this!” Kyle’s father is shouting. His chair has moved enough now that he is able to look at Kyle and the RN. His eyes are filled with anger.

“Dad!” Kyle shouts. “This is horrible!” He turns to Tony, who hasn’t even looked up from the phone. “I’m so sorry,” Kyle says.

“Again, not Chinese,” Tony says non-challantly. “Born in California.”

Kyle’s father suddenly stops shouting. Whatever it is that’s flying around his office has caught his attention. He’s trying to look up, but his neck is so fragile that he can only track the moving object with his eyes. A breeze spills in from the crack in the barred window, also giving the room its only light. Kyle looks up and realizes what he’s seeing.

A butterfly.

“How’d that get in here?” Tony asks, no longer staring at his phone.

The butterfly flutters overhead, doing a dance for the three men as the room falls into silence. The butterfly turns and pirouettes, rises and moves in soft circles. Kyle’s father is mesmerized. He watches with his eyes, his head slumped over, and a small smile emerges on his face.

“Damnit,” Tony says, and he goes to the window. He pulls a small instrument from the pocket of his scrubs and squeezes it between the bars to jimmy the window.

In that moment, the butterfly floats downward, resting on Chuck Hartvigson’s shoulder. The old man, his arms strapped to the chair and his head unable to turn, stares with his eyes at the orange, black and yellow patterns on the butterfly’s wings.

“What are you doing?” Kyle says to Tony. The nurse stops and looks at him.

“Closing the window,” he says. “We can’t have bugs in this facility.” He goes back to jimmying the window, which squeaks and moves a half-inch.

“You’ll trap it,” Kyle says. His father is still staring at the butterfly on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony says as he groans to move the window the final half inch. “We’ll dispose of it.”

“*Dispose* of it?” Kyle says. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No need to get into the gory details,” Tony says, and with one push he gets the window to close. He turns toward Kyle and his father. “Hmmmm,” he says. Kyle’s father is watching the butterfly flutter its wings on his shoulder. Chuck Hartvigson is breathing hard, but he’s silent. Tony turns back toward the closed window. “That doesn’t make sense,” he says.

“Please,” Kyle says, “open the window. Let the butterfly be free.”

Tony goes to the window, jimmies it open and crouches over to look out.

“It’s true,” he says. A cool breeze enters the room, and the butterfly leaves Chuck Hartvigson’s shoulder and flutters in figure-8s above his head. Tony turns toward Kyle and his father. “There’s a screen on the other side,” he says. “It’s locked tight in place.”

“So?” Kyle says. His father’s eyes are dancing around the room again.

“So,” Tony says, taking a step toward them. The butterfly flutters by his face. He swats at it, then says: “If there’s a screen, then there’s no way the butterfly could have gotten in.”

“There’s one way,” Kyle’s father says. “It’s called a miracle.” He smiles. “Don’t question the miracle, don’t you know?”

“Seriously, old man,” Tony says, rolling his eyes. His gaze locks on the butterfly. “A man can only take so much.”

“Hey,” Kyle says. “Don’t talk to my father that way.”

His eyes tracking the butterfly, Tony begins to give chase, swinging his hand and stumbling around. “Easy for you to say,” he says without looking at Kyle. “You don’t have to listen to his crap all day, every day.” He claps his hands together, just missing the butterfly. “If any of it made a tiny bit of sense,” Tony continues, “I might be able to handle it. Stupid nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Kyle says sharply.

“Now you’re starting to sound nuts,” Tony mumbles.

“Back away from me, Chinaman!” Kyle’s father shouts suddenly. “I can see the germs. You brought them with you! They’ll kill me again!”

Tony stops chasing the butterfly and smirks at him. “You can’t *see* germs, Mr. Hartvigson,” he says. “For the love of God, where do you -?”

With the speed of a venus flytrap, Tony slaps his hands together. He’s caught the butterfly.

“No!” Kyle shouts. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What?” his father shouts. “What’s happening?”

A wing flutters between Tony’s fingers. He pulls his hands closer to his face.

“Got ‘em,” Tony says, grinning. Kyle’s father sees the butterfly fluttering in his hands and tries to lunge at him but ends up toppling over, crashing onto the floor. The chair is still attached to him as he squirms. Tony, holding his hands together, just watches. “Take a chill pill,” Tony says. “It’s just a bug.”

“Please!” Kyle shouts, hearing the desperation in his own voice.

“You can’t do this,” Kyle’s father whispers.

Tony, slowly kneeling while holding onto the butterfly, looks from Kyle to his father.

“You guys are freakin’ nuts,” he says. “Both of you.”

