



When a truck hits a tree at seventy miles per hour, everything happens over the course of one second. Within the first tenth of a second, the front bumper and grill have collapsed, the engine demolished, the tires punctured by steel shivers. The entire frame begins to break the momentum by the second tenth of a second, but the body of the driver continues forward at the combined weight—thanks to the force of gravity plus momentum—of close to three thousand pounds. By the time four tenths of a second have passed, the front two feet of the truck have been completely demolished while the rear end of the truck continues to travel at about forty miles per hour. The driver continues at fifty-five. By the seventh tenth of a second the driver is dead, crushed between the front seat and the steering column, shoes ripped from his feet, broken steel puncturing his chest.

What happens if that truck hits a car instead of a tree? What if the truck is traveling at sixty-eight miles per hour?

Everything changes.

'How are you?' I ask finally. We've already had a half-hour's worth of silence after the initial greeting and complimentary catching up.

Johnny looks at his half-full glass for a moment, spinning it between his fingers. 'It's been a long week.'

When a truck hits your stationary car while going sixty-eight miles-per-hour, one of two things can happen: your head snaps back, killing you instantly. Or you live, without a scratch on your body to show for it.

'How's Sarah?' he asks.

I feel my ears get warm, even sitting near one of the bar's open doors. 'She still blames herself.'

Johnny nods. 'It could have just as easily been her. I don't ... it just as easily could have been the other way around. I'm just glad she's okay.'

Such words of condolence have done little to soothe my sister's mind.

'She doesn't have a goddamned scratch on her,' I say. 'Just a few bruises.'

When you see your best friend's neck pull back with all the force of three thousand pounds behind it before everything goes black, there are bruises. They hide under the skin, just out of sight, and they take longer to heal.

'It's a miracle,' he says. He takes a liberal drink from his glass. It's his fourth, but I'm not going to stop him because I know he needs it. 'I'm just so glad she's okay. I'm so glad.'

I look away from his glassy eyes, down to my half-empty beer. My mind is still playing out the scene at the hospital that night, the frantic drive from work, my heart beating in my ears, unsure of the details of the accident. At the hospital emergency room, being greeted by the priest-on-duty and falling over on the information desk, immediately fearing the worst. The relief when I saw her lying on the gurney, wiggling her toes when I ran a shaky finger along one bare sole.

'I passed out,' I say with a weak laugh. 'Did I tell you that?'

He shakes his head.

'I literally blacked out on the info desk because they had a fucking priest come and take me to my sister's room. I thought she was dead. Or dying. There should be some kind of fucking rule about that. No priests allowed unless it's life-or-death.'

He laughs a little bit. Of course he doesn't find it very funny—his sister is gone. Mine is alive and it's completely unfair. There's no reason the two of them should have ended up on absolute opposite ends of the spectrum.

'I tried to keep it from her,' I say. 'I thought it would be better for her to hear from our parents. She turned on the news station while I was talking to the nurse.'

The high, wailing screams of my parents on the other end of the line after I told them that their friends' daughter was dead. That their daughter's best friend was gone forever. Screams that traveled two hundred miles and knocked me against the smooth, white walls of the E.R. hallway. I still can't get them out of my head. Their cries bounce from one ear to the other, never losing momentum.

'You did everything you could,' he says. The water has left his eyes for a moment. I'm grateful because I can't stand to see this person, the very same person who once saved me from a group pummeling in eighth grade, the very same person who sprained his knee skiing and tried to go down the hill one more time—I can't stand to see him broken.

'We got a lawyer,' I say. 'We're going to sue him as soon as the state patrol formally presses charges.'

Johnny nods. 'They said they probably would. Manslaughter, at least.'

'I talked to him about taking you in, too. To file a lawsuit.'

He nods again, but doesn't respond.

I lean over the table. 'It might help to alleviate the pain. A little, at least. To know you got something out of all this. We've been through so much over these past two weeks. Your family's been through so much.'

