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Unchained

Caroline Partyka

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 01, 2021

Dr. Kathryn Evans, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Lisa Litterio, Committee Member

Prof. Bruce Machart, Committee Member

Dedicated the priests who helped me along the journey, God bless you!

Friend,

Hello there! I know there is a likely chance we have never met before, but I'm going to call you a friend. Let's face it, we all need friends, *I need friends*, so, can I call you a friend? I pray that as you read on, you might consider me a friend too, I'd be honored to have that connection, even if my eyes never get to have the gift of seeing your precious face.

I don't know how this came into your possession, but I'm excited you're here with me. Friend I will tell you; I wish I had a happier story share. When I was discerning whether to share my story with the world, the word that kept telling me to put my pen down was "Why." That word combined with a question mark left me sitting in the pew in the adoration chapel scratching my head muttering those same three letters to Jesus. W. H. Y. Why should I? Why bother? I look back on my life, especially the period of time this story focuses on, and not going to lie, it is depressing with a capital D. What good could possibly come out of it? Who would get anything out of it? In all honestly who would willingly want to read something so... bleh? To answer this terrifying question, I looked at the books I read when I was coming into the Catholic faith. I brought myself back to talks and conferences I attended and mentally studied the speaker sharing their story. Do you know what they all had in common? The wisdom they shared was influenced by the love of Jesus that they encountered during their struggles. We all struggle, that is a fact. From hearing how these men and women of faith not only survived their trials but use it to get closer God and to pull others along with them, I was inspired. Their stories helped me, and now I want to help others. If this is an opportunity to do it, then I must try. Even if there is only one line in the entire page length of this book that resonates with you, then it's worth it. I pray that through these pages, Jesus will come out and speak to you.

I will give you some warning friend before you come on this journey with me. My story is hard. You know those faith movies where someone encountered Jesus and their life got infinitely better and they lived happily ever after? The credits didn't role after my Christ moment. In fact, after my conversion high I was hurled into a world of evil and darkness. My story has the heavy topics of depression, suicidal ideation, sexual assault, and self-harm. I'm telling you this not to scare you off, but as a warning in case you are someone who has personally experienced any of the things listed above. You're my friend, and I'm here to love you, not to trigger you, so if you're not ready to walk this road with me yet, I understand, but I will say that I wish I had someone to relate to when I was going through it. But the good news it, you will get through it! That's mainly what this story is about. Showing other people that even in the most trialing of hours, you will not stay in the struggle you're in. Thank you for being on this journey with me friend, I will be praying for you!

Many Blessings,
Caroline

Part One

Chapter One

It was Tuesday, December 6, 2016, and honestly speaking, I didn't know if I'd be alive to see Fr. Sean celebrate the 5 PM Sunday mass. That uncertainty made it hard to text my friends from college back. They were asking me if my medical leave was ending and when I would return to campus. My laptop was on my desk back home and had an opened tab with an email from the registration department. It sat there with a blank text box; no reply drafted.

The sky was cotton-candy, light blue and soft pink colors hanging in the air – a Massachusetts winter sunset. It looked cool, like the cool you taste when you chew mint gum. My symbolic mind used to take joy in sunsets in high school, but at that moment, it felt as if the sun was setting on me, that it was the last time I'd see it go down.

I stood across the street, watching a small group of people walk down the stairs to the lower church. I went inside and took a seat in the back. I had never been inside St. Paul's before, and as I sat in a lonesome pew my mind started comparing it to Resurrection. The pews were all wood, dark, shiny, and smooth with no padding. The pews in Resurrection had cushions on them. It was also dark; the sun had disappeared and there were no hanging lights from the ceiling. Resurrection was always brightly lit.

I never thought I would find myself going to mass on a Tuesday night. I didn't know churches held masses during the week. This was no ordinary mass though. Last Sunday Fr. Sean mentioned to the congregation that the Tuesday night mass was a healing mass and encouraged anyone who was sick to go. Not sick as "I got a cold sick," but rather "I'm dying soon" – that kind of sick.

My head scanned the room, searching for a familiar face, knowing I wouldn't find one.

I'm alone.

Middle-aged men and women sat with their elderly parents.

I'm the youngest one here.

This.

Is.

Stupid.

My knees bounced up and down, fast, like a jackhammer. I raised my heels off the ground, putting all the weight on my toes.

The pastor, Fr. Nelson, walked out with the deacon, and mass began. I floated through the calisthenics. I sat and listened to the readings. I stood and listened to the gospel. I sat and listened to his sermon. We stood for the prayers of the faithful, then sat right back down. Fr. Nelson walked in front of the altar.

"I'd like to invite anyone who is sick or having surgery soon to come up," he said. I rose and followed a handful of people to the front. We stood in a semi-circle in between the pews and the sanctuary. Father removed a small tin of oil and started anointing everyone. My hands were interlaced, squeezing so hard my fingertips pressed against the knucklebones; I could feel the ligaments stretch in each hand.

Breathe.

My hands dropped to the side as the thumps in my chest dulled. I didn't realize my eyes were closed until I sensed someone in front of me. They opened and watched Father's oil-dipped thumb touch my forehead.

"May the Lord who's freed you from sin strengthen you and raise you up," he said, drawing a cross. He coated his thumb with more oil and traced a cross on each of my palms. He

moved on to the next person, and when everyone in the semi-circle was anointed, we returned to our pews. I sat, hands folded in my lap, eyes forward, mind wandering – trying to bring everything to the surface. My mind re-winded the last four years like a film strip, and I brought myself back to the scene that started it all.

It was the week after Christmas break my sophomore year of high school. I had been lying in bed awake but not moving. I could hear the footsteps in the hallway getting closer to my door. The door opened, and my mom told me breakfast was ready. I took thirty seconds, knowing she'd come back if one minute passed. I heaved my 16-year-old self out of bed and shuffled into the kitchen.

“Raccoon eyes,” my mom said when she looked at my face.

We both knew what that meant: I had a sinus infection, and instead of going to school, I'd be going to the doctor.

I left the appointment with a prescription for antibiotics. “Take two a day for ten days,” the doctor instructed. “You'll start to feel better after a couple, but make sure you finish the bottle.”

Except after ten days, I was still sick. My mom drove me back. A different physician looked in my ears.

“You have an ear infection, here's a script for another antibiotic.”

I took the pills, but then I started coughing. It got so bad it kept me up at night. My parents, whose room was next to mine couldn't sleep from the hacking either. My throat became raw and scratchy, and I sounded like a pack-a-day smoker.

“Looks like bronchitis,” another doctor said, “let's try to clear it up with some steroids.”

Ten days later, no change.

“It could be pneumonia, here's another steroid pack,” Doctor Number Four said as she emailed the script to the pharmacy.

Ten days, still sick.

“It might be bronchitis,” another said.

Are you kidding me?

She looked at all the antibiotics and steroid packs I had already been prescribed, searching for a new one to try.

Finally, the coughing cleared up, but I still felt like crap. A month had passed, and I still wasn't better.

“It's an ear infection,” a different doctor said.

What is going on? You said it's this. He said it's that; someone else said it was this.

Another stop at the pharmacy on the way home and another new prescription.

When the bottle was empty, and I was still sick, we went back again.

“It's another sinus infection.”

You're freaking kidding me.

Another script, another antibiotic, and a week of waiting. This time though, the congestion cleared, my cough went away, and I could breathe again.

Shortly afterward, I woke up one morning with a bad headache. I took some Ibuprofen and went to school, thinking it would clear up in 20 minutes.

It didn't.

I went to bed when I got home.

Sleep it off; it'll be gone tomorrow.

It wasn't. I woke up, and it was still there.

And it followed me into the next day.

And the next day.

And the next day.

It didn't go away. The pain kept increasing; it was like the sides of a clamp were resting on my temples, and someone was cranking it closed, and with each crank, a sharp, thick, needle was stabbing deeper in my brain.

It fluctuated, dancing to a tempo. One moment it would be dull, then suddenly have a dramatic crescendo that brought me to the ground, arms wrapped around my legs, head buried in my lap, flexing every muscle in my body begging for it to stop. I'd curl up, hoping the smaller I got, the tighter I'd be, the pain would leave.

But it never did.

During the day, it was my shadow, darkening any light that tried to come my way. At night it was my ghost, keeping me awake, haunting me in my sleep.

It siphoned the energy from my body.

It stole my ability to see and hear normally. The fluorescent ceiling lights in all the classrooms burned my irises: pain.

Loud noises ricocheted in my eardrum: pain.

Brick after brick piled on my shoulders: pain from my head, pain from my senses, fatigue, stress from not knowing what was wrong with me, fear, insomnia—a stone wall I carried.

The muscles in my shoulders became so tense they felt like bone. The higher the pain built, the more I thought any moment my skull would cave in from the invisible clamp. It would crack from the pressure and then it would be over.

It was March 5, 2013 when my mom took me to the emergency room for the first time, the first of many visits. During my first few hospital trips I was surrounded by concerned doctors, CAT scans, IV saline drips, MRIs, and blood tests, but with no tumors and clean results, no explanation was found. For lack of a better conclusion, I was slapped with a migraine diagnosis and sent home.

“Rest and fluids will make it go away,” the nurses kept saying. Yeah, because two full bags of saline being pumped into my body and twelve hours of sleep each night weren't enough.

One doctor proposed it had something to do with my spine, and given my notorious history of spinal fractures, it was a good place to start. I spent every week of March going to a chiropractor. He'd adjust my spine and realign my neck. It didn't help, but my time with the chiropractor got cut short anyway.

“Caroline, can you take Reggie out,” my mom asked. It was the night of March 31, 2013, Easter Sunday. I walked into the living room and scooped Reggie up, carrying him through the kitchen and porch to the outside stairs that led to our backyard. Reggie was blind, and while he had learned how to climb stairs, he needed to be carried down. I descended halfway down before slipping and falling backward—the corner of the step connected with a vertebrae in my spine. The air disappeared from my lungs, and I couldn’t make a sound. I looked down at Reggie, who was standing two feet on one step and two feet on another. My hands gripped the edge of the step.

No, no, no, not again.

My arms started shaking as pain radiated in my spine. I forced my body to turn over, placed my knee on the step, and pushed myself up. Then I did the last thing someone should do when they hurt their spine—I ran.

I bolted up the stairs, through the kitchen, down the hallway into my parent’s room, and I launched myself on their bed. My mom came in. “What’s wrong,” she asked.

“I slipped down the stairs, I hit my back,” I said between sucking in gulps of air. It was either breathe or talk; my lungs couldn’t do both. Knowing that this was a “better safe than sorry” scenario, my mom picked up the phone and called an ambulance.

When the paramedics arrived, my mom directed them to her room, answering their questions and telling them what happened, that I have a history of fractures, and anything else they needed to know. I laid on my stomach; my head turned to the side. One of the medics was standing on the other side of the bed, scooting a backboard next to me.

“Hey, sweetie,” he said, “We’re gonna roll you on to this, ready?”

I held my breath as I felt the board dip under my side. I felt hands on my shoulders and my side, slowly turning me over. The board was stiff, like laying on the ground stiff. A strap was wrapped around my chest and another around my knees, tightly keeping me in place. One of the medics placed a neck brace on me. All I could do was look up. I saw the ceiling change to sky as I was carried outside. I felt the small bump when they placed me on a gurney and loaded me into the ambulance. On the ride to South Shore Hospital, one of the medics put an oxygen tube in my nose.

“You guys from South,” I asked. There’s a fire station next to my old elementary school.

“We are.”

I was taken to the adult emergency room, which was a good choice. The pediatric unit was getting irritated with my nightly visits over the last month. One of the nurses who always got assigned to me told me at my previous discharge, “I don’t want to see you back here.” Normally one would take that as a wish for good health, but from her tone, I knew she just didn’t want to deal with my case again. At least this time I wasn’t there because of my head. I spent the night in the ER. An x-ray was taken of my back, and I was given a glorified ace bandage to wrap it. The radiologist stated that the bones were okay, but my mom being the skeptic she was, had the scans sent to my orthopedist at Children’s Hospital. Neither of us was surprised when we got a call the next day.

“She refractured T-11, she has to come in and get a brace,” he told my mom.

When my mom told me, I laughed.

These things come in threes.

Back in 2008, I fractured my spine twice. Once in January, once in August—and I’d joke about a third break. I never thought it would actually happen.

The hardest part about fracturing my back wasn't the pain or the brace that could be seen under my shirt.

It wasn't having to leave class five minutes early and faking smiles at people pretending to be my friend so they could carry my bag and leave early too.

It wasn't the disappointment on my coach's face when he found out I couldn't play softball that year.

It was that every time I said I was in pain, everyone assumed it was because of my back. As long as I was wearing that brace, the raging migraine was forgotten about. It was still there, but only I could see it. And it was just getting started.

Chapter Two

“Please Partyka, just write something,” Mr. Reynolds said. He was kneeling next to me in the school library. It was the last day of classes, and I was taking my last final. I gave him an empty stare. I felt guilty. Mr. Reynolds was my favorite teacher, and I loved his class, but my brain refused to create a single sentence to write. The composition part of the final was worth the most. It was a prompt about Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, a play that I did not read. Not reading the play wasn’t a choice; whenever I looked at the book the pain in my head would skyrocket, but no accommodation in the world could get me out of taking this final.

“I can’t,” I said. “My head hurts, I wanna go home.”

“I know, but you have to write something. I don’t want to fail you,” he said.

I buried my face in my hands. That was all that had been going on the last few months: failing. Ever since March when I broke my back my academic standing plummeted. I started the year off earning Bs and Cs, but my Term Three report card had Ds and Fs. I had a feeling my Term Four grades were going to look a lot like Term Three.

Sympathy from my teachers about my medical status went away at the start of April. When my back healed, and the brace went away, so did my excuses. There was only so much work they could cut.

From my increased absences between my back and my migraine, the guidance department approached me and my parents with a possible way to help. My school was trying a new program for students who had injuries or illnesses. They called it the Transition Room, and I was to be its first participant. I’d refer to my role in its test phase as me being a Guinea pig.

The Transition Room was a room in the guidance department where students who missed two or more weeks of school in a semi-consecutive time could go and catch up on work. The student would spend their study hall or elective class periods in the Transition Room doing missed work while the supervisor, a curly-haired redhead with glasses I would come to know as Ms. Sadler, coordinated with teachers on the student’s behalf. Ms. Sadler would make a work schedule with a list of assignments for me to complete during my time in the room. Sometimes if my teachers had a free period and I was there, they would drop in to check on my progress or help me with an assignment.

One day, Ms. Currans, one of my all-time favorite teachers, walked into the transition room to drop off work for another student. When I saw her, I put the history homework I was working on away and pulled out the biology assignment she had given me the week before.

“Is that biology I see?” she asked when she looked over at me.

I smiled. She was so sweet, and her voice was so gentle. She was always approachable, and you could tell she was a teacher who really cared about her students. Her dedication could also be because she was a first-year teacher. Teachers like her and Mr. Reynolds got me through the rest of the school year. They never gave up on me, even when I had already given up on myself, like now when I was trying to complete my English final even though I no longer cared if I failed or not.

“You can do it, Partyka,” Mr. Reynolds said. “You have the extra time, use it.”

I looked at the clock. I stared at the screen and began typing.

I typed and retyped an introductory sentence at least five times.

I squinted my eyes shut trying to mentally dig up any information my mind could recall from class discussions or movie clips.

Not knowing or caring if I had a solid thesis or developmental ideas, I wrote about Portia and the three boxes she made her suitors choose from.

The dismissal bell rang. I watched as students grabbed their bags and walked out of the library. I had a half-hour before the late bus came at 3:05.

I stayed in my seat and continued typing random sentences I wasn't even sure connected to each other.

When I reached a page and a half, I summoned Mr. Reynolds to see if he needed more from me. He glanced at my work and looked at me.

“We'll work with this.”

I smiled and clicked print. I grabbed my backpack and picked up my essay and handed it to him.

“You did it, Partyka. Have a good summer.”

“Thank you!”

The summer went by too fast and provided little information on what to do with my head. Even though a cause was yet to be found, we learned some things.

1. The pain wasn't as intense when school wasn't in session. No school meant no stress.

With my increasing ER visits, a migraine diagnosis was no longer a sufficient term to use. Maddie, the neurology practitioner at Children's Hospital in Boston, whom I started seeing at the end of the school year, had classified it as a “tension-stress migraine”. Like adding two words in front of it would make it seem more crucial.

Nonetheless, the absence of school took the stress part out of the migraine.

2. Summer was not long enough.

As soon as junior year started, the stress of homework and the knowledge that I would eventually fall behind weighed me down. My dad coined the phrase, “the sooner you fall behind the more time you have to catch up.” I never understood that logic, but it fit me perfectly.

The challenge was that junior year was a whole different level. It was the year colleges looked at with great scrutiny, and in my upper-middle-class town, my high school was a funnel to the higher education system. Not going to college was never an option. SAT prep courses were all anyone would talk about. There was a whole new set of classes and electives we could choose, and with my new schedule came a new set of teachers that were not as compassionate as the ones I had sophomore year.

I didn't blame them for their impatience because I understood. It's one thing witnessing a student's medical decline but being told “oh this one is sick with a whole bunch of accommodations you have to follow” doesn't hit the gut too much. Last year I at least had a brace so my teachers could see **something** was wrong with me, and they also saw what kind of student I had been before my migraine appeared.

This year, my teachers had nothing to go on. I wondered how many of them just thought I was lazy or unmotivated, not that any of them would admit it. The guidance office sent my teachers a memo that basically told them “if she's sitting at her desk, leave her alone.” I picked up things to do during class like playing with silly putty or coloring in graph paper, things that I could focus on that also did not require much thinking. I can see how having to watch your student actively distract herself during class can get on teachers' nerves.

One day though, I sat with my head in my arms, and it didn't sit well with my English teacher.

"Caroline," he said as I passed his desk, the bell rang, and I was on my way out.

I turned around and walked up to him. He was sitting in his chair.

He leaned across his desk and whispered, "It's very rude to sleep when another student is up speaking."

I closed my eyes and sighed. I felt bad enough but hearing the disappointment in his voice added to my defeat.

A couple of students had given presentations that day, and while I was listening, I was fighting my exhausted body that demanded to use my hand as a pillow so it could get a few minutes of rest. My eyes refused to stay open. Normally I'd go unnoticed. My seat was in the front row near the window. Other students couldn't see me, but the teacher had full view if he looked over.

It didn't matter that I was going on a year of nonstop physical torture.

It didn't matter that the last girl speaking was someone who declared herself my enemy, and every time I would open my eyes to watch her speak, I was met with the nastiest glare, which was the reason our teacher was looking at me.

It didn't matter that I paid attention to the other speakers who didn't think to look at me.

It didn't matter that at that moment, I was so tired and in so much pain that I didn't care that she was presenting, and yet I still remember what she was presenting on. She was preaching about bodily autonomy and how she felt she had the right to get a tattoo without her mom's permission because she was 16.

It didn't matter that whenever I spoke in class, whether up front or at my desk, every time I looked at her, she had that glare and would roll her eyes.

It didn't matter that the counselors **warned** the teacher at the beginning of the year that this girl was known for hating me. The bullying in middle school made it so we could never be in a small group together. I'd pass her every day in the hallway, and she'd give me that stare, not the "I hate you stare" but the "I'm going to murder you in your sleep" stare. And she knew where I lived too.

No, none of those facts mattered. Me not being able to physically stay awake during her presentation was rude.

"I'm sorry, I was in the emergency room last night," I said. I got home at three in the morning, and Mom got me up at seven to send me to school. We used to have a system, whenever I went to the ER, I would get the next day off. Anytime we'd go we'd be there for hours, never making it back before midnight. The only reason I'd be released was that after hours of no sleep, IV fluids, and whatever drug they wanted to try had failed, I'd had enough.

You feeling better? Yes. Let me go home.

Lying was an acquired skill that was born from exhaustion and discouragement.

My mom had sent me to school that day because I had already accumulated too many

absences. The administration, teachers, and counselors were out of patience. Yet, the pattern of missing school, having a growing pile of make-up work to catch up on, and sleeping 18 hours a day continued.

Chapter Three

“Hello?” I said, clenching my phone between my ear and my shoulder. I was in the middle of buying something at FYE. Since it was a good head day for me, I had taken the car my brother and I shared and bought some presents for my family.

“Hey, you got to come home,” my dad said through the phone. “Children’s called and said they’ll admit you so you can get a couple doses of Toradol.”

“It’s Christmas Eve.”

“I know, but this way you won’t miss school,” he said. “Hurry up, we have to leave soon.” I hung up, grabbed my things, and headed to the car.