Kyle, sixty years old, jumps over his father. *Jumps.* He lands a foot away from Tony, tries to kick him but misses. Tony releases the butterfly and grabs Kyle’s leg, pulling upward to make him fall onto the ceramic floor.

“You *are* crazy,” Tony says, flipping Kyle onto his front and pinning his arm behind his back. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He pulls on Kyle’s arm, causing a flash of pain, and Kyle wonders, for the first time, if there are any Percosets in this place.

Tony picks him up and continues to pin the arm behind his back.

“Let him go!” Kyle’s father shouts, lying on his side. “Let the man go!” Tony pushes Kyle into the corner, releasing him. Kyle’s father’s eyes narrow. He stares at Kyle. “I know you,” he says. “Yes, you’re the brother.” The butterfly is now fluttering on the floor, struggling to fly. One of its wings is broken. “You’re Jocey’s brother,” Chuck Hartvigson says. Tony is panting, standing between them. “I’m sorry,” Chuck Hartvigson says. “This was all my fault, wasn’t it? This disease.”

“Mr. Hartvigson, there’s no disease,” Tony says, clearly exasperated.

“Dad, I get it,” Kyle says. “I would have done the same thing. But …” He glances at the butterfly, struggling to fly. “But I had to undo it, Dad. Jocey’s life, it wasn’t worth all those deaths.”

“Sir,” Tony says, “if you don’t stop talking, I may have to lock you up too. This is getting ridiculous.”

“I had to let her go, Dad,” Kyle says, ignoring Tony. “For the good of humanity.”

His father seems to be taking it all in. Tony walks over to the butterfly, stands over it.

“Tell me one thing,” Kyle’s father says, looking down at the floor. “What happened to her?”

“To who?”

“Jocey,” Kyle’s father says. He looks up. “When they brought her back, what then?”

Before Kyle can answer, Tony raises his leg and slams his foot down on the butterfly with a loud TWACK! Kyle screams and starts toward him.

Tony pulls out the dart gun and fires a perfect shot, into his neck.

CHAPTER 40

Kyle wakes up on a cold, hard floor. He is naked. The pain in his hip shakes him from sleep. He also feels a pinching in his neck. He reaches up and pulls a small dart out of his skin. He has a vague memory of being airborne and coming down on his hip, hearing it crack. Broken again. He immediately craves – not wants or desires, but *craves* – a pain pill.

As he lifts his head, he sees he’s in a room much like the one his father was in, only there is no window. He hears someone screaming down the hallway. Across the hall, a man recites from the Bible in a monotone droll, then shouts that the devil is coming. Something breaks in the room next to him. It’s like he’s in a nightmare.

In all the chaos, Kyle hears whispering. He searches the room again, forcing himself to sit up despite the excruciating pain. Another broken hip, only now he is without access to pain pills. “Hello!” he calls out. His voice is weaker than he expected. “I need … help!” he shouts. His voice echoes in the stone-walled room.

He tries to drag himself toward the door but gives up after three feet. The cold, hard floor and the dragging movement exacerbates the pain. “Who’s there?” he calls out.

The whispering continues. He cannot make out words. He scoots himself another three feet. He’s about 10 feet from the door now. He drops back to the ground, his face on concrete. The screaming down the hall dies down, and now he can hear the voice clearly. More of a mumble than a whisper.

“Every choice,” the voice says. He recognizes the Caribbean accent. “Every choice comes with a price.”

His cheek against the floor, he sees her shadow beneath the door. The pain is throbbing. He can see movement where her shadow peeks through. He sees the ends of her fingertips, placing something small and round at the base of the door. The hallway goes quiet, and then he hears her laughter. More of a cackle. Like a witch. It echoes through the halls.

When the laughing dies down, Kyle hears a rolling sound, and he sees something that looks like a large marble rolling toward him, slowly. It rests against his chin and he takes it between two fingers. He pulls it up to his line of vision.

“I’m gonna read a quote to you child,” Madame Delilah says from behind the door, “so you listen close. It’s from a book. Called the Alchemist. About a man who goes looking for treasure but finds much, much more.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Kyle whispers.

Madame Delilah clears her throat. “’Anyone who interferes with the destiny of another living thing,’” she reads, “’will never discover his own.”

Kyle hears the book close. He hears footsteps, walking away from the door, footsteps that echo in the hallway.

He looks at the object between his fingers. Madame Delilah’s glass eye twinkles with light and illuminates the room. He closes his fist around it, squeezes tight, and prays for the end of his suffering.

He fears that this will be his eternity. *Be not afraid*.

He closes his eyes and hears something in the distance, something like chanting voices. He remembers the protests, and the virus, and the hundreds of thousands of deaths.

With his eyes closed, he sees Jocey’s face. Not as she was, but as she would be. Smiling. Laughing. Running through grass.