He finishes his beer with one more drink. 'I don't know. I just ... you're doing it for the right reasons. You're doing it because your sister can still use the money. And your parents had to take time off from work. And you had to take off from work.'

'It would help your family, too.'

His eyes are glassy again. He's doing his best not to let himself cry in front of me, as if I could possibly lose any respect for someone who's been so strong in the face of tragedy. 'I don't know. He doesn't even have any insurance. Suing him would be pointless.'

'It doesn't matter,' I say. 'He shouldn't get away scot-free. Whatever settlement we can get, you could set up a scholarship foundation in her name. Donate it to a medical college. Recoup some of the losses from your family missing so much work.'

'I don't know.'

'He deserves everything he fucking gets.' I can already feel the hot water stinging my eyes. 'He ruined two lives. He doesn't deserve to just .... God. To just walk away without anything. I went online and I found the fucker's rap sheet, and it's a mile long. Reckless driving. Driving while intoxicated. Fucking ... *exhibition driving*. Exhibition driving! I don't even know what the fuck that even means.'

'It just seems so trivial at this point.' He shakes his head, staring down at the table—thankfully, I think, so he doesn't see the tears in my eyes.

'Then I'll do it for the both of us. I promise you we'll make him pay with everything he can.'

He nods slightly, however reserved he may be about serving a cold dish of revenge. I can't understand his tolerance any more than he can understand my own lust for punishment. For him, a quiet period of mourning will alleviate the pain of losing someone so close. For me, nothing short of seeing the driver of the truck behind bars, spending every day of his waking life looking over his shoulder will suffice. Knowing he'll be sold off every night for a carton of cigarettes is the only cold compress that can sufficiently cool my hot forehead.

'You going back to the city?' he asks.

I shake my head. 'Not until my sister is all right. Or starts healing.' Not until I've made my peace with this black hole of a town.

I drive him home before heading back into town. At home, the lights on the second floor are out, so I take the three garbage bags out of the trunk and carry them into the basement. The noise wakes my mom up—she comes downstairs to check up on me, clutching her red bathrobe tight to stave off the cold draft.

'How's Johnny doing?' she asks.

'As good as can be,' I say quietly. I can't take my eyes off the bags.

'What are those?'

I don't answer for a moment. Something's stuck in my eye, and it's causing my diaphragm to seize. I take a deep breath. 'Clothes I brought home that I don't need anymore. I'm just going to go through and see if anything's worth dropping off at Goodwill.'

'Do you want any help?'

I shake my head.

'Do you need anything?'

I inhale hard through my nose. The mucus gets stuck in the bridge, sending flashes of pain through my forehead. 'I'm good right now.'

'Okay.'

I wait for her to leave before opening the first bag. I go through everything, sorting it into two piles: my sister's things and her friend's things. Everything that the Sheriff found in the car at the scene of the accident. Everything they had taken on their weekend-long visit to their friend's dorm at State College. It's a lot of clothes, mostly, muddled together; but I've known my sister and her friend long enough to discern their tastes.

At the second bag, I need to make a third pile. A shoe, gray with long heels, has a blemish of red blood on it. I place a torn purse and a pair of large pink sunglasses into the third pile, as well. The sunglasses have dried, dark liquid on both lenses that flakes off like old syrup when my fingers brush against it. I have to work faster through the third bag in order to keep my mind distracted from recreating the events of that night two weeks ago. I sort through the purses, their wallets—both of their fake ID's are still there, despite the Sheriff having looked through it. One of the coats is ripped to shreds. One of the pillows, likewise, has a large gaping hole where factory feathers have begun to flow out in wet clumps.

Everything is wet. The snow must have crept in after the crash, after the windows had been reduced to so many shards on the icy concrete of I-94.

I have to stop and close my eyes. Something is telling me to go up to the second floor and check in on my sister. It always tells me this in the middle of the night, clogging and suffocating my dreams until I wake and groggily walk down the hall and peer inside. She's always lying on her stomach, head buried in her pillow, seemingly waiting for the nightmare to be over. For her best friend of fifteen years to call her up on her phone and ask her if she wants to go out for the night. For the pain to finally dissipate and the pressure in her chest to cease.