So, this is what it’s come to. Sacrificing holidays and school breaks, periods of time where my head hurts less, to see if a couple of Toradol doses would keep me going. These scheduled hospital stays were getting old. And I never had a choice. These weren’t a simple trip to the ER at night. My parents would talk to the hospital in advance, and we’d show up and I’d be admitted for a few days. I was more solid than patient, going wherever I was ordered to go.

The cocktail of drugs that I would get during my hospital stays is something I could recite by memory. I’d be given a bag of saline, Zofran, and a couple doses of Toradol. Zofran is an anti-nausea medication, and Toradol is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug used to treat pain. That IV combination would lower my migraine from a ten to a seven.

I’d learned to live on a seven.

And that was what my pain was currently at, a functioning seven. I got home and my mom handed me a gift box that had been sitting under the tree for weeks. I don’t need to unwrap it to know what it is: a new set of pajamas. It’s our family tradition. Every year mom and dad would let us unwrap one gift on Christmas Eve and it would always be a new set of pajamas. When my brother and I were little, we would get so excited to unwrap our first present, and we would wear our new pajamas to sleep. Right before bed we would change into them, raid the bin of homemade chocolate-chip cookies, and fill up a plate for Santa. The tradition of leaving cookies out for Santa and a carrot for Rudolf died in middle school, but I would still wear the new pajamas to sleep.

“I’d figured you might want to unwrap it now so you could wear them tonight,” Mom said.

“Thanks.” I opened the box and a white long-sleeved shirt with a penguin sits on top of red penguin covered bottoms. I went inside my room and changed into the bottoms and put a short sleeve shirt on. I packed my bag then met my parents in the driveway. I had no shame wearing pajama pants out in public. If we were going to the grocery store people would see me as an unmotivated teenager, but drop me in a hospital room and my outfit would be self-explanatory: only regulars come dressed in PJs.

“So, what they told us is we’ll go through the ER, and then they’ll admit you,” Dad said as we drove into Boston. Children’s had become my second home. Every three weeks my mom would shuttle me there for an appointment with Maddie, who was a neurology nurse practitioner. The two of them would talk about how I was doing and would decide whether to adjust the dosage of a medication they put me on or if they should add a new drug to the mix. If I wasn’t seeing Maddie for an appointment during the day, I could be found chained to a bed, being pumped full of fluids and Toradol in the emergency room at night.

We arrived at the ER and my mom walked with me to the front desk. “Hi,” my mom said, “we’re here because my daughter has a migraine. We called earlier and they said they’ll admit her through the ER. She’s a regular here.”

“Okay, what’s her name and date of birth?” the receptionist asked.

“Caroline Partyka, P-A-R-T-Y-K-A.” Same conversation every time. I looked at the ER waiting room and saw parents holding their small children. *Poor things. Sad that they don’t feel well and that they’re here on Christmas Eve.* When my mom was done talking, I turned back around.

“Hold your wrist out for me,” the receptionist said. I extended my right hand to her and she puts a hospital band on it. *Another bracelet.* “Someone would bring you back shortly.”

My mom and I took a seat next to my dad and started to guess the over/under on how long we’d be in the waiting room.

“45,” my dad said. It was a decent guess; it usually took that long.

“No, I think 20. There’s not that many people here,” mom replied. “Caroline?”

“I don’t know,” I said, resting my head on my dad’s shoulder, ready to take a nap. For once I wasn’t tired from the migraine, I was tired because this is the most depressing thing ever. This couldn’t have waited until after Christmas? I couldn’t have come in on the 26th? Instead of chilling at home, playing with my dog, or watching Hallmark holiday movies, I’m was here.

The big, loud automatic doors opened.

“Caroline,” a nurse shouted my name. I got up and walked over to her. “Hi, I’m going to get some vitals.” We went around the corner. I hopped on a scale. She wrote my weight down. She took my temperature, wrote it down. We went into a room where I sat in a chair and she took my blood pressure. She wrote it down. “Okay, a few questions. What brings you in today?”

“A migraine I guess.”

“One to ten how’s your pain?”

“Seven, but it’s usually a ten.”

“Are you on any medications?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what they are?”

“No.”

“Do you smoke?”

“No.”

“Do you drink?”

“No.”

“Do you do any drugs?”

“No.”

“Any chance you’re pregnant?”

“No.” My response to the intake questions was robotic. They were always the same, question after question, following the same script of things to ask me, information to take, vitals to record. I had the process memorized.

I returned to my parents and a few minutes later another nurse came to take us back. She led us to a room, and I took my place on the bed. I ignored the conversation she had with my parents; I only spoke when I had to. My earbuds were in my ears and I stared at the ceiling.

“Over-under on when the doctor comes in?” my dad said when the nurse left.

“Ten minutes,” Mom said. I didn’t answer. I curled up on my side and listened to my music. One of my hands traced over the penguins on my new PJ pants. The penguins felt rough,

and if I pressed on them hard enough my fingertip could feel the rivets of the thread that made them take their shape.

The door opened and a doctor stepped in.

“Hey there,” he said. I sat up and looked at him. “So, we’re waiting to get a bed ready on the neurology floor, but for now we’ll start your IV so we can start getting some Toradol in you. How are you feeling Caroline?”

I shrugged. If I said fine, he’d wonder why I was there. “My head hurts,” I mumbled.

I’m so excited to spend the next two days in the freaking hospital, cause you know, what’s sadder than telling your friends you spent Christmas in the hospital.

“Well, hopefully we can fix that soon,” he said.

Aww, he’s so hopeful. Give it time. That hope will die in time.

“Thanks.”

The doctor left as the nurse returned with an IV kit.

“Ready?” she asks.

“Wait,” I said, rapidly thinking of something to say. “Can I go to the bathroom first?” As soon as that needle went in my arm my freedom of mobility would go from 100 to 25. I wanted to prolong being shackled to a machine a little bit longer. Being tied to a pole on wheels by plastic tubing isn’t the most freeing experience.

The nurse walked with me out of the room and pointed out where the bathroom was.

When I was done, I looked in the mirror.

Son of a... I hate IVs.

I hate IVs.

I HATE IVs.

I returned to my room and sat on the bed. The nurse came back and opened the IV kit. I held out my right hand and she searched for veins.

“Okay, deep breath,” she said when she found one she liked. They always said that, but I always held my breath. I stopped breathing, feeling the air halt in my throat, my lungs start to panic. Having an IV inserted hurts. It’s not like getting a flu shot, one jab and you’re done. A needle stabs its way through your skin and into your vein, all while you must fight the urge to yank your hand away. And if the nurse misses the vein, you have to start over. Once the needle is in, it’s replaced by a catheter and the tube is now attached to your body and taped to your skin so it won’t accidentally fall out. The catheter has two tubes, one that has a stopper that the nurse can stick a syringe in to deliver a quick medication dose. The other tube connects to the saline bag hanging from a pole with a machine that monitors the bag. When the bag empties it beeps, annoyingly, until someone either mutes it or replaces the bag. My mom learned how to mute after our first few ER visits.

“All done,” the nurse said. She got up and threw the trash away. My eyes looked at my hand and followed the path of the tube until I saw the bag of saline. I could tug on the tube and it would bring the pole to me, but it would also pull the catheter in my hand which would hurt. We’re linked that way, if I mess with the pole, it messes with me.

I laid back against the bed and mourned the death of my freedom. Now, if I wanted to travel anywhere, that pole would have to come with. Trying to fit that pole through a doorway while it was attached to you sucked. One bump and the tape on my skin would pull. It didn’t matter, there was nowhere I could go except the bathroom. It’s not like they would let me go home. I would often fantasize about walking out of the hospital, IV and pole in hand, just to see what they would do.

Now that I was successfully leashed to the IV pole the nurse left to get the drugs from the pharmacy. She returned a few minutes later and removed a syringe from a package, scanned the medication, scanned my bracelet, then injected the dose into the free IV port. First, it was the Zofran. As she injected it into my IV it burned my vein from the inside out. The surreal sensation of feeling something be injected into your body trips you up, and the fact it burned made it weirder.

Next came the Toradol. When it was going in, it cooled the burning. I didn't know which felt weirder, the painful burning or the trickling cold.

With my first dose of medication over with, all that was left to do was wait to be moved up to neurology.

I learned to measure time in saline bags, so when I looked at the saline bag and it was a quarter empty, I knew an hour had passed.

I would spend about four hours in the ER when I went at night, and every time the bag emptied, a nurse would hang a new one, and ten minutes later I'd be discharged. On a night like this one though, the bags will just keep coming.

The door opened and my nurse, an orderly, and the doctor came in.

"They are all ready for you upstairs," the doctor said. "Feel better Caroline." *Aww cute he still has hope.* The nurse unhooked my IV from the saline bag, sweet momentary freedom.

Even though I was perfectly capable of walking the rule of the ER is that if you're being admitted, you don't walk—anywhere. The orderly put the rails on my bed up, unlocked the wheels, and away we went. I sat crisscrossed on the bed and watched my parents follow us down the hall, into the elevator, and up to the neurology floor. Some twists and turns down hallways and we arrived at my accommodation.

I got the bad half of the room – the door side instead of the window. The curtain that divided the room was drawn, so I couldn't see my new roommate. In fact, I never saw her. But I could hear her voice. It was quiet, a young girl's voice. She couldn't have been older than eleven. Her parents and her brother were with her—all laughing and having a good time.

As my mom went over to talk to my roommate's mom, my new nurse came in and attached me to a new IV pole that hung a new bag of saline.

"Can you hand me my backpack?" I asked my dad. He tossed the bag on the bed and I dug out my laptop cord. "Can you plug this in?" I handed him the chord and he searched for an outlet. I took my laptop out of my bag and placed it on the tray table hovering over me. I also got out my folder and colored pencils.

"I hope there's homework in that folder," Mom said as she returned. Of course she'd expect me to do homework. Other students get to enjoy their break, I get to use it to play catch up.

"Yes," I grumbled. There was homework inside, but I had no desire to do it. I pulled out my agenda that had the list of all the assignments I had to get done over winter vacation. Looking over it, I decided on a reading assignment. "You guys can head out if you want," I said.

"You sure, will you be alright?" mom asked.

"Yeah." I might be trapped here, but they don't have to be, not with two other kids at home. Not when they haven't eaten dinner. Not on Christmas Eve, they probably have last-minute presents to wrap. "Go home."

"Okay, we'll come visit you tomorrow," Mom said.

"Okay."

Mom kissed my forehead then grabbed her purse. Dad took her place and I hugged him.

“Be good Little Little,” he said. I smiled, my dad was the only person who had ever given me a nickname, and Little Little was what he came up with.

“Bye,” I said as they walked out the door. I looked around the room, then at the curtain. The family on the other side sounded happy like they were having fun. They were laughing and talking about memories I didn’t know anything about. A stark contrast to the silence on my side. I put my earbuds back in and looked at the reading assignment. *No way I’m doing this.* I took out some graph paper I stole from a classroom before break started and began filling in the squares.

The paper was half-filled when I looked at my saline bag. It was half empty. Two hours since I got to my room. The curtain drew back, and a man stepped over to my side. He was my roommate’s dad. He was holding a plate with pizza on it.

“Would you like a slice?” he asked. I looked at him, then at the pizza. I stared longer than I should have.

“Um, no thanks,” I said. I was hungry, but I didn’t feel like eating. When he nodded and disappeared behind the curtain, I understood why. I didn’t want to eat pizza alone.

The reality of my situation crashed over my head. I was alone in the hospital at Christmas. My parents and my siblings were 45 minutes away in Hingham, while I was in Boston. I wondered what they were doing. If things were normal, we would go to the Christmas Eve mass at our church, then eat a cooked honey ham at the dinner table. After my siblings and I would open our one present then everyone would do their own thing. *Are they still sticking to tradition, even if I’m not there?*

My migraine brought me a lot of things. Pain, fatigue, stress, social isolation, anger from school administrators, even a deep-rooted self-hatred for having it. But even if I was withering on an ER bed or I spent the night by myself in a hospital room, I never felt the extreme loneliness that I was experiencing that moment.

Nothing sadder than being alone for Christmas.

It’s better that I’m here. It means they can have a taste of normal.

Sitting on that bed with my colored graph paper in front of me, and the family party on the other side of the room, I realized something. This migraine didn’t just affect my life. It damaged my family.

My mom, who missed sleep at night taking me to the ER, sitting with me, and taking me home. Who still got up early to go to work the next day. Who would visit me in the hospital when she got out of work and who would sit with me until she had to go home and make dinner.

My dad, who in mom’s absence had to make sure my brother and sister were alright.

My brother, who had to hear students gossip about me at school. Who stopped being friends with someone because that guy couldn’t stop calling me a freak, who sat in silence when he drove us to school because he didn’t have anything to say to me.

My sister, even though she was grown, still saw the stress it brought on my parents.

My parents, who now had to deal with new prescription pickups every week, driving me 45 minutes to Boston every two to three weeks, and mountains of medical bills.

None of them deserved that.

And I was the one who brought it, I was the one with my migraine.

I’m the reason they couldn’t be normal.

Me being in the hospital on Christmas Eve all of a sudden didn’t seem so bad. While it sucked for me, it meant my family could have a quiet holiday without me or my migraine ruining it.

It took me forever to fall asleep. After my roommate's dad and brother left, her mom put on a movie. The noise from the movie kept me awake. It was right before sunrise, where it's light out but it looks like someone put a blue filter on the world, I didn't know what time, when I opened my eyes and the room was silent. My eyeballs felt tired, and the light from the hallway was shining through the door. The room was dark, but a dark you could see in. I noticed something on my tray table. I sat up and wheeled it closer to me. It was a gift bag.

To: Caroline

From: Santa

That's sweet. I could imagine the joy the little kids would feel when they woke up in a few hours and see that Santa didn't forget them. The miracle of Christmas is that Santa would always find you. But as cute as that gift was, me, a 17-year-old, didn't take much comfort in getting a bag of small toys, fuzzy socks, and a reindeer stuffed animal. I packed the stuff back into the bag and pushed the tray away. I felt the IV tug my skin as I rolled back on to my side, glaring at the machine I was still attached to. I didn't believe in Santa, and I certainly didn't believe in miracles.

Chapter Four

I leaned against the raised mattress; legs extended out on the bed as my nurse sat on the edge, checking my hospital bracelet. “Happy belated birthday,” she said when she confirmed my date of birth.

It was October 18, 2014. I turned 18 two days ago. Now that I was at that magic age of legal adulthood, people seemed to talk to me more. The receptionist at the ER desk asked me the questions she used to ask my mom.

“What brings you in today?”

“What’s your insurance?”

“Any changes in health?”

“Any changes in insurance?”

“Still can be contacted at the phone on file?”

“Is your address the same as the one on file?”

I could answer half of those questions. But since my all-knowing mom was with me, all I had to do was give verbal permission for her to speak for me, and she’d take care of everything like nothing had changed.

It was Saturday, and my head was hurting extra. Given that it was the weekend, my mom was thinking that maybe I could be admitted and stay overnight to get a few extra Toradol doses. I could be discharged Sunday night and still make it to school Monday morning. It all felt so calculated now.

Since senior year started everything was revolved around staying afloat academically. Minimizing absences was a must. The search for a permanent, oral medication treatment was still on, but it had slowed. I’d see Maddie once a month, and every appointment led to more disappointment.

Maddie lost a good chunk of respect from me over the summer when I discovered a drug she put me on was the cause of some not-so-desired side effects. Last spring, my mom started commenting on the increasing number on the scale.

“You need to eat better.”

“You should join weight watchers with me.”

“Stop eating junk food.”

Every time one of those comments reached my ears, a part of my self-esteem died.

“Mom,” I’d say, “something else is causing this. My diet has never affected my weight before.” Which was true. I was so immersed with basketball, softball, theatre, and bike riding growing up I could eat a family-sized bag of Cheetos a week and not gain a pound.

True, exercise in my life was non-existent due to the migraine, but I wasn’t eating much anyway. I spent 18 hours a day sleeping. For the remaining hours, I was a zombie at school. I never ate lunch, mostly because I snuck out of the cafeteria and hid in the library because I had no one to sit with. At home, I would sleep through dinner. My diet was cereal in the morning and a few Oreos at night.

With my nonexistent appetite, there was no way it caused my rapid weight gain.

“Do you have any ideas?” Mom asked Maddie when we saw her in June.

“When did the weight gain start?” she asked.

“A few months ago,” Mom answered.

“Well, Nortriptyline can cause weight gain. It’s a very uncommon side effect though.”

“What?!” I shouted. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s very uncommon.”

“Take me off it, now!”

“Okay, we’ll start tapering you down.” Of course, because I can’t just stop taking it cold turkey. I have to be weaned off it, so my body doesn’t “freak out.” How many side effects from these pointless medications have I dealt with? Too many. A few weeks ago, I had shown up at the nurse’s office at school, and she almost called my dad she was so concerned...

“Your oxygen is low,” she stated as she read the pulse oximeter she placed on my finger. She shined a light in my eyes. “Your pupils aren’t dilating,” she observed.

All her words flowed in one ear and out the other, I didn’t pay attention to anything she was saying. All I remember was the feeling of air. I felt like I was floating. Not in a nirvanic, ecstasy, joy-filled state, but like any second my soul would detach from my body and float away. Like, if you let go of a balloon and as it floats up, it pops, falling to the ground where its remains get stepped on and forgotten about. The airy sensation I felt was like the lightness of death.

The nurse waited 15 minutes as I sat in a chair, watching students come and go, a dumb, blank look on my face. She retook my vitals, and everything returned to normal. My oxygen was acceptable, and my pupils responded to light. She called my dad to update him, but he told her to send me back to class.

Maddie had concluded that it was the Verapamil that lowered my blood pressure to a point the pulse ox didn’t like.

And then months later, there I sat, talking to her about another side effect from a different drug. A drug that had made me gain 40 pounds in the last three months. A drug that destroyed my self-esteem regarding my body. A drug that, in a cruel twist of fate, was starting to help my migraine by knocking my pain scale down a few points, but that I couldn’t take because of the weight gain.

“Thanks,” I said to the nurse, pulling myself back to reality. I was fully weaned off the Nortriptyline a few weeks ago, which was why my head hurt more. All I wanted to do was get this emergency room visit over with.

Why do I still come here?

I don’t know. It’s the same carousel ride. I’d wake up, and the pain in my head would be unbearable. “Mom,” I would say, drawing out the vowel in a low, complaining tone. “My head really hurts.”

“What do you want to do?” she’d ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to go to the ER?” I would nod. We’d drive to Children’s, but as soon as I got to a room, I’d want to go home. So, mom and I would wait for them to give me the drugs, then when the doctor showed up to check on me, I would lie, telling him or her that I was feeling better and that I wanted to go home. It was the same game I was playing tonight. All I wanted to do was go home.

An older gentleman wearing dark blue scrubs and a white coat came in.

“Hey there,” he said. “You guys seem to be regulars here.”

“Yeah,” my mom said. “They usually give her Toradol and fluids. We were hoping maybe she could be admitted so she could get more doses?” Why couldn’t some pharmacist turn Toradol into a pill? If it was a pill, I could take it at home. But no, it had to be an IV only medication.

“Well,” White Coat said, “I thought maybe we could try her on something else. I’d like to put her on Decadron and see if that will help the pain go down.”

“I don’t know,” Mom said. “We’re seeing the neurology nurse here to try and find a permanent treatment; these ER visits are usually for Toradol doses that will help her function. We know it works to lower her pain; that’s all we want to do.”

“I understand. But I think it’s worth trying. Let’s put her on it, and if it doesn’t help, we’ll talk about Toradol.”

“Alright,” my mom said, sounding skeptical as ever. Dr. White Coat left, and 20 minutes later, the nurse came in with a small machine.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“This will push the medication into your IV over a period of time. So instead of me injecting the full dose at once, it will administer the medication slowly. Your doctor ordered to have the medication injected over 15 minutes,” she explained.

“Oh. Okay.” I watched her set the box-shaped machine on the table next to my IV pole. The nurse scanned my bracelet then checked the bottle of medication. She prepped the syringe and placed it in the machine, turning it on and walking away. The machine made a small hum. I didn’t even feel the medication go into my vein. It was so slow.

I didn’t know how much time had passed, maybe 10 minutes, but something started to happen during that IV injection. My body felt like TV static, like every limb was asleep along with the sensation you get when trying to wake it up. My eyes felt cloudy. I could see out of them, but if I stared at something for too long, it would look fuzzy. I felt my face droop.

“Mom,” I mumbled. Talking felt weird. I swallowed a few times, tasting metal. My tongue pressed itself on the roof of my mouth.