She turns to him. Her face is gone. The image of her fades away.

All he sees is the blinding, bright, white light of pain. His only destiny. The one he cannot change.

He listens but cannot hear anything at all. No chanting. No laughing. No screaming. The silence, too, hurts.

The world, always moving, appears to have stopped. Kyle rolls onto his back, with the eyeball still in his hand, and opens his eyes.

All he sees is darkness.

CHAPTER 41

One summer, a few days after the final day of school and a few weeks before Chuck and Gloria Hartvigson decided to end their marriage, Jocey called down from her bedroom. Kyle had been lying on a couch, an ice pack around his injured ankle, taking a break after a Pony League practice.

“Jocey, what!” he screamed, annoyed by her shouting.

“Just come up!” she said.

Kyle groaned, gingerly placed his foot on the ground and limped down the hallway. When he reached the bottom step, he looked up into the light and said: “This better be good!”

“It’s better than ‘Full House’ or whatever crap you’re watching!” she called back.

Kyle worked his way up, step by step, and reached her closed bedroom door.

“Swear to God, Jocey,” he said. “If this is some trick or something stupid, you’re toast.”

“You ever see someone fly?” she asked. He opened the door, and Jocey was crouched in the sill of the open window, wearing an angel costume she had left over from the school play. Her back was to Kyle, the huge wings blocking most of the light. She was looking back at him, flashing her infectious smile.

“Hello, non-believing mortal,” she said with a wink.

“Okay, dumb,” Kyle said. “Just like I predicted. You know I sprained my ankle, right? You know how much effort it took to get up those stairs?”

“Don’t get your panties in a bind, Sunshine,” Jocey said sweetly. “You ready to watch the show?”

“Jesus, Jocey,” he groaned, rolling his eyes. “What show?”

“I told you,” she said. “I’m going to fly.”

“You’re so retarded.”

“Kyle!”

“What?” he said. “Isn’t that was the definition of retarded means? Stunted mental capacity? Look it up in the dictionary. You’ll see a picture of an 11-year-old girl. Wearing an angel costume. Telling her incredibly intelligent brother she can fly.”

“Who reads dictionaries?” Jocey said with a shrug. “And who’s this person who has an intelligent brother?”

“Can we just get this over with, Joss?”

She smiled. Her hands were holding the sides of the window frame, keeping her in place. Kyle yawned.

“Don’t you want to get a video camera or something?” Jocey said. “Get this on video to show in history class for centuries to come?”

“Jocey!” he shouted, clearly annoyed. “I’m going back downstairs in three seconds if you don’t …”

Jocey started to stand. She removed one hand from the frame.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kyle asked, taking a step toward her.

“Flying,” she said. “Look it up in the dictionary, Buttface.”

Suddenly, she let go with her other hand and jumped out into the sky, from her second-story bedroom window. Kyle rushed for her, calling her name, his adrenaline trumping the pain in his ankle. He could feel his stomach drop, that sense of helpless fear that he would end up carrying through her adult life. Jocey disappeared out of view, and Kyle ran to the window, expecting to see a crumpled body, dressed in a while angel outfit, lying on the ground below.

Instead, he saw Jocey bouncing on the trampoline, smiling up at him. She had pushed it several feet, against the house, without him knowing.

“You little, flat-chested dingleberry!” he shouted. She continued bouncing, her arms spread wide, her wings flapping in the wind and her smile lighting up the space between them. “I’m gonna kill you!” he shouted. Kyle quick-limped back into her bedroom, down the stairs, and out the back door. He saw the wings escaping through a gate, out toward the front.

Kyle gave chase, as best he could. Jocey weaved between trees and houses, running up sidewalks and alleys, disappearing out of view and appearing again, as Kyle continued in pursuit from 20 yards back. He winced as he ran, promising himself that he would give her the beating of a lifetime if – *when* – he caught her.

She cut through someone’s yard, up the driveway, and between the hedges, slipping out of view. She giggled and ran, appearing again in a backyard, running through an alley. She looked back at him, laughing so hard she was crying. Kyle gave chase, promising not to let her out of sight again. She ran toward the end of the alleyway, looking back and mocking him, right out toward the street. He called out for her, in a panic, but she kept on laughing and running. He could see a truck coming down the street, the driver distracted, and all Kyle could do was stop suddenly and cover his eyes. He couldn’t watch.

He couldn’t bear the sight of Jocey getting run over.

He heard the sound of screeching brakes. He opened one eye and saw Jocey, sticking her tongue out at the driver, without breaking stride.

His heart beating, Kyle fell to the dirt of the alley. He watched her run. He watched the wings flap behind her, as if she was flying.

He’d never seen her look so free.

THE END