I head upstairs and check up on her. Her cat is lying at her feet—he hasn't moved from the bed for anything, knowing something is wrong. We can't even pull him away to eat. There's a pin sitting on her end table that says 'Chicks Before Dicks' that Johnny's sister had hidden inside my sister's clothes a week before the accident. My sister found it yesterday while sorting through her clothes.

Before I shut the door again, I hear her crying softly into her pillow. I sit down next to her and gently rub her back with the tips of my fingers until she falls asleep again. We're still kids, no matter how old we are. No matter how far I move away, I still need my parents for something like this.

I walk into the kitchen to grab a glass of orange juice, but my hand instead reaches instinctively for the phone hanging over the stove. I pick up the receiver and dial the number by heart—I've called so many times, let it ring once, then hung up before he could answer. This time I dial and I think about the bags sitting on my workbench. I think about the third pile. I think about the dark brown stains of blood on the tattered blue jacket.

He answers after the fifth ring.

'Jeremy?' I ask in a somewhat shaky voice.

'Yeah,' he says. He has the dry, throaty voice of someone who's been asleep, locked safely away in REM. It takes me three hours to fall asleep at night. My sister hasn't slept for more than a few hours at a time since the accident.

'Are you sorry?' I ask.

He's silent for a moment, maybe contemplating hanging up. 'Who is this?'

'For the accident,' I say. 'Does any of it even bother you?'

More silence. Then: 'Fuck you.'

'You killed someone,' I say through choked-back sobs. Every word I'd planned, every speech I'd gone through in my head, jumped ship the moment I heard his voice and now I have to ad-lib my anger. 'You killed my sister's best friend, and no matter how many days go by, she'll never be able to fully forget. Her back ... the pain won't ever go away. Something to always remind her of what happened because you were too fucking careless to slow down with the rest of the cars.' I say this last word with such contempt, condemning anyone who drives an SUV with a reckless disregard for the safety of others.

'Fuck you.' He hangs up the phone.

I call again. This time, the answering machine picks up.

'I'm going to sue you for everything I can,' I say into the machine, hoping he's listening. 'And I'm going to convince her friend's family to sue you, too. I hope the state patrol presses murder charges on you for what you did. My sister had to watch her *best friend* die while she got away without a single bruise.' There are bruises, I remind myself. You just can't see them.

I hang up the phone and escape to the back porch before bursting into tears. Outside, the temperature has dropped significantly, threatening to freeze the tears to my cheeks before they have a chance to roll off. I get into my

parents' car and start it up so I don't freeze to death while I try to stop the wet hiccups. I go back inside, downstairs, putting the third pile into one of the empty trash bags. I double-knot the top of the bag, squeezing out as much stale air as I possibly can, trying not to inhale the stench of dried blood and J.Lo perfume.

I pull out of the driveway and begin driving down the main street. I take different side roads randomly through the neighborhood, letting my mind wander wherever it pleases while the music from the speakers drowns out the sounds of my parents' screams. I don't know how to get to the dump from here, and so I just keep traveling south, trying not to think of the bag in my trunk.

On Superior Street, I spot something furry up ahead in the middle of the road, slowing down to a crawl when I see the tail move. The possum turns its head to look at me, its eyes illuminated by my headlights. I stop right in front of it, putting on my high-beams to try and scare it away. The possum cocks its head, uncaring of the large two-ton beast heaving heavy exhaust into the air. It returns to sniffing at the small clump of matted fur and blood next to one of the yellow median lines. I watch it poke with its snout at the remains of what must have been a baby, while beyond it the concrete is mapped with one dark tread mark of the culprit car, painting its path in a trail of frozen blood.

I wait, but the mother refuses to leave the unrecognizable mass of decaying flesh. I want to get out of the car and sit next to the possum. I want to grab the possum and hold her and tell her everything will be all right, that the pain of loss will fade over time. I want to hold her all night and never let go.