Mom looked at me, and I could see her face transform from “what do you need” to “what is happening to you.”

“Could we get a nurse in here?” she said into the call button. A few minutes later, my nurse appeared.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but look at her,” my mom motioned to me. “Does she look right to you?” The nurse studied my face. I watched them stare me down, and I could see the growing concern in their expression.

“No, she doesn’t.” The nurse walked over to the machine pumping Decadron into my IV and shut it off. “I’m going to page your doctor.” She left, and as the minutes ticked by, the metal taste in my mouth disappeared.

“You’re looking better,” Mom said. The door opened, and Dr. White Coat strolled in.

“You really want to be admitted, don’t you?” he joked.

“Excuse me?” Mom said. Oh no, that’s not a good tone. “We paged you because she didn’t look well. We didn’t know if it was the drug or not.”

“Okay, well, what’s going on?”

“She started to not look right. But the nurse stopped the injection, and she’s starting to look better.”

“Maybe her body didn’t cope well with the speed of the injection,” he said. “We can adjust the speed and finish the dose.”

The doctor left, and the nurse returned. A fog was increasing in my mind.

“If he has a problem with us being here, I’ll take her home.” I heard my mom’s scolding tone. The growing fuzziness made it hard to pay attention to what was happening around me.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the car as my mom drove us back to Hingham. My eyes focused on the streetlights, each passing by, glowing in the dark. The car stopped in the driveway, and Mom and I went inside.

“How ya’ feeling?” she asked when we reached the living room.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” I said. I still felt weird. I walked down the hallway; my steps felt heavy, but they made no noise. I shut the door to my room and curled up on my bed. My room was dark. My eyes stared at the blackness around me, not comprehending that I was in a place with three-dimensional objects. I became confused with the shadow my desk made when light from the streetlamp shined through my window. I got up and stumbled to the shade. *It must be dark. No light allowed.*

I stood in my room, not moving. My mind was trying so hard to think. Something came over me. A voice invaded my mind. It shadowed me.

You shouldn’t be here. It whispered. I ran my fingers through my hair.

What’s happening to me?

My arms and legs started shaking. It was as if there were tiny, invisible ants inching over every part of my body. My skin felt like a constricting barrier; I wanted to crawl out of it.

The only way out is to die.

No, no, that’s not right.

I hugged myself, trying to banish the voice from my mind. My body, acting separate from my mind, headed to the door. It tiptoed down the hallway, passing my mom in the living room. My feet brought me to the kitchen, where I gripped the handle to the knife drawer and slowly pulled it open, careful not to make a sound. My eyes looked at the knives; I felt horror. My hand reached for one, fingers out, ready to pick it up, but I forced my fingers into a fist.

No. I clenched my fist together so tight I felt my muscles in my fingers pull.

Yes. My fist opened, and I picked up a knife. I took a deep breath and tears formed behind my eyes.

What is happening? I don’t want this.

My brain was splitting, the two sides engaging in a civil war. I didn’t know how to fight. The voice leading the charge against me had the support of my body. My body was telling me that it needed to die.

This isn’t right, though.

You have to die.

Get out of my head. Get out of my head. Get out of my head.

I dropped the knife back into the drawer and backed away. I held my face in my hands, fingers scratching my skin as they balled into fists and pressed in under my cheekbones. I bent down, hoping the desire to die would float away. It didn’t. It got stronger, and I became more terrified of what I was yearning to do.

This isn’t right.

I walked into the living room. My mom was sitting on the couch, reading her Kindle, looking relaxed like everything was alright.

“Mom,” I said, disturbing her peace. She looked at me.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I breathed. “Something’s wrong. I can’t explain it, but I feel like I want to die, but I don’t at the same time.” I started to cry. I walked further into the living room and collapsed on the ground. My crying grew into full-blown hysterics as I rolled around the floor while my mom was trying to figure out what to do. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

My mom managed to get me to the car. She would've called an ambulance, but she feared I'd become more agitated if I was strapped to a gurney.

"I'm taking you to South Shore," she said. She didn't think I could last the 45 minutes it took to get back to Children's. During the drive, I was vibrating in my seat. Heat flashed over my body. I couldn't stop moving. I unbuckled my seatbelt, rolled down the window, and stuck my head out. The wind slapping my face was a suitable distraction.

My mom guided me into the lobby of the ER. Given the circumstances, I was put in a room almost immediately. The room was familiar to me. It was spacious, with a bed, a wall that I always thought looked like a garage door, and a camera in the top corner of the ceiling. *This is the crazy person room.* I remember this room. I was put in a room like this when I had a depressive episode when I was ten. Mom and Dad took me here because I wanted to die then too.

Oh no, did I finally snap? Is this all an emotional breakdown?

While I was alone in the room with the camera, someone no doubt on the other end watching my descent into madness, my mom was talking with the doctor.

I was pacing around the room when my mom came in.

"We have an idea on what's going on," she said. I looked at her, waiting for her to continue. "They think it has something to do with the drug Children's gave you. They think it's a steroid-induced psychosis. Dad is on the phone trying to get more information from Children's."

"So, I'm psychotic... the doctors think I'm psychotic," I wept. That's all the doctors are going to see now. Will they think the migraine is all in my head? That it's there causing the pain because I'm crazy?

Will what I'm feeling go away?

Is this need to die always going to be with me now?

"What's going to happen to me?" I asked between my sobs.

"As soon as the drug wears off, you'll be fine. Listen," she looked deep into my eyes, "you're not crazy. The drug is making you like this. Understand?"

"Okay, but when will it stop? I just want it to stop."

"We're going to figure it out. South Shore is going to keep you here tonight, and their psychologist will check on you in the morning."

"Okay." I sat on the bed and curled up into a ball. "I'm scared."

"I know. But you'll be okay." I looked at her.

"You can go home if you want. You need rest too."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Home's not far."

I woke up the next morning. *I don't even remember falling asleep.* The voice that shadowed over me last night was nowhere to be found. Relief escaped with the air in my lungs. My shoulders relaxed. I hit the call button, and a nurse came in a few minutes later.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Okay."

"Your mom called; she'll be here in about an hour. Is there anything you need?"

"Is there a way I could shower?" I felt gross from last night. I needed to scrub that experience off of me.

"Yeah, come with me." I followed her, and she led me to a room with a shower. It wasn't much of a shower, though. Some soap but no shampoo or conditioner. When I was done, I changed back into my clothes. The nurse returned with a wooden toothbrush and some

toothpaste that I could brush my teeth with. I finger-brushed my hair and came across a giant bird's nest of a knot located deep in the back layers. I tugged, scratched, and tried undoing strand by strand, pulling each hair out of the knot but no luck.

The more I tried to untangle it, the more frustrated I became. My breathing picked up, and a panic began to pump through my body.

"Excuse me," I said to the nurse, where she returned. "Could I have some scissors?"

"No," she said in a firm tone.

"Please, I just need some scissors."

"No, time to go back to your room." She ushered me back to my bed. I couldn't understand why she was so adamant about not letting me have scissors. I was more upset about the knot in my hair and how I couldn't get rid of it. My frustration made me cry. The nurse left as I turned into a blubbering, tear-producing mess.

My mom came in and sat in the chair next to my bed.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"They want to admit you to the psych floor," she told me.

What? No. No, no, no, I thought they said I wasn't crazy.

"Why?" I asked, trying to force the panic down into my stomach.

"They said you asked for scissors."

"Yeah, to cut a knot out of my hair..." Oh, I understood all of a sudden. They thought I was going to hurt myself. "I wasn't going to hurt myself; I just wanted the knot gone."

"I told them I wanted you transferred to Childrens; Dad talked to the pharmacy last night. He said the half-life is 36 hours."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that while the initial dose could be worn off, the drug might not be out of your system yet. I had to explain that to the doctor here that wants to admit you."

"So, the drug could still be causing all this..." I didn't know what to call it. "Whatever is going on with me?"

"Yes. But you're going to be transferred and admitted to Childrens until the half-life period is over."

"Okay." I started to cry again, but I pulled myself together when two EMTs with a gurney showed up. I was strapped in, loaded into an ambulance, and taken to Boston.

I woke up and found myself in a new hospital room. I sat up slowly and looked around. I was at Childrens. I had my own room, and there sitting in a chair near the door was a woman in a security uniform looking at her phone. *Of course, psychotic patients get babysat.* My mom wasn't in the room. Brief memories from the day flashed in my mind: the ambulance ride, mom sitting with me then leaving to go home, watching a movie on the hospital TV. I didn't remember falling asleep. I lay back down and rolled over, curling up in a ball looking out the window. It was raining. Droplets were running down the glass. My eyes followed the race between a couple, watching to see which one will disappear from view first. The glass looked so cool. I felt hot.

While the voice was gone, its shadow came back. The feeling of uncontrollable hysteria was building up in my body. I whimpered as tears raced each other down my face, just like the water on the window.

“Sweetie,” the babysitter said. I heard her rise from her seat and walked over. I could sense her presence even before she put a hand on my shoulder. Her hand was comforting. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I cried, bunching the sheet in a ball and clutching it to my chest. “Make it stop.” *It’s happening again—another wave.* I began to panic. I got up and ran to the window. I leaned my forehead against the glass. It was cool. I wanted to soak up its coolness. My skin was on fire, my muscles pulsating, my hands continuously trying to grip the air. I started to sob. The window wasn’t enough. I sat on top of the chair, rocking myself back and forth.

The nurse came in. “What’s going on, Caroline?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I cried. The nurse opened the laptop next to my bed and started typing. I got off the chair and sat on the floor. *I need to get out of here.* I started crawling. I passed the bed and headed to the door.

“Caroline, you can’t leave,” the nurse said. She caught up with me and stood in the doorway, blocking my exit.

“I have to please.” I didn’t even know what I was doing or why. I just needed to get out of the room. But the nurse wouldn’t budge, and that denial increased my despair. I crawled over to my bed and climbed in. I noticed there was no IV in my hand. “Please make it stop! Give me something to make me sleep,” I begged.

“I’ll go ask your doctor. I’ll be back soon.” The nurse left, and the babysitter stood there next to me, whispering words of comfort as I withered in emotion.

“You’ll be okay, sweetie,” she said. *Will I? Even if the drug wears off, will I ever be the same?* What if this drug-induced psychosis unlocked a hidden part of me, and now that it’s free, it won’t ever leave?

“This isn’t going away, is it?” I asked.

“Sure it will. You’ll feel better soon.”

Lies.

After almost two years of a migraine and now this, feeling better seems even more impossible.

Chapter Five

It was the middle of January 2015. I was sitting on the loveseat in my living room watching television with my mom. The phone rang, so she paused the show and answered it.

“Hello?” she asked into the phone. She looked at me. “It’s Maddie; she wants to talk to you.”

Why would Maddie be calling? I got up, took the phone from my mom, and sat back down.

“Hello?”

“Hi Caroline, how are you doing tonight?”

“I’m alright. How are you?”

“I’m good. I’m just calling to give you some information. Given the fact you’re now 18, I think it would be best if you find an adult neurologist. So, I’m going to go ahead and cancel our next appointment.”

“O-okay,” I said, not knowing what to do.

“I wish you the very best in finding a treatment for your migraines.”

“Thank you.”

“Goodbye.” The line went dead, and I shut the phone off.

“What did Maddie want?” Mom asked.

“She said that since I’m 18 I should go find an adult neurologist,” I said, not believing the words.

“What?” She sounded surprised and angry at the same time. “That doesn’t make sense, they would have seen you until you’re at least 22.”

I shrugged. I knew it wasn’t my age that disqualified me from future appointments. It was because Maddie didn’t know what else to do with me. Short of trying to find a doctor that would do Botox on an 18-year-old, we were out of options.

The last appointment I had had with Maddie, she sent me to a cancer center in Boston to get some kind of transfusion. My dad drove me, I was checked in and an IV was started. But we never made it past the IV because a simple miscommunication resulted in my third adverse drug reaction. A nurse read my allergy bracelet and knew not to give me Compazine, but she gave me something in the Compazine family. Receiving that medication resulted in me panicking all over the room, lying on the floor, and a lot of tears. My dad was so angry. Obviously, the transfusion didn’t happen. The prospect of the transfusion was a Hail Mary, a last attempt to try something, anything, that would get rid of my migraine.

If a nurse practitioner from Boston Children’s Hospital, one of the best hospitals in the world, couldn’t figure out a way to help me, who could?

I sat on the loveseat and stared at the wall, ignoring my mother’s angry comments.

No one can help me. I’m going to be like this forever.

There was no point in fighting anymore. No point in trying. The best I could hope for was to find a way to live, to soldier on, drag myself through each day even though I knew tomorrow wouldn’t be better.

With my mother’s voice fading out of focus, I felt a change in me. A numbness encased my heart. I felt emotion disappear.

This is my life now. And there’s nothing anyone can do to change it.

I give up.

My mind stopped recording memories. There was nothing worth remembering.

That March I was walking down an aisle in a Walmart with my friend Alice and I bought a journal. I brought it with me to school, and when I didn't feel like doing work in the Transition Room, I would write in it, tricking Ms. Sadler into thinking I was a productive student working on English homework. Sometimes I would write in it when I was alone in my room.

March 21, 2015

I'm in danger of not graduating high school. I'm so irritable. My anxiety and my depression are getting worse. I'm still in pain. Sometimes I think my headache is gone. Maybe I'm getting so used to the pain that I no longer feel it anymore, but it's still there, almost mocking me, whispering "I'll never go away" continuously in my ear.

Since I was no longer a patient at Children's, my trips to the ER dwindled. I found no point in trying to put a band-aid on something no one could fix. A permanent solution couldn't be found, so I had to learn how to live with it. In learning to live with it though, I fell into a deep, hopeless depression. My history of depression is one thing that made doctors suspicious about my migraines. Some thought I was so depressed that the illness manifested a migraine. My mom and I had to repeatedly tell them no, my depression was under control when the migraine started, but after years of pain, it made it worse. The two fed off each other in a vicious cycle.

My attendance at school increased, and with that, the expectations for me to do schoolwork also rose. The problem was that I still could barely function. I was still a zombie sitting at my desk watching the teacher. Their words went in one ear and out the other, I didn't understand anything that was being taught for two reasons. One was because my brain didn't work. The other was that I was so behind that I was still working on the material the class learned the first half of the year. Even if I could piece together what the teacher was saying, I still wouldn't understand.

March 30, 2015

It's Monday morning and I'm so tired. I drop Transition Room today. I have to see the tutor after school. I'm just so tired, physically and emotionally. Right now, I just really want to withdraw and get a GED. I just feel really depressed. Maybe it's the alprazolam I'm taking every day. I know it's supposed to make me tired but right now I'm also depressed. I'm slowly feeling panic and anxiety creeping up on me. Also, for the past few weeks, even before I started the new medication, my dreams at night are really starting to seem realistic. Sometimes I get confused and think that my dreams are memories and vice versa. It's starting to concern me. I'm so tired. I feel like there's a really heavy weight on my shoulders. It's freaking me out. And my head really hurts, which is not helping at all. I need to go home. I'm feeling too tired and too scared and too overwhelmed with paranoia and panic. My shoulders hurt. My chest feels tight, my heart feels heavy. I feel a panic attack coming on. I think my body temperature is rising. My breathing is starting to become irregular. Try to stay calm. Try to make it through first period. Deep breaths. I just want to curl up in a ball and hide in a dark corner. The muscles in my legs feel tight. Internally I'm freaking out. I feel like there's a lump in my throat. I can't be here. I feel like I'm going to cry. My eyes feel heavy. I don't know how long I can make it through the day.

I don't want to be here. My parents refused to pick me up. I spent second period in the nurse's office. They say I can't afford to miss another tutoring session. Tutoring doesn't help. I like her, she's nice and all but when I'm with her I don't know what to do. Honestly right now I just want to withdraw and get a GED. Mom says she thinks I'll regret it and become more depressed if I don't graduate but I really don't care. School is just not working out for me anymore. I'm done. I want out. I give up. I want to move on. I just want to curl up in a dark corner and disappear.

Withdrawing from school and taking the GED test seemed to be the best option for me. I spent the school days waiting for the year to be over. I was already accepted to a film school in California, a school that required either a 2.0 High School GPA or a GED. There was no way I was going to get a 2 for a GPA, my grades were too bad. I so badly wanted to leave Massachusetts. A part of me still hoped that if I left the state, the migraine wouldn't follow me. I was committed to my plan of withdrawing from school until I ran into one of my favorite teachers, Mr. Johnson. I was hanging in the lobby waiting for the dismissal bell to ring so I could go home. He walked out of the main office and saw me.

"Hey Caroline," he said.

"Hey."

"How's the school year going? How are the migraines?" he asked. *He must be glad I'm out of his hair. He hasn't had to deal with me since sophomore year.*

"Not too well. I'm really behind and my head still hurts. Part of me wants to withdraw and get a GED."

Mr. Johnson's face dropped, and he looked at me.

"Now that is the stupidest thing you have ever said, and you've said a lot of stupid things."

Most people would find offense in that statement, but I knew he was joking about me saying stupid things. He was so passionate about it though, how it would be stupid of me to drop out. I didn't even know how to withdraw and get the GED test, nobody I asked would tell me. No one wanted me to go that route.

The weeks kept passing by, and I found myself unable to sleep at night. I would sit at my desk writing by candlelight so my parents wouldn't know I was up so late.

April 11, 2015

I lay awake most nights haunted by my thoughts. I keep thinking of different ways to self-harm. I don't know why, it's something I haven't done before. These thoughts consume me. sometimes I just want to die. Some of the time it's for no reason whatsoever and other times it's everything at once. The stress of school and my parents breathing down my neck. My siblings treating me like crap. I just feel like I have no will to do anything anymore. I don't want to go to school. I don't want to do the stupid make-up work. I just want to sleep. Every day I'm in pain. I'm tired of it. I'm too tired to even cry anymore. Crying is something you do when you experience new pain. My pain is so old I just feel dull and empty inside. I'm sick of it all. Every day graduation gets closer, which means the deadline for everything is getting closer. Dangling in front of me, taunting and mocking me. Going to California is starting to feel like a fantasy. A dream that will never come true. I'm losing hope every day. I guess that's why I want to give up. I have no hope left. No

hope, no drive, just emptiness. I'm afraid if my parents hear about this, they'll send me back to therapy. I feel like it's too late for me. I feel like a waste of space, a waste of my parents' much-needed money, a waste of life. I just don't want to do it anymore. That essay I had to write for Reynold's class, "What is a meaningful life and how do you make it meaningful?" I don't know. I feel like my life has no meaning anymore. I just want it all to be over, but I'm also scared to end it as well. I feel so empty and worthless. I'm stuck between whether I should live or die.

I closed my journal and threw my pen on my desk. Call it depression or an overwhelming amount of self-pity and defeat, but I felt like the most pathetic creature in the world.

What's sadder than an 18-year-old with no hope for her life?

My friend Hailey and I got out of my car and started walking to the grocery store. My mom wanted me to pick up a few things before I came home. Coming out of the store was Ms. Sadler. It was weird seeing her outside of school, on a Saturday in May, nonetheless.

"Caroline!" She jogged over to us holding her bags. "I was going to call your mom Monday to tell her, but since you're here let me tell you the news."

"What's up?" I asked.

"You passed chemistry; you're going to graduate!" She smiled as my world stopped.

I passed?

I held my mouth with my hand and crouched to the cement.

Tears streamed down my eyes, but for the first time they weren't from pain or sadness, they were tears of relief.

I'm going to graduate.

I knew for sure that pass in chemistry was out of pity, but I didn't care. Next Saturday I would walk out onto the football field with my brother and the students I've gone to school with for the past 12 years. The principal would hand me my diploma and I would be free.

And that's exactly what happened. On Saturday, May 30, 2015, I walked on that field. The principal handed me my diploma. My final GPA was 2.01. I made it.

I graduated.

And in the fall, I'd hop on a plane and begin a new life in California. While I knew the migraine would follow me, the idea of starting over in a place where no one knew about it outweighed the pain.

Chapter Six

I opened my eyes and looked out the window. A whole lot of nothing passed by as the car drove down I-40, going by endless fields in Oklahoma. I looked over at my dad, whose eyes were glued to the road. He didn't realize I was awake. I scrunched myself into a tighter ball and leaned my head against the window. In another two days, we'd be back in Massachusetts.

One year.

I made it one year in California. I had started college with the excitement of getting out of Hingham and being somewhere. That energy fueled my drive to rise above my migraine. As time went on though, the excitement dulled, and the pain increased. It felt like I was driving myself to the ER every other week, asking for the same IV cocktail I had in high school.

I remember I was sitting outside after work one day crying because the pain was so awful. I had class later that afternoon and I was dreading it. LaVona, one of the school's academic advisors, was walking out and saw me. She shuffled me into her offices and had me explain what was going on. Through shaky, hefty breaths I told her in between cries. LaVona went to my classroom and talked to the professor, then she called my friend and had her drive me to the emergency room.

Given my decline, my parents and I decided I should take a medical leave. There was one treatment I could try now that I was an adult, so we decided that me being back at home as I searched for a doctor would be best.

On September 8, 2016, I said goodbye to the friends I made.

"When will you be back?" they all asked.

"I don't know," was all I could tell them. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I couldn't promise a return.

My dad flew out the next day and we hit the road back to the East Coast. I was drugged out on Zzzquil and muscle relaxers for most of the drive, and the closer we inched towards Hingham, the heavier I felt. Through all the physical pain, I felt something worse.

I felt like I failed.

I tried living, thinking that if I just kept going, I could continue to persevere through the pain.

I could live the illusion of a person thriving in college.

But in the end, I couldn't outrun my broken brain.

Watching the wide-open land drift past us on the interstate made me wish I was born in a different life. I imagined myself growing up on a horse ranch, learning to ride, and feeling free. Even though the grass looked more brown than green, it still seemed like any kind of life would be better than mine.

Reality was too much for me, too sad. I couldn't break free from the physical pain. There was nothing to hope for, this possible treatment didn't look too promising. Every other attempt failed, why should I hope in this one?

Deep down I knew why I couldn't tell my friends when I'd be back in California.

It was because to me, I wasn't going home to get better.

I was going home to die.

On Sunday, October 16, 2016, I woke up with no messages, no phone calls, and no will to live.

Happy birthday to me.

I'm 20 years old.

I had had an appointment with my new doctor about getting the treatment. The treatment was Botox, the same stuff middle-aged town celebrity soccer moms get injected in their face to try to convince themselves they're not actually getting older. For some reason knowing that my last chance of relief was riding on a cosmetic drug did not instill much confidence of its effectiveness. I promised my mom I'd try it though, so I have to see it through. Dr. Gallagher, the Botox doctor, told me she'd give me a call when her office finishes getting set up to do the procedure—that was a month ago.

I sat up in my bed and looked around. I don't know what to do with myself.

Maybe go say hi to Aaron.

I got in my car and drove to Resurrection Parish, just in time to make it to the 11:30 mass. Aaron was the music director there. I knew him from the days I sang in the teen choir.

I couldn't remember the last time I saw him or went to mass.

I walked inside and saw a couple familiar faces, my neighbors, parents of kids I went to high school with, people I knew from town. I found an empty pew and sat down. Aaron was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Paula, the woman who always sang at mass.

When 11:30 hit the mass began, and it was music-less. I had never been to a music-less mass before, and as someone who spent more time in this church having voice lessons than going to mass, the experience felt wrong—so wrong that I started to cry.

When mass ended, I walked to the front pew near the piano and sat down. Rey, my old voice teacher, used that piano for my voice lessons. He died around this time five years ago.

I was still crying. I didn't know why, it was like everything was coming to the surface and I could finally let it out.

I tried to hold my cries in until everyone left. Sympathetic looks from parishioners passed me as they left. The priest disappeared into the sacristy, and I looked around to see if I was alone.

I was.

I cried, and it echoed throughout the big room. I leaned my elbows against my knees and held my head in my hands. Deep burst of air expelled from my mouth as I wept. I could feel the warmth of the breath through my clothes as it repeatedly hit my knees.

I sensed the cushion of the pew dip as someone sat next to me.

I looked up and there was the priest who celebrated mass sitting there, staring at me.

"What's going on," he asked.

I looked down, then at the piano, trying to form words to explain why I was crying in his church.

"Well, today's my birthday, and I don't feel the need to celebrate," I said.

"Why's that?"

"Because there's nothing in my life worth celebrating. Look I know you obviously believe in God; I mean you're a priest, but I'm having trouble believing in him."

"Can you tell me why?"

"It's just, there's so much bad in my life. Five years ago, my voice teacher died. He was the old music director here. Four years ago I got sick and I'm so tired of fighting. My brother is in bootcamp right now, and I'm worried about him. All my life I had some kind of suffering. Like I know there's ten million more important things than my life, but I can't help but think, what about me? What about me?"

I babbled on and on and the priest just sat and listened.

"I have to get going now," he said after an hour had passed. "Can I pray with you?"

“I don’t know how to pray,” I said.

“That’s okay, you just listen then.” We bowed our heads, and he prayed. When he was finished, we both got out and left the church, walking out in opposite directions. Later that night I looked at the parish website because I forgot to ask for his name. His name was Fr. Sean.

Over the next week I found myself riding my bike to Resurrection and I would sit outside under a tree journaling. While I didn’t understand it, it felt like something was pulling me there. Sometimes, when it was unlocked I would go in and sit, looking at the crucifix hanging above the tabernacle. I remember in my religious education classes growing up was that whenever the candle next to the tabernacle was lit, the Eucharist was inside. I was taught that the Eucharist was the body and blood of Jesus, but I didn’t know what that meant. God and Jesus are so far away up in heaven, they’re unreachable. Why would they care about me, all the way down here?

During that week I met with another doctor since I hadn’t heard anything from Dr. Gallagher. Our appointment was brief because he looked at my history and said,

“I don’t think you’d be a good candidate for this treatment.”

I got up and, feeling extra defeated, went home.

With all the pain and uncertainty, I felt like I was drowning in sorrow and hopelessness. A few days after the appointment, I snuck out of my room and went into the kitchen. My mom was at work and my dad was out of the house. I took an Icebreakers container and dumped the mints in the trash. I went to a bag of unused and expired medication that was sitting on a table under the counter and grabbed it. I walked into the living room and sat on the couch. I opened the bag and began sifting through the bottles of medication. There were multiple different pain medications and antidepressants in the bag. I took pills out of each bottle and put them in the Icebreakers container. After going through each bottle, I placed the bag back in its spot and headed to my room.

I sat on my bed and looked inside the container. It smelled of expired medication, close to rotting eggs. There were so many different pills inside.

This should be enough.

I placed the Icebreakers container in my desk drawer next to an envelope that held some of my hospital bracelets from the last four years. I lay in bed, feeling a little more peaceful. Knowing that I had a way out was the only thing that brought me comfort. All I needed to do was pick a date.

After I get the treatment.

That way when I wake up after the treatment and I’m still in pain, I could justify it more. I could go knowing that I tried everything I could and it all failed. I had drafts of letters to my parents that I’d leave them that I would have to finish. For the first time in a while, I felt hope, knowing that it would all be over: the pain, the depression, the feeling of failure. It would be all gone. I knew that this ending would not be ideal for everyone else, but it was getting easier for me to accept.

Some people beat illness. Some people never lose the will to fight. Some people have something to live for. Some people's lives are just blessed.

I was not one of those people.

I had never really believed my life was worth living anyway. Maybe my purpose was to die, and I no longer minded that outcome, in fact I was excited for it.

“Great news,” my mom said as she popped her head in my room. “I know we’re still waiting for Dr. Gallagher, but I did some research and found that they do Botox at the hospital’s pain clinic, and it’s a five-minute drive away. I scheduled you an intake appointment for tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said. My mom closed the door and left me alone. I looked at my desk. I get scared every time she comes into my room, wondering if she can smell the odor of the decaying medication hiding in my desk.

The next day I drove myself to the intake appointment. I met with a doctor who brought me to an exam room.

I told her the tale of my migraine, a story I could now recite in my sleep. I made it clear I didn’t want to be there, low tone of voice, poor posture, no eye contact. I had already given up, why can’t my mom give up too? I had been labeled a lost cause by Children’s Hospital years ago, what makes anyone think they could do better?

After hearing my tale of woe, the doctor told me I should try the treatment. She brought in a woman who schedules the appointments, and a date was set.

December 7, 2016.

When I told my mother she jumped for joy, she was so happy that we finally had a date. I was happy too, but for a different reason. I finally had a date on when to end my life: December 8th.

My brother and I sat in the front pew of Resurrection. No one else was upstairs. A youth ministry meeting was finishing up downstairs. It was early November, and my mom angrily dropped me off because she was mad that I cut our family dinner out short. I could hear the rubber squeak against the road as she drove away.

My brother was home on post-boot camp leave and Mom wanted to have a fancy dinner at a fancy restaurant to celebrate. I asked after we were done eating if we could go back to Resurrection because my car was there, and I wanted to talk to Fr. Sean. My brother decided to wait with me for a while.

After a few minutes I started to cry. My brother timidly put an arm around my shoulder. “What’s wrong with you,” he asked.

“Don’t tell Mom, but I want to die,” I said.

“That sucks.”

My brother does not talk much. That’s just who he is, but with me no words are needed. Call it the weird twin bond everyone talks about, but our relationship had always been a silent understanding.

After a while he got tired of waiting, so I told him he could take my car home and I’d walk back.

He left and I moved to a pew in the middle of the church and kneeled, staring at the crucifix.

“Alright Caroline, what’s going on,” Fr. Sean’s voice echoed through the room as he walked in. He made his way over to me and leaned against the pew.

I looked down, hands folded, resting against the pew. I couldn’t look at him. I didn’t want him peering into my vulnerability as I was about to say the riskiest thing ever.

“I’m not sure I want to be alive,” I said as my face pointed to the crucifix.

I turned to him and he was just staring at me, arms folded, silently demanding an explanation.

“I don’t feel like my life is worth living,” I looked down, staring at the pew. I was still kneeling, for some reason I was afraid to sit down. “I was never really loved well as a child. And now, I’m so sick and tired of all this physical pain and the depression that comes with it, I don’t want to do it anymore. I don’t have any hope for a happy or even functional future. I’m alive but I’m not living, and I’m tired, I’m so tired of it.”

I turned my head to look at him.

Father looked down for a second before looking me in the eye. “Well Caroline,” he said bluntly, “You have two options. You can either continue feeling this way, or you can let Jesus help you.”

“How? I don’t know how to do that?” When has Jesus ever cared about me?

“You go to him, and you let him in.” Father took a step closer to me. “Here, let me give you a blessing.” He raised his hands over my head, closed his eyes, and began praying,

“Lord, we asked you to bless your daughter Caroline. Right now, she’s struggling, she doesn’t feel loved in her family, and she is struggling with the battle of life. I ask that you remind her of your presence in her life. Remind her that she is your beloved daughter, your princess, and that you love her. Help her to know you more clearly, follow you more nearly, and love you more dearly. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

I made the sign of the cross over myself. During the blessing I felt my heart flutter. I didn’t know if it was from anxiety or something else.

“God loves, you Caroline,” Father said, “I have to run, but I’ll see you at mass next week.”

“Thank you,” I said as I rose from the pew and left the church. As I was heading out I saw my car pull into the parking lot. My brother got out and walked over.

“Apparently mom cares about you so she sent me to pick you up. You done,” he asked.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

He drove us home and I went straight for my room. I went to the desk and looked at the Icebreakers container. I didn’t know what I was feeling, but the need to die was strong. My talk with Father helped in the moment, but it was still there.

Not tonight. Wait.

I changed into pajamas and laid in bed, counting in my head how many days until December 8th.

Chapter Seven

I sat in the pew at St. Paul's, slightly shaking in my seat. The only reason that I was here was because a few days ago at Sunday mass Fr. Sean mentioned that Tuesday at six o'clock there would be a healing mass. Tomorrow is December 7th, the day I get the treatment. The day after is the day I had planned to be my last day on earth.

My head scanned the room, searching for a familiar face, knowing I wouldn't find one.

I'm alone.

Middle-aged men and women sat with their elderly parents.

I'm the youngest one here.

This.

Is.

Stupid.

My knees bounced up and down. I raised my heels off the ground, putting all the weight on my toes.

The pastor, Fr. Nelson, walked out with the deacon, and mass began. I sat and listened to the readings. I stood and listened to the gospel. I sat and listened to his homily. We stood for the prayers of the faithful, then sat right back down. Fr. Nelson walked in front of the altar.

"I'd like to invite anyone who is sick or having surgery soon to come up," he said. I rose and followed a handful of people to the front. We stood in a semi-circle in between the pews and the sanctuary. Father removed a small tin of oil and started anointing everyone. My hands were interlaced, squeezing so hard my fingertips pressed against the knucklebones; I could feel the ligaments stretch in each hand.

Breathe.

My hands dropped to the side as the thumps in my chest dulled. I didn't realize my eyes were closed until I sensed someone in front of me. They opened and watched Father's oil-dipped thumb touch my forehead.

"May the Lord who's freed you from sin strengthen you and raise you up," he said, drawing a cross. He coated his thumb with more oil and traced a cross on each of my palms.

This is the anointing people get when they're about to die.

How fitting.

He moved on to the next person, and when everyone in the semi-circle was anointed, we returned to our pews. I sat, hands folded in my lap, eyes forward, mind wandering as I watched the mass continue.

"Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life," Fr. Nelson said.

"Blessed be God forever," the congregation replied. I had never heard those words before. They were never spoken at Sunday masses.

I watched as Fr. Nelson spoke a similar phrase for the chalice.

I stood when everyone else stood.

I kneeled when everyone else kneeled.

Stood.

Knelt.

Fr. Nelson lifted the host in the air and the deacon rang the bells as the consecration took place. In my religious ed classes we were told that at that moment, the bread turned into the body of Jesus.

The Eucharist—that's what the consecrated host was called.

I got up and followed the line to receive communion.

I always got nervous when it was my turn to walk up to the priest, extend my hands, and receive the host in them.

Now, I was terrified.

My teeth started to chatter, and my heart thumped so loudly I not only heard its rhythm, but felt it pulsating. It beat so hard it hurt.

I walked up to Fr. Nelson; hands extended.

He looked me in the eyes and said, "The body of Christ."

"Amen," I whispered, remember the training I received in second grade when my religious education teacher was instructing us how to act during communion.

Always say "Amen."

I stepped aside and placed the Eucharist in my mouth.

It tasted bland, and it would dissolve quickly. I was always afraid growing up that it would stick to the roof of my mouth. Sometimes it did and I would spend the rest of mass scraping it off with my tongue.

I returned to my pew and knelt.

This was the time where I was supposed to pray—that's what the religious education teachers said. I always spent the time watching people in the communion line trying to spot anyone I knew.

I couldn't think of one prayer to say.

I knew the standard prayers like the "Our Father" and the "Hail Mary," but those felt meaningless to say.

I placed my face in my palms as I wondered what to do.

I wanted the pain gone.

I wanted to die.

I wanted my life to have purpose.

I was terrified to hope.

I was terrified by death.

The words Fr. Sean said to me a few weeks ago popped into my brain.

You can either continue feeling this way, or you can let Jesus help you.

I dropped my hands, closed my eyes and took a deep breath as I mouthed the words I was thinking:

"Jesus, I don't know you. But I have nowhere else to turn to. Show me I can trust in you."

The next day I stood at the front desk of the treatment center and handed the receptionist the clipboard of completed forms.

Today was the day.

The receptionist printed out a hospital bracelet and told me to hold out my right wrist. She put it on and I stared at the laminated plastic resting on my skin. It had my name, date of birth, the current date, my doctor's name, a bunch of numbers, and a barcode printed in small black characters on it. At a certain angle light bounced off the plastic.

When this is over, I will cut it off and this bracelet will join all the others in the envelope in my desk, the one next to the Icebreakers.

I sat in the chair and waited. My fingers played with the bracelet. It felt heavy, like it carried the weight of all the others. The dates of the ones I managed to save were gnawing at my nerves, reminding me of all the disappointments.

March 5 - 6, 2013

March 12, 2013

March 21 - 22, 2013

March 29, 2013

March 31, 2013

April 30, 2013

May 4, 2013

May 23 - 26 2013
 June 25, 2013
 July 19, 2013
 September 17, 2013
 September 18, 2013
 September 20, 2013
 October 8, 2013
 December 17, 2013
 December 24 - 25, 2013
 February 2, 2014
 March 17, 2014
 May 20, 2014
 August 19, 2014
 October 17, 2014
 October 18 - 21, 2014
 November 19, 2014
 January 9, 2015
 February 2, 2015
 May 2, 2016
 May 30, 2016
 July 21, 2016
 August 6, 2016
 August 9, 2016
 September 4, 2016
 October 19, 2016
 November 23, 2016.

And now December 7, 2016. So much grief represented in one bracelet. All the emergency room visits, hospitalizations, doctors' appointments, blood tests, MRIs, I.V. drugs, the miles traveled, the tears cried, Fs on report cards, passes to the nurse's office, dismissal notes, teacher conferences, nights spent buried under pillows, ten out of ten pain scales, allergic reactions to medication, steroid-induced psychosis, panic attacks, fatigue that chained me to my bed, three years eleven months, an estimated 1,335 days of constant pain was represented in that shiny strip of plastic.

This was it.

Either way it would all be over after today.

I watched 15 minutes go by on the wall clock, big red numbers that showed the ticking seconds go by. The door opened and I heard my name. I followed the nurse to the spot reserved for me in the treatment area. I sat on the bed and answered her intake questions.

"What's your name?"

"Date of birth?"

"Height?"

"Weight?"

"Are you on any medications?"

"Out of 10 what's your pain at?"

She entered my answers into the computer and another nurse dropped off a bag that had boxes of Botox inside. My nurse took my temperature and blood pressure before taking the bag and leaving me alone.

She returned a few minutes later with my doctor. He shook my hand and introduced himself. While he explained the procedure to me, I watched the nurse draw up syringes from the boxes.

I laid back flat against the bed and my doctor started the treatment. He took the syringes and injected the Botox into different points of the muscles in my head.

Prick. Pain.

Prick. Pain.

Prick. Pain.

One after another again and again. I lost count of how many.

When it was over ice was placed on my neck and forehead. The nurse took my vitals and gave me something to drink.

I was monitored for 20 minutes before being discharged.

I sat in the passenger seat of my mom's car as she drove me home. I looked in the mirror from the visor and noticed small, dried, crispy patches of blood from where the injections were, along with stains of purple marker on my skin.

How am I going to get this off?

I was told by the doctor not to shower, clean my face, or rub any of the injection sites.

My forehead, neck, and shoulders throbbed.

When we got home, I went straight to bed, clutching my comforter, snuggling into it as I began to fall asleep.

I felt light shining on my eyelids.

I opened my eyes and looked out the window.

What time is it?

I checked my phone and saw the date: December 8, 2016.

I had slept through the day.

I sat up and swung my legs over, hands clutching the edge of my mattress. Something felt... different.

I felt different. I felt light.

I searched my mind for an explanation. My eyes widened and the realization came to me.

It was gone.

The migraine was gone.

Not only was it gone, but it was like the memory of it had been wiped from my brain.

Not possible.

For the first time in four years, my mind was clear. My body had energy. I could relax.

Four years of pain chaining me to my bed at home.

Four years of IVs chaining me to hospital beds.

Four years of hospital bracelets serving as shackles to the prison that was my migraine.

Gone, like it never happened.

This treatment was said to curb symptoms by 50%. Science couldn't promise me much.

The depression, the desire to die vanished too.

How is all of it gone?

My heart fluttered as a name radiated within me.

Jesus.

That name being put on my heart was like the final piece to a puzzle. Something in my mind clicked and a door to an understanding blew wide open.

He's real.

He heard me.

He healed me.

My eyes watered as peace spread within me.

I got up and walked over to my desk. I opened the drawer and took out the Icebreakers container. I opened it and looked at all the pills inside. The smell had grown worse over the weeks it had been sitting there, waiting for me.

I snapped the lid shut and threw it in the trash.

I had experienced a death, but not the one I was expecting. Yesterday I went to sleep, and I woke up a completely different person.

I couldn't describe the change.

The migraine poisoning my body, the depression that it brought, the grief of trauma, the suicidal thoughts – they died.

A part of me did die last night.

But I woke up reborn.

Part Two

Chapter Eight

I sat on a cushioned bench in Logan International, American Airlines Terminal B. I was doing everything I could keep from crying, but the tears built up behind my eyes, and they needed somewhere to go. I kept my head down, reading my journal, listening to the song *Even Angels Fall* on repeat. That's what I felt like – falling. A month ago, I was on the brink of suicide. Then I went to that mass, got the Botox treatment, and woke up a different person. My soul had been transformed. Now, I faced the gift of having a future, but I didn't know how to handle that. There were so many paths I could take, and in 20 minutes, I was going to board a flight that would send me back to California. *Is this the right choice? Do I still belong there?*

So much healing had taken place on my collegiate leave; I didn't want to walk away from a place that brought me so much good.

My secret afternoon visits to Resurrection Parish, where I'd pray in the dark.

5 PM Sunday masses.

Adoration every Thursday night.

Fr. Sean's ministering.

Finally feeling like I could breathe.

What if returning to California changed that? There was so much I wanted to learn about faith and Jesus, but I wouldn't know where to go. I felt like I was abandoning an opportunity to further change my life by going back to the college I was at before I was healed.

"Welcome to American Airlines direct service to Los Angeles," a flight attendant at the desk spoke into the intercom microphone. "Group 6 is now welcome to board." I stood up, slung my duffle bag on my elbow, and joined the line.

It'll be okay.

My friends well received my return to California. I didn't tell them I was returning, so they were shocked to see me walk into the campus building. The first thing I did was search nearby Catholic churches. One was within walking distance from my apartment, but I found a home at another one on Ventura Blvd—Saint Mel's Catholic Church. I walked in, and the high ceilings, the statues of saints that lined the walls, the open-spaced sanctuary, it reminded me of a spruced-up Resurrection. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the sacrament of confession was being offered.

I knelt in the confessional, looking at the screen that was separating me from the priest. "In the name of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit," he said in a thick British accent, "May the Lord who's freed you help you to know your sins."

Know my sins; there were so many. I didn't know what I could say.

"Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. It has been years since my last confession. I can't list all the sins I've done since then. But the greatest offense I did was I walked away from the church, and I just recently found my way back." I said. Suddenly I felt it, its weight of my guilt. **I walked away.** Jesus had been real and working in my life even before I went to him for healing. He had been waiting for me to let him in. I didn't seek a relationship with him; I didn't know I could. But instead of finding out, I walked away from him. I was crushed. "That's all," my voice croaked.

"Praise be to God for your confession. Welcome home," the priest said. Home...

Home...

Home...

That was what this was—a homecoming. Home wasn't a church in Hingham.

It wasn't a gift of healing.

It wasn't a belief I had to stay in Massachusetts to make progress.

Home was wherever I could find a Catholic Church, wherever I could go to mass and receive the sacraments. Home was Jesus.

The priest prayed absolution over me and assigned me a penance. I stepped out of the confessional and knelt in a pew. I did my penance and left. I exited the church, knowing I'd be back for

mass the next day, and with my clean soul, I walked into the Southern California sun a free woman, excited to see what God had in store for her.

Chapter Nine

I don't remember the date. I don't even remember what month it was. All I remember was that it was during the week, and it was around eight or nine o'clock at night. The air was cold. Bad night to wear shorts—I had goosebumps. I scanned my access card to the back entrance of the building and walked down the hall. The campus at night was always eerie. No one liked to hang around this late. Seven to eleven PM classes occupied the building, but professors rarely kept students to eleven. Even they didn't want to be there that late.

I was meeting my friend Stacy to discuss a film one of us wanted to work on. She told me to meet her at school. I texted her:

I'm here, where you at?

I sat on the edge of a bench and waited for her to respond.

Sorry, running late. I'll text you when I'm there.

I stuffed my phone in my pocket and walked over to the living room film set. *Maybe I can take a nap.* I walked in, and Charley, a student who was a year ahead of me in school, was sitting on one of the couches near the fake window. "Hey," I said, plopping myself down on the other couch and putting my feet up on the coffee table.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm meeting Stacy; we're going to talk about a film. When can I get in on some of yours?" I asked. He did a lot of extracurricular shoots. If you wanted more set experience, this was the guy you'd get in touch with.

"Hey, next time I have a script, remind me to hit you up. I'm just editing the last short, wanna see?"

"Yeah."

He got up from his spot and joined me on my couch. I watched the latest fan-film themed short. It was pretty good.

After, we showed each other different YouTube videos and laughed at the vine compilations random people make.

He put on a long compilation, but it was okay because I had nothing to do until Stacy showed up. Other than the audio from the video, it was quiet, or rather, it felt quiet – in the wrong way.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. *That's fine.* The hand started rubbing my muscles. *This is okay. Every day people hang out in the pub set, and he'd give the massages. He's given me a few.*

"Your back is so tense, I could throw you at someone and it would kill them," he'd always say.

But why did his hand on my back feel wrong all of a sudden? The air felt unsafe. The muscles in my arms tensed, and my lungs stopped circulating air.

Should I move?

I couldn't scoot away. My left side was pressed against the arm of the couch. His left leg was against my right. I'd have to get up. I was sitting on my foot, so I began to carefully move it out so both my feet would be on the ground. But my leg didn't move far. Something stopped it.

His arm was now around my back, and his hand crept from my shoulder to the front of my throat. I never knew how big his hands were until one of them was holding my neck. When I swallowed a gulp his hand pressed harder. From thumb to fingertips, he held half of my neck's circumference. His thumb was on one side, his four fingers on the other – both resting on veins. One squeeze would stop the blood flowing to my brain.

Don't move. I looked at the laptop screen. *Watch the video.* I stared at that screen so hard I couldn't see anything else.

I closed my eyes when I felt his other hand on my thigh. Fingers brushed against my thigh and played with the hem of my shorts. Could he feel the goosebumps that sprouted on my thigh the second his hand appeared? I could feel the calluses on his fingers scrape against them. They slowly moved under further and further up under the clothing.

Those fingers were just getting started.

My hands became fists and my fingernails dug into my palms, hard enough to leave indents. My stomach bubbled like it was either going to hurl or implode.

While my muscles froze, hardened like cement, unmovable, I could feel the “thump, thump, thump” of my heart pounding against my ribs.

I opened my eyes and narrowed them to the laptop. The more he did, the more I focused on the video playing.

Can there be moments in life where the concept of time shatters? Can the mind just stop working? I don't know.

I sat there, frozen, watching each agonizing second tick by on the video. I don't know what those seconds added up to.

One minute?

Five?

Seven?

Or was it not a minute? Was it 30 seconds? 45? Time lost all meaning. Its only speed was slow, and yet, it couldn't have passed sooner.

The hands disappeared when the sound of footsteps approached our direction. My saving grace entered the room. “Hey,” a guy I didn't know said.

It was like nothing had happened.

I grabbed my phone and looked at it. Stacy texted me.

Hey, I'm gonna have to reschedule.

I gripped my phone and jabbed a response.

Ok.

“I gotta go, see you guys.” I got up and walked out of the set. When I made it through the lobby, my legs picked up speed and paced to the door. When I got outside, I was shaking.

I got in my car and floored it out of the parking lot, trying to get as much distance as I could from that building. I reached my first red light, and when the car stopped, tears poured out of my eyes. A cry I had never experienced before clawed its way out. It was a guttural, almost inhuman noise that voiced grief over something I lost, even though I didn't know what that something was.

What just happened?

The light turned green, and I pressed the gas pedal so hard the motion pushed me back against the seat. Quick, deep breaths crossed the line into hyperventilation as my chest heaved up and down.

I drove, relying on my body's muscle memory to get me home. My mind wandered back to the living room set, combing through every second it could remember. The more I thought about it, the harder the tears streamed.

I made it to the light at Pierce College. Halfway home. Greenlight.

Five minutes ride by. Red light at the intersection dividing the Westfield Mall and The Village. Almost home. Greenlight.

I took a left on my street then a right into my apartment complex. I scanned my key fob and the gate opened. I trolled through the parking lot looking for an empty spot, but I couldn't find one.

I drove out of the parking lot and found a space on the street to park. I shut off the engine, and with the Christian music singing about joy and hope and God's goodness playing in the background I held my face in my hands and cried. *Get it out now. As soon as you leave this car nothing can be wrong.*

My hands wiped my eyes and I sniffled in all the gunk in my nose. *Deep breath.* I opened my door and the music shut off. I unlocked the gate and climbed up the stairs to the second floor. I walked down the weed and \$1 microwave ramen scented hallway to my door. I unlocked it and stepped into my apartment. No one was in the living room. Both bedroom doors were shut. I went over to mine and gently turned the knob, opening the door without a sound.

I tiptoed into my room, walking to my bed in the dark because my roommate was asleep. I was too numb to change. I kicked my shoes off and curled up on my side.

What happened?

I needed to know. I whipped out my phone and clicked the home screen. The light blinded me as I unlocked it and turned the brightness down. I opened Safari and went to Google.

Define harassment:

Google dictionary said: noun) aggressive pressure or intimidation

Define assault:

Google said: verb) make a physical attack on

noun 1) a physical attack

noun 2) a concerted attempt to do something demanding

Define sexual harassment:

Google said: noun) behavior characterized by the making of unwelcome and inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances in a workplace or other professional or social situation.

Define sexual assault:

No Google definition was provided, but links to hundreds of articles appeared. I clicked the first one and read it. Then I went to the next one. And the next one.

What's the difference between assault and sexual assault?

More articles appeared. Numbers for support hotlines came up in every link. But I still couldn't define what happened to me.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. My mind was thinking about five different things at once. The voice in my head, the one you hear when you're faced with a decision or when you feel guilty about something you've done, was trying to comfort me and shame me at the same time. I felt it split in two, like a second conscience was born, one whose only mission was to shut me down.

Why didn't you say something?

I don't know. My voice stopped working when his hand was on my throat.

Why didn't you move?

I don't know. My body froze under the touch of his hand. It paralyzed me.

You're overreacting.

Was I? Probably. I could already hear the things people might say if I opened my mouth about this.

"You're overreacting."

"What were you wearing?"

“Are you sure that’s what happened?”

“I don’t think he’d do something like that, he wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“But he’s so nice.”

All these articles on sexual assault, all the news stories, none of them matched with what happened.

I wasn’t jumped in an alley.

My drink wasn’t spiked.

My clothes weren’t torn, and my body wasn’t beaten.

But his hand, it didn’t feel safe. I still sense it on my throat. The hand exploring and groping other parts of my body—parts my clothes purposefully kept hidden.

You can’t prove anything.

That was true. I couldn’t. No evidence. No witnesses. My word against his, and I didn’t even know what to call it. When does harassment turn into assault, and what makes assault sexual? None of those articles stated, “if you were touched here, then it was sexual assault, if you were touched there, it was harassment.”

I tossed my phone to the ground. It landed with a thud. As I continued staring at the nothingness of the ceiling my hands gripped the comforter and I snuck my body underneath it. I curled up to my side and closed my eyes, feeling part of my heart begin to harden as I waited to fall asleep. Maybe if I just went to sleep, I’d wake up and this whole night would have just been a dream.

A few weeks went by. I was lying on a towel on the sand. My friend Jane and I decided to have a beach day. “Hey, can I get your opinion on something?” I asked.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

I told her about that night, sharing the details I could stomach to repeat. I told her who it was and how I was feeling since.

“I can’t tell if it’s harassment or assault,” I said.

“I don’t know, I’d say it’s more harassment, maybe,” she said.

“Oh.” For some reason, her words didn’t make me feel better. *Were you hoping it’d be classified as assault? Freak.* Since that night, the second part of my conscience grew louder in voice. It morphed into its own personality. The moment I would think maybe I should tell someone, try to get help, it would shut me up.

No one would believe you.

What if he finds out?

Maybe if you said something you wouldn’t be in this mess. It’s your fault.

“You’re probably right. Should I do anything, like tell someone?”

“If you want, I don’t know what the school would do, though,” she said. I didn’t know either. “I would just move on.”

There’s an option.

I got up and walked into the water. When I was waist deep, I dove under, savoring the rush of cold that stung my head. It always felt so good.

I came up, my hair now soaking, and walked back to my towel. *It doesn’t matter. Just forget about it. Don’t let what you think happened ruin everything.*

I laid on my towel and shoved the memory of that night, what I was feeling, and all the emotion from it into a box and banished it to the deepest part of my mind. It no longer existed.

“It never happened,” I whispered.

It never happened.
He wouldn't do anything like that.
Stop overreacting.
It never happened.

Chapter Ten

I was walking through the crowd of people at a ski resort in New Hampshire. It was the beginning of August 2017, and the warm sun was beating down on everyone. It was day two of Soulfest, a three-day Christian music festival.

I was there alone, that was one thing about growing in my relationship with Jesus, I had started to outgrow a lot of friendships. I didn't have any Catholic friends yet, but I was not bothered by it. Ever since the incident with Charley at the beginning of the year I had been spending more time alone. I had barely socialized with anyone for the rest of the school year. My days had consisted of going to class during the day, then in the evening I had spent two hours in the gym listening to Christian music. My self-imposed isolation did not help my loneliness, but the constant gym activity had resulted in a noticeable 15 lbs. weight loss.

"You lost a lot of weight," Fr. Sean had said to me when I got back.

I walked through the giftshop, more like a gift tent because every vendor was a tent not a building and browsed around. They had everything from T-shirts to home decor to books. The home decor had the cliché sayings like "bless this home" and different bible verses on them. They were pretty but too expensive for me to ever buy. I came across a lanyard section and looked through it. I needed a new lanyard because my current one broke and was being held together by a bulky knot. A red one caught my attention. I picked it up and held it in my hands, reading the bible verse printed on it.

"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' – Jeremiah 29:11".

I had never seen that verse before, but it stuck with me. I bought the lanyard.

When I got to my hotel room after the night was over, I got myself caught up on some texts. When I opened my email, I saw one from Ava, the director of the study abroad program. I felt my heart descend into my gut.

Hey Caroline,

Unfortunately, the school has decided to cancel the abroad program to Newcastle, they have concerns for your safety. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me.

See you on campus,

Ava

This couldn't be happening. When Ava set me up with the study abroad program, I immediately felt relief knowing I wouldn't be going back to California. I was so hopeful. Now it was all gone, and I have to face the reality of going back to Los Angeles, back to campus, back to where *he* was.

I emptied the plastic bag that was holding my gift tent purchases onto my bed. I picked up the lanyard and reread the verse on it.

"You have plans for me Lord, I'll be okay going back there, right?"

I placed my keychain on the new lanyard and went to bed, knowing as soon as I got home, I have to prep for the journey back to California.

Chapter Eleven

It was Wednesday, October 18, 2017, two days after my 21st birthday. I was walking with Mandy down the hallway and telling her about how I celebrated my birthday by cleaning my room and drinking a bottle of wine throughout the day while watching *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. I also told her that Brian, the guy who I had been crushing on and who I've asked out twice in the last two years popped by to wish me "happy birthday."

"What's the deal with you two?" Mandy asked.

"I don't know, he knows I like him. He comes over to watch TV every Friday. We're bingeing a show," I said. "Hey, I'm going to the movies with Marcie and Jane tonight, we're seeing *Happy Death Day*. Wanna come?"

"No, I'm good. I have no interest in seeing that."

"Neither do I but I'd rather hang out with people than just sit at home."

"Are you going back to Oakwood now?"

"I don't know, I was thinking about hanging around here until I know what time they want to see the movie."

We reached the small kitchenette on the second floor, and Charley walked out holding a newly purchased can of soda.

"Hey," he said to us. "Whatcha guys up to?"

"Nothing much. Just got out of class," Mandy said.

"I was thinking about watching a movie in the viewing room. Wanna join?" he asked.

"I have to get home," Mandy said. Charley turned to me, now expecting an answer.

Funny, it was just last week that Mandy told me to never be alone in a room with him. *If only she knew. No, none of that, remember what Jane said at the beach. He's harmless.* Whatever I thought happened a few months ago, it was history. Plus, the whole school knows he's dating someone.

It'll be fine.

"Why not? I have nothing to do," I said.

Charley and I walked to the library and he picked out *Deadpool*. He signed us into the viewing room, and I took a seat on the couch, sitting on one end. I put the large throw pillow next to me, so he'd be forced to sit on the other end, a safe distance away from me. After putting the DVD in and hitting play, Charley walked over, tossed the pillow to the other couch, and sat down next to me. A little too close for a man with a girlfriend in my opinion. His leg was against mine.

It'll be okay. He has a girlfriend. What does he need me for?

Wishing thinking.

Ten minutes into the film I felt his arm wrap around me, and his hand was on my throat. Again.

That hand was like a key unlocking a box in my mind, and memories from the beginning of the year gushed out. *Oh no. No, no, no.*

With the hand back on my throat, my body froze... again. It was like it never left.

His thumb and fingers massaged the front of my throat.

His arm pulled me against him, and he kissed my temple two times.

"I'm so happy you're back," he said cheerfully. The pep in his tone made my stomach sink. I wanted to throw up.

While his other hand traced my thigh, it didn't have access to the skin because I was wearing jeans. The hand that was holding my throat moved lower but would return every so often to my throat. A move that kept me quiet, one peep and God knows what he'd do. The adventurous hand had no problem unbuttoning the top button of my flannel. With the button undone his hand went lower. *Did his hand feel the cross necklace I was wearing?*

I don't want this.

He found another button. It was undone in seconds.

Then the next button.

His hand went back to my throat and slid down the skin, past my collarbone, reaching the collar of the camisole I was wearing as an undershirt. He slipped his fingers under the fabric. He went back to my throat and repeated that motion over.

And over.

And over.

And over.

What's going to happen to me? Say something stupid. My mouth was dry, and my jaw trembled. *Just say something.*

His hand returned to my throat. *I can't. I'm too scared. What would he do?*

Please, make it stop. I don't want this.

My eyes clenched shut. So hard I saw white instead of black.

Jesus, where are you?

Once again time lost all meaning.

Watch the film.

His phone rang. He signed and dug it out of his pocket. His hand left my throat and he leaned against the couch.

"Hello?"

I stared directly at Ryan Reynold's deformed face on the television. "I'll be right there." He ended the call and turned to me, "I have to run to take care of something real quick. Stay here, I'll be back soon." He got up and walked out like it was nothing.

I sat there, wondering when he would return.

Is it safe to leave?

What if I get up to leave and he comes back?

I moved to the other couch and sat there, staring at the coffee table under the TV trying to figure out what to do.

What do I do?

I pulled out my phone and played Tetris.

Five minutes went by.

Ten.

Fifteen. I looked around the room. My eyes stared down the door that led back to the library. The light from it poured in from the small crack where the door hovered above the floor.

I got up from the couch and pulled my flannel down. *It's still open.*

I buttoned it up, grabbed my stuff, and left.

I walked out of the library and headed down the stairs, praying I wouldn't see him come around the corner.

Be cool, be normal.

I walked down the hallway that led to the building's exit.

Almost there.

I stepped outside, the warm afternoon air hitting me. I paced to my car, waving back at classmates who said hi as they headed inside.

I got in my car and sat, staring out the window.

Again. It happened again.

I heard my phone buzz. I looked at it, Marcie texted the group chat for the movie tonight. Let's do the 7:15 show. That work?

Crap. I can't cancel. I promised them we'd see it and out of the three of us I'm the only one with a car. Jane doesn't even have a license.

What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?

I typed a response.

Ok, lmk what time I should pick you guys up.

I tossed my phone on the passenger seat and drove home.

I didn't feel anything, like, my emotions forgot how to emote. I was blank.

When I got to my apartment no one was home. I laid on my bed and stared at the ceiling, my mind short-circuiting from trying to process what happened... again. Memories from the last time this happened began meshing with today's events. My second personality awoke from its hibernation.

You stupid girl. You knew better.

No. He has a girlfriend. He wouldn't.

You were asking for it this time.

No, I thought he would have changed by now.

You're the idiot who let herself be alone in a room with him.

I know. I am an idiot.

Were you testing him? Flirting with fire just to see if it would burn you, even though deep down you knew it would?

Maybe. I don't know. If nothing had happened today, I could bury the last time for good. Chalk it up to me being dramatic, delusional.

Oh God, this time it really is my fault.

I couldn't stop the guilt that was closing in around me.

When he had touched me months ago, I didn't want it to be real. I got so good at pretending that I painted myself as an overreacting girl and him the sweet man who wouldn't hurt anyone.

Now, it happened again. I didn't want this to be real. I don't want to be another girl who joins the statistics people use to warn young women entering college. I didn't want whatever happened to me to be my reality.

But something did happen.

My soul felt how wrong it was.

My body, paralyzed in fear, wondering what he'd do if I moved.

I can't ignore it now. I can't pretend something didn't happen.

I can't forget.

I could still feel his hand on my throat.

What do I do?

Last time Jane had said the school might not be able to do anything. And I still didn't know what to label what happened.

I stared at the ceiling, reliving the two times his hands were on my body, willing myself to remember every detail so I could try and figure out what to call it.

When I had had enough, I checked the time, and for once, it sped by when I needed it to. I got up, grabbed my keys and went to pick up the girls.

“Hold on a sec,” Marcie said as we were walking in the lobby of the theater. She held out her phone and we smiled at it. She snapped a selfie and we continued walking. I checked her Facebook and saw that photo now on her timeline. Me, Marcie, and Jane smiling with the AMC lobby in the background.

I look normal, except my eyes. To me, they look like they're slowly dying. To anyone else, I'll look tired.

No one would know that six hours earlier Charley was groping my body in the library movie room.

No, all people will see in this photo was a girl who went to see a movie with her friends on a Wednesday night.

But the girl in this photo was very different from yesterday. Yesterday I was smiling and happy. Now everything was different.

Chapter Twelve

I sat in a plush chair in the corner of a coffee shop, journal out, sipping the fancy looking hot chocolate I ordered from the barista. A lot had changed since October.

Initially after the incident on the 18th, I still didn't know whether to call it assault or not, even though Mandy told me it was, I went to the school to report it. They weren't much help. They offered to do an investigation, and at first, I said no, but when I changed my mind, nothing was done.

I developed a habit of self-harm. One night, when my roommates were out, I was overwhelmed with so much emotional pain. I went into the kitchen and got out my fruit cutting knife. Even though the apartment was empty, I had still felt the need to tip-toe back into my room. I made cut after cut. One slash was deeper than the rest, and I froze seeing it. The knife slipped out of my hand as I looked at the gash on my thigh.

"Never do this again," A voice said. It was a man's voice. Its tone was direct but there was a warmth to it.

I looked around, no one was in the room, but I had heard it so clearly.

Jesus?

I cleaned everything up and got out my rosary.

I hadn't touched that knife since.

I took a sip of my hot chocolate and swallowed that memory down with it. I checked my phone wondering if my friend was still coming to meet me. While I waited, I picked up my journal and began writing:

She's frozen. Her mind is numbingly blank. Her scalp is sore from her hair almost being pulled out and from the chemicals that soaked through to her skin. The bleach and the dye were washed out, but some residue might have remained. When she looks in the mirror now, she sees the change but recognizes herself at the same time. She might have changed the color of her hair, but the demons of her past can still find her. She can't escape. She is still haunted. She is possessed by overwhelming depression and emptiness. The idea of changing her appearance was appealing, she'd turn herself into someone new, someone who wasn't hurt, but she still looks the same. Her eyes are still blue, her nose, chin, skin tone are all still the same. What a funny thing it is when you can recognize yourself but at the same time don't. For a while, she forgets that her hair is a different color, but then she'll catch a glimpse of herself in a window and is reminded. In a ying-yang fashion, she likes the change but hates it at the same time. She is at war with herself over the difference, just like in every other part of her life.

She's been struggling with anger and forgiveness, change and familiarity, all kinds of opposites plague her. Why should something so small as a change in hair color be different?

She's attempting to erase a part of herself. She wants to destroy the part that is depressed, dejected, unloved, hated by herself. The part that was vulnerable and hurt by others. She knows better now. She doesn't show weakness in front of others. She takes

what she gets. She longs to stand up and be brave but is still submissive and timid when intimidated.

She still feels the hand on her throat. She's too scared to breathe or speak. The hand is rough and coarse. It's big enough to cradle half of her neck's perimeter. She keeps slapping away this invisible hand. She even presses her fingers against her throat to prove to herself that no one is there. She feels that hand all the time. The fear of being choked is as fresh as when it first happened. She sees him with his friends and she wonders: do they know? She sees his girlfriend with him. Does she know?

Is there a difference between vengeance and justice? Or is complete forgiveness what she should strive for. She doesn't wish ill on him, she just wants people to know, but if people knew his reputation would be damaged. She wants him removed from the school, but he's a star student. If he's expelled, all that hard work and money that was put into his education would be wasted. What kind of justice can be given to her now? In this life? When her life is over, when his life is over, will her Heavenly Father give her justice? Will she be avenged? Maybe in the Lord's way, not hers.

She hates going to that school now. She avoids it whenever she can. She never knows if he's there. Why risk it? Seeing him only heightens her feelings of fear. Seeing her brings her back. She can't wait to leave. 33 days and she's gone. She'll come back at the end of June for graduation, but that will be it. She'll never have to see him again.

I closed my journal when my friend arrived at the coffee shop. He saw me and did a double take.

"You dyed your hair," he said.

"I did." I smiled.

"It looks good!"

"Thanks," I took a breath. "Hey there's something I have to tell you. I'm transferring schools and I'm moving back to Massachusetts next month.

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's time for me to move on."

Part Three

Chapter Thirteen

I don't think this will work out.

That's the text I got from a guy on July 4, 2019. I didn't know why I was so upset over it; we only went on two dates. It's the second "this won't work" text I've got this year, which stung. Dating for me was hard, for an extra reason. Every time I found myself liking someone, the devil would whisper in my ear, "Once they find out about you, they're not going to love you."

And with each rejection, I believed it more. I sat on my bed staring at that text.

Who would love you?

You're broken, you're stained.

Who could love a person who's so damaged? Whose been used like you have?

"No one," I whispered to the air. "No one can ever love me because of this."

I heard my mom yelling at my dad over something from down the hall.

I hate it when they fight.

I pulled my knees to my chest and hugged myself, trying to squeeze the pain that was bubbling up out, so I didn't have to feel it. But the pain was too much, and I didn't know what to do, how to cope.

Over the next week or so, I found myself slipping away.

Depressive episode.

Another wave. It will be okay. I've had enough waves to understand how they work. I know the stages.

- 1) Trigger
- 2) A time of sadness or numbness
- 3) Suicidal phase
- 4) Meltdown
- 5) Resolution

Based on that list, I was in the transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2. It'll be fine, I had a wave in January that lasted a couple of months. I'll see my therapist Dr. Simmons more and talk to the campus Chaplin Fr. Gray.

It'll be okay.

Except, after a few days, I realized that this wave was different.

I didn't feel anything.

A week after the 4th I realized I hadn't eaten anything since. I remembered receiving that text, then hearing the yelling from the other end of the hallway, and then looking down at the plate of steak sitting on my bed. I took it and scraped the food in the trash.

Every day since then I would take a portion of the dinner my mom served and watch it turn cold before throwing it away. I looked at food, and I could not get myself to eat it.

That's new.

I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone. I felt like a fraud and a liar, meeting Dr. Simmons and Fr. Gray, sitting in their offices, and not telling them.

By the end of July, I transitioned from Stage 2 to Stage 3, the suicidal phase. I no longer wanted to be alive. I was living off a liquid diet. I had a protein shake in the morning, and that would fuel me each day. At night, my stomach would have the sharp pain of hunger, so I would sneak

into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of milk. “It’s okay to have a glass of milk, it’s okay to have a glass of milk,” I would tell myself. Milk wasn’t solid food. Milk was just milk.

I knew that not eating solid food was bad. But then the number on the scale started to go down. It went down to a number I never thought I would reach – all the exercise and calorie counting I did in California shed some weight, but I had never gotten to the number I wanted. Now I was close. I couldn’t stop. The hatred I had for my body and my weight made it so I couldn’t go back to eating even if I wanted to.

In the last week of July, I started writing journalistic poems. I’m not a poet; I don’t scrutinize stanzas, rhyme, or meter. I generously called what I wrote free verse. I had dabbled in my version of poetry since high school, but I never perused study of it. I wrote nine poems in five days, and I put them in a document titled, “The Diary of a Not Too Suicidal Person.” Those poems served as my diary; I was too tired to write prose.

7/28/2019

Sunday

I went shopping for clothes today

I tried stuff on

And I even bought a couple of things

But the thing is...

A suicidal person should not go clothes shopping

Because buying clothes means you will wear them in the future

And a suicidal person doesn’t like to think about the future

Because she doesn’t know if she has one

She doesn’t know if she wants one

And she’s scared

She looks at the bag and feels guilt instead of excitement

And she thinks about going back to the store and returning those new pair of jeans

Because there’s no way a suicidal person would get a chance to wear them

Or maybe she will

When I say suicidal, I mean I don’t want to be alive

But since I have a phobia of commitment

My fear of permanent overpowers my desire to die

I could let these clothes be a beacon of hope

I could tell myself that the cute clearance sweater I bought is reason enough to hold out until winter

But it’s hope that I don’t want

Hope that I don’t know how to process

I don’t want to be here three months from now

I can barely get through today

The thought of things changing seems impossible when each day feels like 20 years
 Times slows down when you avoid
 The clock ticks and I want it to stop
 I don't want to see tomorrow
 But it's not like I can do anything

And so all I'm left with is a bag of clothes
 Inside them a brand-new outfit
 Which I will probably wear tomorrow.

7/29/2019

Monday 9:58 AM

Today I'm wearing that outfit
 And I was walking across the street
 Head down, not looking
 And a car coming in on my right almost hit me

Out of the corner of my eye I saw shiny blue metal halt to a stop
 If I was one step further,
 I would've been hit
 If the car didn't halt,
 I would've been hit

Head down I waited a moment
 Then journeyed on
 And as I passed the car disappointment rose
 I felt cheated

I was so close
 Why couldn't she have hit me?

A suicidal person should not cross the street
 Because she will fixate on all the almost hits
 All the times she could have gotten what she's been yearning for
 A chance to die and not be at fault
 They would call it an accident and leave it at that
 And no one would ever know.

Monday 10:44 AM

I don't know if I should be using the word suicidal

I want to die
 But I am too scared to do anything about it
 And in a twisted way, I see that as a lack of bravery
 I'm not brave enough to face death
 To shake its hand
 And welcome it's embrace
 I'm stuck.

Monday 1:10 PM

After a few hours of almost getting hit by a car
 I went to the dentist for a teeth cleaning

A suicidal person shouldn't go to the dentist.
 They polish your teeth for a smile you never use
 X-Ray after x-ray
 Bite down, bite down
 "These will be good for five years," the technician says

Five years

The idea of me five years from now is unfathomable
 There are cavities they want to fix
 Drill, drill, drill
 Too bad those tools can't fix the holes inside

"You may need a root canal," they say
 Pain, pain, pain

Why fix my teeth?
 Why do anything?
 I don't want to reap the benefits of your work
 As my tooth dies,
 Maybe I will too.

Monday 9:02 PM

A suicidal person should not talk to their parents about their student loans
 All the dollar signs that cause anxiety
 The projected 30-year payment plan
 The fact that high school conned you into thinking college was the only way
 The fact that your parents agreed to take out massive loans instead of telling you
 to wait
 Massive loans that are in their name, but you're secretly responsible for

Because they can't pay

The thought of transferring that debt to you
 \$150,000 weighs a lot
 Don't forget the interest
 You're in too deep to quit though
 It'll be cheaper to finish

Yet the job you dream of having won't give a lot
 You'll live paycheck to paycheck
 Barely making ends meet

Dad says go after that job
 Find your passion
 Get paid to play.
 Mom says make sure you make enough to pay

Crushing debt
 It gives me a reason
 Transfer it all to me,
 And when I close my eyes for the last time,
 It'll all disappear.
 Like it never existed...
 Right?

Monday 10:37 PM

I told people I wasn't doing well
 That I didn't want to be alive
 I wish I didn't
 I wish I didn't burden them with concern

They have their own stuff to deal with
 Why should I add my train-wreck to that?

To take it all back I say:
 No, I don't want to stay over
 No, I don't need to be in a program
 No, I don't need to go to a hospital
 No, I won't call
 Yes, I'm safe
 Sure, I'll text you, letting you know I'm alive

Just because I don't want to be alive doesn't mean I want to die
 I know I'm not allowed to do what I want
 Because other people will bear the consequences

Guilt is a good reason to stay alive I guess
 While my heart beats
 And blood runs through my veins
 My emptiness grows
 My stress increases
 My want consumes
 And my soul will slowly die
 Bit by bit
 Until there's nothing but a shell left
 A living person, who's not really alive.

7/30/2019

Tuesday 7:56 PM

I wish people wouldn't care about me
 Even though I want it,
 It's too much of a responsibility.

7/31/2019

Wednesday 9:28 PM

I fantasize about cutting
 I want to see red lines across my chest
 I want to feel the sting
 But most importantly I want the guilt I know I'll feel

As soon as I drag that blade across my skin
 Because I made a promise to God long ago
 And if I break that promise,
 Maybe He'll give up on me
 And if He gives up on me,
 I might be able to stop beating myself up
 For not being able to hear His voice,
 Or because I can't figure out what he is calling me to do.

I sat in Fr. Gray's living room at the rectory, waiting for him to finish a call. I heard his footsteps approach and he appeared in the doorway, closing the door, and sitting down in his usual chair.

"I haven't eaten since the Fourth of July," I blurted.

He looked at me.

"I just haven't been hungry."

"Why did you stop eating?"

“I don’t know.”

“Does Simmons know?”

“Yes. He’s not concerned.”

“Well, I’m concerned. You need to eat.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t.”

“You’re flirting with fire here.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Look, it’s a sin against the fifth commandment. ‘Thou shall not kill’ includes yourself. That’s what you’re doing if you don’t eat.”

“I hear you, but right now I just don’t care. It keeps me from feeling.”

“I see we’ve reached the end of my influence. Wanna go to lunch?”

“You’re funny.”

“What? I’m serious. I’m hungry and you need to eat.”

“Maybe another time.”

I was coming up on almost four weeks of starvation. It was Thursday, August 1st, and I was hanging out in the chapel. I found it unlocked, and so I took the opportunity to sit at the piano and practice my vocal warm-ups. My summer voice instructor had been on me about working on them, making sure I practiced them at least once a day. I didn’t want to be alone though. The empty chapel, the lights off, and the fact that I knew I was purposely hurting my body made me feel like I wasn’t supposed to be there. While I still went to mass and adoration every day, I felt so unworthy. I took my starvation to a new level. I had a compulsion to make sure my daily calorie count was zero. I had my 180-calorie shake, but I would go to the gym to burn it off immediately.

It was five in the evening. I had a few hours before people would start showing up for the fire. I pulled out my phone and texted Fr. Gray.

I’m at St. Basils. Wanna get dinner?

A few minutes later my phone buzzed.

Sure!

I started to panic. No, no food. When I said “dinner” I meant “hang out.” *Why did I say dinner?*

Never mind, I’m not hungry.

I bit the nail on my thumb as I waited for his reply.

Too late, I’ll be there at 5:30!

Just go and don’t order anything. You’ll be fine.

I sat myself down at the piano and ran my fingers up the scale. I wished I knew how to play it; all I could do was the solfège scale for my warmups.

Do,

Re,

Mi,

Fa,

Sol,

La,

Ti

Do.

If I was practicing a higher key my voice always cracked at the top, which frustrated me to no end.

Sometimes I would pretend I knew how to play, pressing random keys gently and purposefully like I knew exactly what I was doing. While it never sounded bad, no one could ever consider it music.

As I was pressing random keys to pitch-match, my phone started to buzz. I picked it up and Fr. Gray's picture was on the screen.

"Hello?" I said into the phone.

"I'm outside!"

"Be right out." I hung up and gathered my sheet music, filing it into a manilla folder practically labeled "music."

I walked out of the chapel and saw Father sitting in his mustang, top down, smoking his usual cigarette.

"I hate this," I said as I tossed my folder in the backseat and got in the car.

"I think what you mean to say is 'Thank you Father for getting dinner with me,'" he said as he discarded his cigarette. "So, where do you wanna go?"

"Up to you, I'm not hungry."

"Pick something, I'm hungry. Something that's quick cause we gotta get back soon."

"There's a Panera in Raynham."

"Great, let's go." He backed out of the parking space that was labeled, "reserved for clergy" and drove out onto the street. He handed me his phone, giving me first choice of the music. I chose a song and looked at the passing street. I loved riding in his car with the top down. The wind slapping against my face always had a way of soothing me. In the absence of a roof and walls, the wide space cradled me with freedom.

We reached the Panera and I felt my heart descend. I couldn't move. I sat in the car, clenching and unclenching my hands repeatedly.

"Come on, I'm hungry," Father said.

"I can't."

"You've got to eat."

"No, I don't."

"Well, I have to eat; you don't want me to go hungry, do you?" he asked.

"No."

"Good then come on." We walked inside and I stood next to him. "What looks good?" He asked.

"Grilled cheese," I said.

"Great, that's what you'll have now for me... I'm thinking soup," he said staring at the menu hanging above the cashier.

"No, I'm not hungry."

"Too bad," he said. He ordered and we sat at a table. "Things any better at home?" he asked.

"No," I said. His buzzer rang and we left to retrieve the food. Once we returned, Father blessed it and said grace. He wasted no time digging into his soup. I stared at the grilled cheese. It was a big portion of food. All the saliva drained from my mouth as my aversion sunk down into my gut. My stomach had shrunk the past few weeks, and it felt like I had no room for a bite.

"Eat," Father said.

“I can’t.”

“You’re not going to waste that. I paid for it,” he said.

How dare you guilt me.

My hand trembled as it gripped the grilled cheese and lifted it in the air. I brought it to my mouth and nibbled on it. It was a foreign experience. I forgot what solid food felt like. Breaking it down with my teeth, pressing it against my tongue, swallowing it. The bread was chewy, soft, and the cheese was warm, gooey, and easily swallowable. I got through half of the sandwich before I needed a break. I felt too full and too guilty.

“You better finish that,” Father said.

I glared at him.

“Come on,” he said.

I picked up the remainder of the sandwich and began eating it. The fullness of my stomach disappeared, and it started to hurt. The pang of hunger that disappeared after week four of starvation returned, and I finished the grilled cheese with more vigor than I had when I started. When I took the last bite, I looked at Father.

He looked happy and proud.

I felt gross and ashamed.

Ashamed for eating, but even more for wanting more.

“Do you think I could have another?” I asked, purposefully making my voice quiet hoping he wouldn’t hear it.

“Absolutely, we’ll order it to go.” He had excellent hearing.

Later, I sat in the chapel, thinking about the grilled cheese sitting in the to-go box I left on the bench near the fireplace. I took out my phone and opened a new note.

8/1/2019

Thursday 9:33 PM

How funny it is,

That when you cry

The tears that flow down your cheek,

Tickle.

The light droplets brush gently against your skin

And the struggle feeling it gives

Reminds you of the laughter that sang from your throat

When someone was tickling you

You press your lips together in a sad smile

Give an audible sigh,

Which takes the place of laughter

Could it be God using your tears to make you smile?

When you cry your heart opens

And grace can sneak in

Bringing a moment of comfort

But your ticklish tears irritate
 So, you wipe them away
 Erasing all sign of the joyful vulnerability.

Over the next two weeks, Fr. Gray continued bringing me to places and buying me meals until I started forcing myself to eat small snacks on my own. But as I eased back into eating, I needed something else to push the truth away.

It was late at night, and I was fighting the dark thoughts in my mind. Thoughts that brought me back to California. The ghost-hand on my throat felt extra tangible.

You deserved it.

You're so ugly, scarred.

No one will want you. How could they? You're used.

You're too broken.

There's no hope for you.

You're not worthy of love.

You'll never be free from this.

You're so dramatic, it wasn't assault. Look at you, you're not pretty enough for anyone to want you that way.

No one will believe you.

The ones who do just pity you.

I couldn't take it anymore. I moved robotically to my art bin. I opened the lid and sifted through all the crayons, painter's tape, paint, before coming across the thing I was after. My X-acto knife. I held it in my hand.

Should I?

No, I made a promise.

I know I made a promise, but I didn't know what else to do. Every day since spring semester ended in May I had been going to mass and adoration for 30 minutes. I even went on a retreat. And yet, even with all those graces, my prayer was drier than ever. I felt left alone in a dark room and I needed something.

Just one. One will do.

I lifted my shirt, holding it up with one hand while the other scraped the blade across the skin. It wasn't deep. It took a few seconds for the line to turn red. I grabbed a tissue and blotted the blood away, then used my rubbing alcohol to clean it. I taped some gauze over it, then shut off my lights. I crawled under my comforter, careful not to jostle the gauze.

I broke my promise.

I couldn't tell what was worse, the fact that I cut myself, the fact that I didn't feel better from it, or the fact that I didn't feel guilty.

Each night I added another cut. At first it was just one.

Then one didn't do it anymore.

I started playing a game with myself whenever I had a shift at work. I would tally on my wrist how many times something or someone threatened to push me over the edge throughout the day, and when I got home, I would make a cut for each tally.

I became addicted.

Cutting became my band-aid, a weak patch over a gushing artery. It momentarily separated me from emotions. Tending my wounds gave me something to focus on. I saw my X-acto knife as a child saw a blanket. It was comfort. It was security. It gave me control. It was my toxic friend that I loved too much to move on from, yet each cut drained more hope from my soul.

And yet I knew I shouldn't be doing it.

I had to at least try to stop.

One day in the middle of August, I sat on my usual spot on the floor in Dr. Simmons' office. I was slightly rocking myself back and forth, scared to death on what would happen next.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

I looked down.

"I'm going to want this back, but for now I think you should have this," I said, removing my X-acto knife and sliding it across the floor. "I've been using it to cut myself." It had now been two weeks.

Dr. Simmons picked up the knife.

"You're not going to tell my parents, are you?" I asked. Me, a 22-year-old woman was still terrified of getting in trouble with my parents. If my mom found out I was a cutter she would never leave me alone, and she would never trust me alone with myself again even if I was in a good place.

"No, remember what I said last time? Unless I believe your life is a risk or that you were going to harm another person, everything is confidential."

I nodded.

"Thank you for trusting me with this," he said as he put the knife in a drawer.

A week later I showed up for my session and he told me he had thrown it out.

"You what?" I asked.

"I had to dispose of it. I couldn't keep it."

"I told you I wanted it back one day."

"Caroline I couldn't have given it back to you."

I became quiet. A numbness circled around me. I didn't think he'd do this.

I felt betrayed.

I felt tricked.

I felt lost.

All I wanted was my knife.

I started grieving the loss of it.

"Talk to me. What are you feeling?" he asked.

"Mad."

"At me?"

"Yes." I didn't want to admit it, but I did.

"That's okay. Tell me why you're mad."

"That knife was more to me than a tool. I drove to California with it in my back pocket. I remember reaching for it at a gas station at 5 in the morning when I saw two guys 20 feet away staring in my direction. I made art with it, I used it to cut the tape for my crayon art."

"I know it meant a lot to you."

"It was my protection."

"I know."

“You took it.”

“You gave it to me.” *Yeah, and I’ll never make that mistake again.*

I huddled my body into a ball, not looking at him.

“I figured there was a chance you’d react this way. And I know you’re not too happy with me right now, but we’ll work through this.”

That didn’t stop me from driving to Michael’s after our session and buying a new knife. When I told him that I got a new one the following week, he wasn’t surprised.

“I knew there was a chance you would. But I also knew you would tell me, and that you would show up today,” he said. “Caroline if I had a feeling that you wouldn’t be safe, I would not have let you leave. But I trust you to talk to me during this setback. This is something that might take time, but we’ll work through it.”

Will we?

It feels like I’m walking in circles.

And I don’t know how to change my direction.

Chapter Fourteen

I sat on the ground, leaning against the front pew at Holy Ghost. Summer was over and I had moved back into the dorm a few weeks ago.

I remember when I was packing my stuff, I had looked inside the drawer of my nightstand. My fingers had grabbed my knife and I held it in my palm. My eyes stared at it. *Do I bring it with me?*

No.

I placed it back in the drawer and left it there, a possible bomb waiting to go off if my mom happened to one day go through the drawer. I didn't think she would, but one can never know. She's seen me with the knife before out on the porch, but I was using it to cut painting tape on canvases. I would keep it in my art bin. I didn't know what she would think if she found it in the drawer. Some guilt I had over my addiction was that she saw me make art with that knife, but she didn't know that late at night I would use it in a way it wasn't meant to, that I'd use it to harm myself. I didn't want her or my dad to know; I was scared of what they'd do. Maybe they'd send me into another hospital program, or maybe my mom wouldn't trust me alone in my room anymore. I didn't think I could live with that.

Either way, with my knife at home I had no way to cut. I couldn't starve myself either. I knew without those band-aids I was spiritually improving, but emotionally I felt worse. My bleeding skin or burning stomach could no longer block the tsunami of emotion heading my way. I could sense it coming, but I didn't want it to hit me. What do you do when you know you're about to drown?

Why am I feeling this way? Why do I feel so sad? Why do I feel so empty?

I had been sitting in adoration for the last half hour, listening to music, and rocking myself back and forth, arms hugging my legs to my chest, head buried in the gap.

Jesus, please. Help me. I don't want this grief. I just want it to go away.

My sniffles could be heard every so often; I did my best to cry without making noise. I looked up and gazed at the monstrosity. Jesus was right there, so close in person. Why did I feel so far away?

An image popped into my head. I was no longer at Holy Ghost in Whitman, MA. I was somewhere else, it looked like the top of a hill. It was an open space, with no roads or buildings. I looked around, the sky was gray and stormy. It was cold. I could feel the chilled air crawl up my body making me shiver. I was lying in mud. Black, grainy, mushy mud. It stuck to my skin, coating it with dirt. My legs and my left arm refused to move. It was like they were broken. My right hand dug deep in the soil, looking for something solid to grab onto. When it did, it hauled my body forward. My hand reached out again and continued to drag on. I could see the muscles in my fingers tense as they dug through the mud, working hard to move my body. I looked up to see where I was going. In the distance I saw Jesus, on his cross, dying. He looked down at me, eyes showing the pain of death.

I shook my head, not wanting to see anymore. But it wouldn't go away. It wasn't front and center in my brain, but it lingered. It sat there in the back of my head, demanding my attention.

What does it mean?

I was crawling through mud with one working hand, heading towards Jesus. Crawling with one hand is hard, it takes a lot of strength. It also takes time.

Be strong.

Be patient.

I dragged myself forward, in the direction of Jesus, who was dying on the cross.

He was suffering.

I was suffering.

We were suffering – together.

I took a deep breath and two words hit my heart.

Keep going.

Crawl through the mud.

I had to surrender my band-aids.

I had to grieve the trauma.

I had to come to terms with the fact that it happened, and that I could no longer go on living like this.

The month of September I suffered, tremendously. All the intense adjectives and the colorful language could never accurately describe what that pain was like. But I kept going. I made sure I ate enough. I saw Fr. Gray and Dr. Simmons every week. I went to daily mass at least two days a week. I found myself sitting in the chapel between classes, crying, shaking, pouring out whatever was going on inside me. I turned to all sorts of prayer methods: music, meditating on bible verses, novenas. I prayed a novena to Our Lady Undoer of Knots. I prayed that nine-day prayer last year, and it helped me come out publicly about my assault. I hoped this time it would help me undo the huge knot the assault had in my soul. I prayed a novena to St. Dymphna, the patron saint of mental illness, asking her to help me with the depression and anxiety I was battling.

More than once did Fr. Gray unlock St. Basils at 11 o'clock at night and leave me there so I could cry in the chapel. One time he had let me in after the campus ministry finished dinner somewhere. "Don't tell Fr. Ben I left you here," he said as he opened the door, locking it.

Fr. Ben was the pastor and Fr. Gray's boss. "Stay as long as you want, when you leave the door will be locked." I nodded and went inside. I entered the chapel and turned one of the lights on. I put my earbuds in, and I began to weep. I was brought me to my knees, and when I couldn't kneel anymore, I laid on the ground, my tears dampening the floor. I looked at the tabernacle, and I was drawn to it. I made my way to it, and when I was face to face with the door, I placed my hand on it. I was listening to a song, and the bridge hit the moment I placed my hand on the gold door of the safe that held the most precious thing in the world: the Eucharist.

"Holy, holy, holy are You Lord God Almighty. Worthy is the Lamb, worthy is the Lamb, You are holy," the lyrics sang in my ear with a powerful, inspiring melody.

At that moment, I felt a lot like the women who touched Jesus's robes 2,000 years ago. She knew with one touch of his garments that she'd be healed. While I didn't know for sure, I could never assume, I could have every hope that I'd be healed one day too.

Every day was a coin toss; I'd either shut down in silence or the tiniest thing would set me off. One Wednesday afternoon I was in my dance class participating in the warm-ups. Emotion was already swimming inside me, ready for any small push to send in rushing out.

"Keep that foot straight," my teacher said to me as she passed by, critiquing my tendus. I pointed my foot so much that the muscles almost pulled and cramped as I glided my leg back and forth.

One, two.

One, two.

I couldn't do it. I felt the tears coming, so I paced out of the room and stepped outside. It was raining, and I couldn't stop the internal storm from coming out. I went back to class, grabbed my boots, and bolted out. I ran to the chapel and headed inside, collapsing on the ground and letting myself break.

October came, and as the emotion heightened, I started to think it was no coincidence, given the fact that the two-year anniversary of my second assault was coming up. Went back to journal writing, but this time I wasn't recording my thoughts. I was writing to Jesus.

10/1/2019

Lord,

I know you are preparing me for something. I don't know what. Part of me thinks its complete healing from my suffering, but my uncertain heart doubts in that possibility. Another idea is that you are leading me closer to my vocation, whether it's discerning the religious life or helping me become the woman my spouse needs me to be. But again, my apprehensive heart doubts. I am planning to pray a healing novena. Please tell me what I need to ask. What do I need healed? I know you're giving me the strength to fully feel this pain, and when I'm done with it, when it beats me down and strips me of everything, You will take it.

As the days went by, I found myself sneaking into the chapel during the day. What I mean by sneaking is that I was actively avoiding people. I'd walk in and directly go into the sanctuary. Coming to the chapel was hard because I ran the risk of running into someone I couldn't spend too much time with. This person was named Charley. Not only was his first name the same as Charley from California, but their last names started with the same letter, and they had similar physical appearances.

One day over the summer, I had been driving Charley to a campus for a ministry event. He was talking about deep theology, theology that was beyond my understanding. I had looked down and noticed his leg, covered in the gray sweatpants he had been wearing, and I flashed back to California. At that moment, the Charley from campus ministry had started to become the Charley from California. Dr. Simmons called it "pairing".. I didn't know how to stop it or how to unpair them. Every time I saw him, I felt guilty and triggered at the same time. Guilty because he had nothing to do with my pain, triggered because when I saw him I flashed back to the library viewing room back in California. I agonized over it, hiding in the chapel, pen in hand, hoping Charley wouldn't come in.

10/7/2019

I've been feeling emotion, but I know there's more. Lord help it come to the surface. Part of me wants to disappear from campus ministry. I feel like I don't belong there. It's like there's the wall between me and the others. It's preventing me from connecting, from trusting. It's the fear of rejection. Lord help me. Break that wall down. Make me brave. Help me figure out where this anxiety with Charley started. It wasn't always there. I need to retrace my steps. I need to find what triggered me to see him as a potential threat instead of a friend. I see it in my head, please heal that.

You know I'm at a tipping point. I'm so afraid to tip. I need to cry, but I never feel safe enough to do so. You, Lord, know what's overwhelming me. I am not safe here Lord. There is nowhere I can break down. People tell me I'm strong, but I'm not. You make me seem strong to others, but inside my weakness is killing me...

I just want to scream. This poor man who triggers me, he's done nothing wrong, yet I'm tempted to hate him. He doesn't deserve my dislike, my avoidance. And he seeks me out for counsel. He seeks friendship that I can't give. Why put a person in my life I can't serve? I have to face him to get to You...

Today I am afraid of people. Is this You healing that? Is this You?

Later that day I had a session with Dr. Simmons, and I read him my journal entry, asking him why I paired the two Charleys together.

"I think it's because you have some deep anger that you're unwilling to deal with," he said. I couldn't say anything to that. Not out loud. I didn't want to have anger.

"The pages I gave you last week, did you read them?" I asked.

Last week I had given him a printed copy of the story of my first assault, told him to read it and to tell me what happened to me. Two years later and I still didn't know what to call it. I couldn't stomach calling it assault. It felt like a label I didn't qualify for. But I was losing my mind not knowing how it should be classified. If a psychologist told me for sure, I'd at least have the backing of some kind of professional.

"I did."

"What happened to me?"

"Based on what you wrote, yes you were assaulted."

I gulped and looked away. I didn't know what to think or how to feel. The curtain I've been hiding behind was suddenly torn away. I not only had permission to call it what deep down I knew it was, but I could now let myself feel all the emotions that came with it.

10/8/2019

He's right. I have anger, but that anger will be released through tears and sadness. Lord help me move that process along. Yesterday it was confirmed. He, the only person I told details to, confirmed it. Gave me a name for it. It gives me a notion that it's official. What happened in those two incidents was not only assault, but sexual assault. I don't know what's worse, having it confirmed or him telling me I was wrong all these years. I'm not crazy. I wasn't being dramatic. Having this confirmation will hopefully give me the confidence to own this event and give me the strength to face it.

What do You have to say to me Lord, what do You have to say about this?

With a dulling calmness that will most likely not last, I sit before you, alone in your house. Thank you, Lord, for the solitude. I've missed this, coming here when it was just the two of us. The pain, Lord, I'm letting it run its course. I'm getting the emotion out. I rejoice in this suffering because I know you will take it. I pray that it's soon. It is indeed stripping me of everything. My peace. My confidence. My security. My comfort. It's all being stripped away. Through suffering I will learn to fight. The promises I hope you'll keep drive me. This will work. This will not be in vain. Good shall come. Good only You can

bring. Keep it coming. I will endure the pain and suffering as long as You want me to. It will lead me to You, where You will heal me.

And so I suffered.

And wept.

And I almost lost my mind.

When I was heading out of the chapel, I was a tearful mess. I caught Fr. Gray and Riley on the way out. They saw my tears but didn't need to ask. The three of us stood in the lobby of the Catholic Center. I looked at Father, sensing more tears coming.

"It's gonna end, right?" I asked.

"Yes," he smiled. He sounded so confident, I needed some of that. The grief was so much. It felt like it would go on forever.

10/9/2019

Okay Lord, what will be today's theme? Yesterday was anger, Monday was anxiety... what will be today? Please, keep it coming. While it's difficult to bear, I delight in this suffering because I know it won't last. You, in Your own time, will heal me of everything. Right now, You are weeding out everything that isn't of You. Once all the weeds, all the pent-up emotion, anxiety, anger, pain, once it's all been released and cried out, You will have the room you need to make something grow in its place. Right now, You are making me a new person. A part of me is dying, and I can't wait to meet the new person I will be through You.

I feel like I'm waiting for this giant shoe to drop. Like at any moment my world is going to come crashing down. Lord, I ask that you take that fear away. Help me feel safe here again. No one is going to hurt me here. No one is going to think I'm weak because of my past. Deliver me from the fear of rejection. Help me be able to sit in your silence. Help my ears be open to Your word.

On October 10th I sat in the chapel and pulled out the printed-out pages of a Pope Saint John Paul II healing novena. I Googled what saints were known for their healing intercession, and he was the first one who came up. I already knew a lot about John Paul II's papal ministry, and I felt comfortable asking for his help. I read through the prayer, and I saw it as an invitation to ask for his intercession. I knelt in the pew, and with all my contrition fueling my voice, whispered the opening and day one prayers.

When I finished, I opened my journal and wrote, thinking about all the emotions that had been wracking my mind, body, and soul. It was deep, heavy, and it felt like tangible darkness. It twisted inside my gut, making me nauseous. It would creep across my skin making me shake. So much distress, so much pain that could only be released through tears.

I meditated on the Sorrowful Mysteries, more specifically the Agony in the Garden, and how Jesus was so distressed he sweat drops of blood.

Lord, I don't understand how any good can come from this. Why does this have to be a cross to bear? Why couldn't it have been something else?

Jesus, I don't feel worthy of love, of healing. Lord, how can I get over the fact that someone looked at me, a living, breathing person who thinks, feels, and acts, and decided I was worth nothing? He'd seen my eyes, the eyes that tried so hard to reflect Your love, and decided I

wasn't your daughter, that I wasn't worth the dignity of a human. He acted like I wasn't a child of God.

How can I ever recover from that?

It haunts me.

His hand, 3,000 miles away, still reaches me.

It's still on my throat.

I can feel it.

10/10/2019

Lord,

I'm learning a lot about suffering this week, the wisdom from You is in my head, but I can't seem to turn it into words. This pain is truly shaking me to the core. Each day it seemed to increase in hysteria. Either yesterday it reached its climax, or the climax has yet to come. You are testing my comfort today. Help me exist in the uncomfortable vulnerability. This pain is not just beating me down, it's kicking my ass - hard. It's stripping me of everything, I mean all the walls I've built regarding this trauma are being broken down. All the band-aids I have placed are being ripped off and discarded, never to be used again. Now You will clean the wound and stitch it up. Soon, very soon I pray, You will heal me.

A couple of days later I was sitting on my bed in my dorm. I couldn't focus on my schoolwork, and my mind wandered to St. Peter walking on water. In that passage, Peter's trust in Jesus allowed him to walk on water, but then he saw the storm around him, got scared, and took his eyes off of Jesus. As soon as he did that he started to drown, and he called out to Jesus to save him.

I had never related to a bible story so much before. I felt like I was drowning in the grief. Over the summer I took my eyes off of Jesus, and now I'm crying for him to save me. I got out my journal, and a poem started to pour through my fingertips.

*My memory invades my peace
The atmosphere turns gray and meek
As a ghostly hand returns to my throat
Slowly pushing me under murky water*

*Down into the despairing sea
A place where tears don't get the chance to stream*

*A silent cry,
A quiet plea,
Choking on water as my mind screams:
"My Lord Jesus, will You come rescue me?"*

*A hand charges through the cloudy ocean
And pulls me up in one swift motion*

Tender eyes gaze down upon me
And His sweet loving voice so calmly speaks,

"Tell me my daughter, why are you afraid
You really think I would let you drown in the waves?
Look around, the ocean is blue,
This trial is not to harm,
But to strengthen you.
Know that I will heal your grief,
And the next time that ghost comes,

Just leave it to me."

Just leave it to Jesus.

I sat in Fr. Gray's office one afternoon for a spiritual direction appointment. All I remember was trying to talk through the blubbing tears.

"Hold on," Father said. I stopped speaking through my cries and looked at him. "Something just popped into my head, like random as day, it might be from God. He said, 'Tell her, she's not an assaulted child of God, but a child of God who was assaulted.'"

I didn't know what he meant by that. All I knew was that October 18th was coming soon, and a small part of me started to hope that all I'd been feeling, all I'd been praying for, would come to pass.

Chapter 15

6 AM

My alarm cracked the silence that was in the room. I immediately turned it off so it wouldn't wake up Riley. I had been awake staring at the ceiling since five. I stared at my phone. The clock on the home screen turned to 6:01, but I was more interested in the date in small print under it.

Friday, October 18, 2019

It was finally here, the day I had been calling "Spiritual Armageddon" the past few weeks.

On this day, two years ago, I was assaulted for the second time. I still felt weird calling it for what it was. A few weeks ago, I wrote down the details from my first attack and threw the pages at Dr. Simmons and said, "Read these and tell me what happened to me." When I saw him the next week, he told me.

"You were assaulted," he said, confirming something I didn't want to be true. I felt that hearing it out of his mouth, an actual psychologist, gave me permission to call it that. But I was still getting used to calling it that and not doubting it. It felt dirty coming off my tongue.

"I was assaulted."

"It was assault."

"He assaulted me."

I don't know if I can ever say it with certainty.

I sat up and slid out of my bed, actually slid because my dorm bed was three feet off the ground. I landed, and my socks slipped on the tile a bit, so I had to put a hand on my dresser to steady myself.

I turned the door handle slowly so it wouldn't make any noise and snuck out into the common room. I brushed my teeth as I went through my mental checklist for the day.

7:30 mass at St. Ann's

9:00 meet with film group to discuss class project

10:00 go to Holy Ghost for adoration

11:30 meet with Simmons

2:00 meet with Fr. Sean

I spat the suds into the sink and rinsed my mouth with water. I sleuthed back into my room, grabbed some clothes, and went into the bathroom to change.

When I got out, I saw Riley in the kitchen.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

"How are you doing?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to mass later?"

"I'm going at 7:30 cause I have class at 9."

"Okay."

"So, do you want to leave around 10 for adoration?"

"Sure."

I nodded, grabbed my keys, and left the dorm.

7:10 AM

I pulled into the parking lot of Saint Ann’s Catholic Church in Raynham. This was the second time I had ever been to this church for mass, and the emptiness of the parking lot made me nervous.

Is mass canceled?

I pulled into a spot in front of the building and put my car in park. I watched the church, wondering maybe if I focused on it hard enough, a person would appear and walk inside.

I was listening to one of my Jesus music playlists, hoping the uplifting lyrics about hope and praise would keep me from despairing or falling apart because no one was around to unlock the building.

Of all the days for mass to be canceled...

“How Beautiful” started playing, and I sat there wondering what to do. I looked at the clock on the dash.

7:15

Mass starts in 15 minutes.

Breathe. 15 minutes is fine. Someone will be here soon.

I needed to distract myself. I pulled out my phone and checked my school email.

7:16

Then I checked my personal email.

7:17

Then Facebook.

7:18

Then Instagram.

7:19

I looked out the window and saw a man heading toward the side door of the church. He unlocked the door and went inside.

Thank you Jesus.

I shut off my car and got out. I looked at the parking lot behind me, and it was starting to fill up. People were getting out of their cars and walking toward the door.

I walked up the steps that led to the side entrance of the church and entered. I removed my veil from my pocket and put it on, the tiny combs from the clip grabbing on to my hair, snapping in place so it wouldn’t move or fall out.

I dipped my index and middle finger in the holy water and made the sign of the cross on myself. Stepping into the sanctuary, I genuflected toward the tabernacle before walking down the side aisle looking for a pew to sit in.

I chose one near the front and sat down. The muscles that I’ve been clenching in anticipation since I pulled into the parking lot finally relaxed.

7:30 mass – check.

10:00 AM

“Great, see you guys in class Monday,” I said, a little rushed. I got up from the table we were sitting at in the Weygand Residence Hall lobby, collecting my folder and my laptop. My group members said their goodbyes, and I rushed to the stairs.

When I got inside my dorm, Riley was putting on her shoes.

“Ready to go?” I asked, frantically tossing my laptop on my bed and grabbing my stuff for adoration.

“Yes,” she said, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

“Great, let’s go.” We walked out of the room and headed to the stairs.

The walk to my car was silent but not awkward.

When we got in my car, I connected my phone to the Bluetooth and played the playlist I was listening to earlier. Riley sat, not speaking, as I drove.

“Thank you for being with me today, being my emotional support person,” I said when we stopped at the intersection near the church. CVS was to our right, and Wendy’s across the intersection to our left.

“No problem.”

The light turned green, and I turned right, then left, then followed the road that led us to the church.

I parked the car, and we got out, heading inside to the lower church. We put on our veils and stepped inside the chapel.

When I stepped inside, I dropped to my knees, bowing so far that my forehead tapped the floor. I kissed the ground before getting up. I walked down the aisle, heading straight for the altar, stopping at the first pew and knelt down in front of it. Sitting in front of the altar was a basket of sunflowers mixed with decorative green leaves.

I was face to face with Jesus.

I gazed at the monstrance and let out a breath.

Here I was safe.

Here I was loved.

Here I could come to the Lord, as broken and desperate for healing as I was, and I would be welcomed.

Here I was free to be weak.

Free to be vulnerable.

Free to lay the pain I was in at his feet.

Since the door to my locked-up pain was opened in July, I had been asking for healing. I had grieved two years of suppressed emotion in three months.

I was ready to let it go.

I took out the folded-up prayers I printed out for the day. I started with the novena to Pope Saint John Paul II. It was the last day of the nine-day prayer. Over the previous week and a half, I had been begging for his intercession.

When I finished the novena prayer, I pulled out the other sheet I printed out. It was a prayer I wrote, checked by Fr. Gray to make sure it wasn’t heretical. This prayer I intended for this day, in adoration, at this moment.

“Holy Spirit, I fully and freely invite you to come upon me.

“I humbly beg for the gift of Your healing as I surrender these petitions and hauntings to You, my merciful Lord Jesus. I ask that You turn Your tender eyes to me and extend to me Your favor.

“Deliver me, Lord, from my failing body, especially the parts that are currently hurting, injured, or dying.

“Deliver me, Lord, from the events of October 18, 2014.

“Deliver me from the psychosis,

“Deliver me from the invisible itch in the veins of my wrists,

“Deliver me from the anxiety that was born from it,

“Deliver me from the PTSD I have from it that causes an anxiety attack every time I receive IV medication,

“Expel anything from that trauma that’s not of You.

“Deliver me, Lord, from my first sexual assault.

“Deliver me from that day – the date of which is lost from my memory, but not from

Yours.

“Deliver me, Lord, from my second sexual assault that took place on October 18, 2017.

“Deliver me from that ghostly hand I feel on my throat every day,

“Deliver me from the pain it has brought me.

“Expel the fear, the guilt I have, the blame I place upon myself.

“Expel the evil, the anxiety, the depression, the darkness, the anger at myself, others, and

You.

“Expel the ugliness I feel, the feeling of unworthiness.

“Cast out from the deepest and darkest part of my soul, parts that I don’t dare to see and the parts that I’m unaware of, anything that isn’t of You, Lord. Remove anything that won’t serve You. Make me a new person through Your love.

“Please grant me the peace I so desperately yearn for. Remember this prayer as I turn my eyes to Your mother and pray the weapon that casts out demons, Our Lady’s most Holy Rosary. Take these prayers, Lord, and deliver me. I beg you to grant me complete healing, so I can be a better servant to you. Whatever outcome You see fit, I will joyously cry, ‘Thy will be done!’”

I folded the paper up and placed it in my pocket. I clutched the rosary in my hand, fingers playing with the beads, and began praying.

Apostles Creed.

Our Father.

Three Hail Marys.

Glory Be.

Oh, my Jesus.

Our Father.

10 Hail Marys.

Glory Be.

Oh, my Jesus.

Our Father.

10 Hail Marys.

Glory Be.

Oh, my Jesus.

Our Father.

10 Hail Marys.

Glory Be.

Oh, my Jesus.

Our Father.

10 Hail Marys.

Glory Be.

Oh, my Jesus.

Our Father.

10 Hail Marys.

Glory Be.

Oh, my Jesus.

Hail Holy Queen.

I finished the rosary and made the sign of the cross. I knelt down, forehead touching the carpet, and kissed the ground. I got up and turned around, nodding to Riley that it was time to go. She rose from her pew, and we headed to the door. We turned, genuflected, then walked out.

11:30 AM

I walked into Dr. Simmons' office and sat on the ground, leaning against the wall and wrapping my arms around my legs. He closed the door and sat in his chair across from me.

"So, how's it going?" he asked.

"You know what today is," I stated.

"Yes."

I buried my head in the space between my knees and my chest. I sucked in as much oxygen as I could before pushing it out. I lifted my head and looked at him.

"I felt sick all day, like, nauseous. When I got in my car this morning, I wanted to throw up."

"Yeah, it's the day for you. Your body is in fight or flight. The anxiety and emotion that's surfacing are making your body have a physical response."

I sat there, staring at his shoes.

"Tell me about your plans for the day," he said.

"I'm meeting Fr. Sean at 2. I'm going bowling with people later. I'm nervous about what I'll feel like around 1:30. That's around the time it happened."

"Is someone going to be with you at that time?"

"Riley is spending the day with me. After Fr. Sean, I'm driving her to get a haircut."

"Good, as long as someone is with you."

I hugged my knees to my chest.

"Why did this have to happen to me?"

Dr. Simmons sighed. He didn't have an answer to that.

"I hate myself."

"I know you do."

"I hate that this happened. It's not fair."

"Look at me." He knows how hard it is for me to look at people, so whenever he makes me look at him, he's saying something he wants me to understand.

"You're going to be okay. You're healing, and all you need to do is get through this day. You've prepared for it, and you knew that it was going to be hard. Now it's here, and all you need to do is hang on until tomorrow."

1:00 PM

Riley and I pulled into the driveway of my parents' house.

"I'll be right back," I said. "You can come in or stay in the car if you want."

"I'll stay here."

"Okay." I got out of the car and walked inside. I headed up the stairs and waved at my dad in the living room.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey, I'm just grabbing something." I walked down the hall and into my room.

I closed my door and crouched down to my nightstand. I opened the drawer and took out my X-acto knife. I hid it in my pocket and walked out.

"See ya," I said to my dad on my way down the stairs. My phone vibrated, I checked it. Fr. Sean sent me a message.

Mind if we meet at 2:30 instead?

Yes, I mind, but what can I do? It's okay.

That's fine.

I walked out the door and headed back to my car.

1:30 PM

I sat in my car, finishing the vanilla-frosted donut I got at Dunkin. Riley was inside the building next to Dunkin, getting a haircut. I wiped my fingers with a napkin and threw it in the small bag the donut came in. I pulled my X-acto knife out of my pocket and stared at it.

I need to let this go. I can't ask for healing if I'm still holding on to something that I'll use to break myself. It doesn't work that way—all or nothing.

I took a fresh napkin from the pile the lady at the counter had stuffed in the bag and wrapped it around the knife. I placed the knife at the bottom of the bag and used the rest of the napkins to bury it. I rolled up the bag and folded it as much as I could before getting out of my car and walking to the trashcan. I took a breath and dropped it in the can. I wasn't sure if deep down I wanted to let it go, but I did anyway.

Safety net gone.

A rush of vulnerability overcame me. I was now falling without my chosen net to catch me. That knife had been a lifeline the last few months – a twisted reminder that while emotionally, I might have been broken beyond repair, my body still had the ability to heal.

The knife had given me hope. Now I had given it up and put my complete trust in something greater, something that required all of myself.

What if it doesn't work? What if Jesus doesn't heal me?

I don't know what I'd do. Go to Michaels and buy a new knife? No, I can't go back to this. If I start it again, I might never stop; it's that addicting.

Trust and breathe. God doesn't waste prayers.

I backed away from the trashcan and headed inside to wait for Riley.

2:00 PM

Riley and I drove down my street back in Hingham. We were heading to Resurrection. The car wound and bent with the road, and I stopped breathing. I felt them. His hands. Not just the ghost-hand that had been on my throat the past two years, but now his other hand too. The hand on my throat pressed extra hard, and I felt the ghost-fingers brush against my thigh, my collarbone, my temple where his lips kissed, and he whispered in my ear. Every part of my body that he touched was on alert. It all returned.

The freezing.

The fear.

The panic.

I clutched the steering wheel and squeezed it so hard my hands jerked.

"It's like it's happening all over again," I said, staring straight out the window. I glanced at Riley.

"What?"

"I feel his hands."

"Spiritual attack?"

"Maybe?"

The devil only attacks when he wants you to step away from the path you're on because he knows it will lead you to God. Is it weird that I found some hope in that?

But those hands, feeling them made me want to vomit.

He's not here. You're safe.

When we walked into the church, I texted Fr. Sean. Riley sat in the front pew while I sat on the ground in the center aisle. I looked at the John Paul II card I was given two days ago as a birthday gift. The picture was of John Paul II leaning his head against a crucifix staff, his eyes closed with a tender look on his face. He looked so peaceful and content. The other side of the card had a mini biography of his life as Pope.

I looked up and saw Fr. Sean walk in. He nodded his head, directing towards the back, and I followed him to a pew. I sat next to him and looked around. The only people in the church were me, him, and Riley. Father and I were far enough away that Riley couldn't hear us if we whispered, but it didn't matter; she already knew everything.

"So, what's going on?" Father asked.

"Before we do anything, would you take my confession?" I asked.

"Sure." Father took his stole out of his pocket and put it on. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," he said as we marked ourselves with the sign of the cross. "May the Lord who's freed you help you to know your sins."

"Bless me Father for I have sinned," I said. I inhaled a breath, and the more air I sucked in, the bigger the buildup I had hiding behind my eyes.

"I have been resentful of a person who hurt me, who hurt me badly. I have been in a state of despair, not going to Jesus for comfort but trying to cope on my own. I swear, and I lie, and that's all I can remember."

"Praise be to God for a good confession," Father said. "For your penance, say 'Jesus, I trust in you' 30 times. Now say the act of contrition."

"Oh my God, I am truly sorry for all my sins. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, who I should love about all things. I firmly intend, with the help of your grace, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us, in his name, oh Lord have mercy."

Fr. Sean raised his hand and prayed, "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

I made the sign of the cross and looked at him.

"I'll go pray my penance, then I'll come back," I said. Father nodded. I got up and made my way to a pew in the middle of the church. I knelt down and made the sign of the cross. I stared at the tabernacle.

"Jesus, I trust in you," I whispered. I balled my hand in a fist and stuck my index finger out to keep track.

"Jesus, I trust in you."

"Jesus, I trust in you," I heard my voice quiver and crack as the tears began to fall.

"Jesus, I trust in you."

"Jesus, I trust in you." *This is hard. Saying it out loud is hard.*

"Jesus, I trust in you."

"Jesus, I trust in you."

“Jesus, I trust in you.”
 “Jesus, I trust in you,” ten more to go.
 “Jesus, I trust in you.”
 “Jesus, I trust in you,” one handful left.
 “Jesus, I trust in you.”
 “Jesus, I trust in you,” I sighed.

Not once did my eyes leave the tabernacle. My face was damp, and tears pooled at the bottom of my chin, tiny drops falling one at a time, dripping onto my shirt. I wiped my face with my hands and returned to Father.

“So, how can I help you?” he asked.

I couldn’t look at him. After years of knowing him, I still couldn’t have him staring into my vulnerability. I looked at the crucifix above the tabernacle instead.

“Two years ago today, I was assaulted for the second time, and I can’t take it anymore. I want it gone. I want the pain gone.” I glanced at him. “I have done so much spiritually today, mass, adoration, finishing novenas, rosary, I was wondering if you would pray over me, ask God to heal me.”

“Of course. Have you forgiven him?”

“Yes,” I said, which was true.

“Can we forgive him one more time?”

“Okay.”

“Repeat after me,” he said. “I forgive...”

“I forgive...”

“Say his name.”

I said his first and his last name.

“For assaulting me.”

“For assaulting me.”

Saying those words was harder than I thought it would be. In all the times I forgave him, it was always in my mind, never out loud. I would always think, *Jesus, I forgive him*. I never put his name to it. Now that it was in the air, there was a finality of it all. I said it, and I couldn’t take it back. *I forgive... for assaulting me*. That was the heaviest sentence ever to leave my lips.

Fr. Sean began praying over me. His words moved quietly and quickly. He spoke in different languages; most of the time I didn’t know what he was saying. He used his thumb to trace a cross on my forehead before praying some more. And while he prayed words I didn’t

even understand, I was sitting there, subtly vibrating in place, trying to hold myself together so I wouldn't fall apart.

He finished his blessing, and I looked at him.

"I want to do one more thing," he said. "It's called 'A Father's Prayer.' Close your eyes and tell me what you see."

An image I've seen the past few weeks pops into my head. Beautiful, detailed, silver, and white clouds float in the picture—a soft, almost unnoticeable yellow glow behind them. Standing in front of the clouds is a large, gray cross.

I told Father what I saw.

"Here is what I see," he began. "I see a three-year-old girl, exploring the world in a field of sunflowers. She's wandering around, joyful, not a care in the world. A man dressed in white, with white hair, walks up to her. He's strong." As he describes the scene, I could see it perfectly in my head. "He walks over to her and picks her up. He looks into her eyes and says, 'You are my beloved daughter. Whatever you need, come to me and my son.'"

"Even though you are only three, you seem to understand what God the Father is saying. Then he carries you off into the clouds you saw."

We sat in silence. I could see myself at three years old. I could see God the Father holding me, carrying me in the field full of sunflowers.

Father gave me one more blessing, and as he prayed over me, my soul began to settle.

"Thank you, Father," I said when he finished.

"God bless you, Caroline."

"God bless you."

October 19, 2019

9:00 AM

I sat in a pew with Riley as Fr. Gray preached his homily. I hadn't been paying attention at all. Not for the opening prayers, not for the readings, not for the gospel, and now not for anything Fr. Gray was saying. I would rise and sit, go through the calisthenics, but my mind was far away. I had been numb ever since I woke up. I felt empty.

By the time the consecration came around, I could still barely focus.

"Take this," Fr. Gray said as he held up a host, showing it to the congregation. "All of you and eat of it. For this is my body, which will be given up for you." Father raised the host in the air, the altar server rang the bells, and I became fixated on the host. It's the most crucial moment of a Catholic mass, where the essence of the bread changes. It was no longer bread, but the body of Christ.

Then it clicked.

It was like a door blew open, a missing puzzle piece put into place, the first domino to fall, pushing the whole line down.

The numbness I was experiencing was there because I was looking for something.

The hand.

That ghost of a hand that had rested on my throat for two years, the pain and the grief that came with it. I was looking for it.

You look for something you don't have.

And if I didn't have it, that means it was gone.

I closed my eyes and gasped for a breath of air. An image entered my mind. I saw a human-shaped glass container. It was filled with murky, brown liquid. Suddenly, the liquid

started to drain. The head of the glass container became clear, then the shoulders, then down to the elbows. Something was slowly vacuuming the liquid out.

Then something else began to fill the empty space. A warm, pastel, glowing yellow floated inside. It never touched the brown liquid, but the more the liquid drained, the more the yellow grew.

And I understood what it meant.

Jesus was slowly removing all the pain, grief, self-hatred, anger, depression, anxiety – everything. Every shred of brokenness that he could heal, he was taking it, and in return, he was giving me something else. Something I hadn't felt before—pure joy. My shoulders relaxed as peace washed over me.

I got up from my pew and walked up to Father. Hands folded, I knelt on my knees.

“The Body of Christ,” he said, holding a host in front of me.

“Amen.”

A Few Days Later

I walked inside Holy Ghost and headed down the stairs. I had a free day, so I decided to go to adoration. I entered the chapel, genuflected, then made my way to my usual spot. The front pew on the left side of the chapel, sitting near the center aisle. The same spot I would sit at over the summer. The same place I knelt a few days ago, begging Jesus for healing.

Now I came here with no petitions, no requests. I was here in full thanksgiving for the healing I was given.

I knelt down and looked at the altar. I felt my eyes bulge, and the air in my lungs vanished when I looked at what was sitting before it.

The sight I saw brought me back to Resurrection, back to Fr. Sean's vision. Me, three years old, being carried by God the Father.

What stood before the altar sealed the truth of the healing I received; sitting there was a large flower arrangement, and within that arrangement, there were so many sunflowers.

Epilogue

It was January 8, 2020, when I stood on the damp sand, the loose grains shifting under my feet every time the surf washed over, the tide pushing in and pulling back. I stared out at the openness of the water, looking at the horizon, separating two shades of color. The water was a rich blue, while the sky was the softest orange. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the horizon, a giant radiating yellow orb inching down like it was submerging itself into the water. To my right, the beach extended for miles, and to my left was the Santa Monica Pier. The lights from the Ferris wheel just turned on, and you could see all the people bustling about, and you could hear the energetic shouts of children on the rides. The earbuds in my ears drowned out the noises the pier made. I was listening to Audrey Assaud's "Show Me." I thought back to the last time I watched the sunset at Santa Monica.

It had been two years ago, December 10, 2017. Mandy and I were spending the evening together because the next day she was moving back to her home state of Minnesota. Like me, she had decided to leave California and finish college somewhere else, but I still had one more quarter to complete. I was listening to Danny Gokey's "Tell Your Heart to Beat Again," a song I had been playing on repeat for the last month. I was still trying to process what had happened to me.

Mandy and I walked along the beach, and I looked at the sunset. It was cloudy, and the sky was gray from the smoke of the fires burning 20 miles away. Yet, through the cloudiness, light could be seen in the distance. The sun looked so far away, but it was there. The lyric from the song, "In this moment heaven's working, everything for your good," played in my ear. And I felt it...

Hope.

It was gone in an instant, but it was there.

"You're going to be okay," something had told me.

That memory hit me.

I compared that sunset to the one in front of me. It was clear, not a cloud in sight, and the colors were bright and captivating. Peace washed over me, filling me with the most comforting consolation.

"I'm okay," I said to myself. It took two years, but I'm okay. I evaluated the timeline of my life.

2013 to 2014 – migraine

2014 to 2015 – migraine

2015 to 2016 – migraine

2016 to 2017 – migraine

2017 to 2018 – trauma

2018 to 2019 – denial

2019 to 2020 – grief

Four years of physical illness.

A year of trauma.

A year of denial.

A year of emotional, psychological, and spiritual torment.

Seven years total.

Seven years of being chained, whether it was to hospital beds or to Charley's hand on my throat, I was a prisoner to brokenness. Shackled to the brokenness of my body and the brokenness of other humans.

Seven years of hopelessness, remembering the nights I watched the sun go down and was left in darkness, never having any hope that it would rise again; only now to be witnessing the most amazing sunset knowing that when it rose the next day, a new chapter of my life would begin.

Seven years of suffering.

Fr. Gray told me once that the number seven symbolizes completeness in scripture. While I was sure that I would suffer in the future, I stood in the surf pondering all that had happened those seven years, and a sense of finality hit me. I felt that this huge chapter of pain was coming to an end, that it was complete.

I couldn't believe it.

To finally be able to say "I'm okay" without any asterisks – such a strange feeling.

As the sun continued to go down and the music switched to another song, I thought about everything I've learned.

I learned to suffer without my faith, and it almost killed me.

I learned to suffer with my faith, and while that suffering was different, more emotional and intense, even in the days where I wanted my life to end, I had something to live for, or rather, I had someone.

Jesus.

Both times Jesus guided me through and healed me.

And he completely changed my life.

He made me a new person, and as I stood there, ready to walk away, I couldn't wait to meet this new woman I had become.