

Between Here and Somewhere

Chapter 1

Journal Entry – Not for school. Not for therapy.

I'm not entirely sure what I'm supposed to write in these.

Doctor Whirrel gave me a notebook once in therapy—a real therapist, not the school one. It was dark blue and had this eccentric design on the front: bright flowers with two outstretched hands in the middle. I guess it was supposed to feel important, or more welcoming.

It also had this little red ribbon to tie around it when I wasn't writing. Not that I ever wrote much.

This isn't the same notebook. This one is mine.

It doesn't have a fancy cover—just a torn black journal from the back of Grandpa's closet. We cleared his stuff out yesterday. I kept a few other things, but this is really the coolest thing I found.

The first few pages are filled with stew recipes and notes about the garden. I haven't torn them out.

I like knowing he wrote something here first.

Makes it easier to start.

Yesterday Mom told me the school thing is "non-negotiable." Not "good for you" or "helpful." Just "non-negotiable." I guess her point was that this was going to work whether I liked it or not.

Apparently, if I won't talk to professional, qualified therapists, then I have to try the school therapy club.

Her logic seems kind of flawed.

If a real therapist didn't have the answers, what's a bunch of random students and a schoolteacher supposed to know?

Mom cried after she told me, although she tried to hide it. I'm not entirely sure she was crying about the therapy, but if I go, then maybe it will make her cry less. I didn't say anything. I haven't been saying a whole lot lately, which is why I'm writing it here instead.

I guess I should explain a bit. About Arthur.

I always just called him Grandpa, even though Mom said it sounded too formal. That's kind of the point, I think.

He was formal.

Not in a “no elbows on the table” kind of way—more like the type of guy who wore a button-up just to water tomatoes.

His hands were always dirty. Earth-stained. Even in winter, somehow.

He didn’t talk much. Maybe that’s where I get it.

I don’t really know how to describe what it’s like without him here.

He was just... there. Always in the background.

Like part of the house. Like the smell of old wood and dried herbs in the kitchen.

Like the way the windows froze on the inside during winter, and he’d just say, “Good. Keep the heat in.”

He hated therapy. Thought it was a scam. “Talk is cheap,” he’d say. “And grief is private.”

I think that’s why Mom waited for him to die before forcing me into this group therapy school thing.

He would’ve made the idea seem so stupid.

Which it is.

Anyway. Today’s the first session.

Room 107A, right after lunch.

They said it’s “informal” and “just a conversation,” but therapy never is—no matter what kind.

The journal entry stopped before Eli’s pen had reached a new line.

“Eli, are you ready for school?” his mom called softly from downstairs.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he sank deeper into the chair by his window, the notebook resting unopened on the desk.

“Yes, Mom. As excited as ever...” He rolled his eyes and sighed, sliding off the chair to lie flat on his floor, staring up at the ceiling.

It was strange—almost like he was watching a memory. His younger self playing with Grandpa in the garden.

It wasn’t real, but the scene flickered softly on the ceiling, like a fading film.

“What on earth are you doing?” his mother recoiled. He hadn’t heard her come up the stairs as she stood in his doorway. “You’re going to get hair all over your clothes.”

Eli gradually lifted his skinny body off the floor and dusted the hair off his jeans.

"Does it get easier, Mom?... Missing him?"

"Oh, Eli," she moaned softly before wrapping herself around him. "I don't think so. I mean, maybe," she said quietly. "I heard once that grief just changes shape over time. It's not about getting past it—it's about carrying it with you. Learning how to live around it."

He leaned into her, the warmth of her shoulder a quiet anchor. The words sank in slow and steady, and for once, the lump in his throat didn't tighten.

"Thanks, Mom," he murmured.

She squeezed him gently before pulling back, offering a tired but genuine smile.

"We'll figure it out. One day at a time."

Eli stepped back and grabbed his backpack from the chair beside him. It was worn and long overdue for a replacement—but it was his.

The house was huge—too huge. Like the kind of huge that felt endless if you were twelve years old with no perception of space.

When Eli was that exact age, he'd spent an entire rainy weekend tracing the layout of the house with Arthur. They'd walked through every hallway, every odd little room, and drawn it all out from a bird's-eye view.

It wasn't exactly a blueprint an architect could use—the lines were crooked, and most of the labels were inside jokes—but it killed the day and, weirdly, actually made it easier for Eli to navigate afterward.

The place felt a little less like a mansion and a little more like a map he could carry in his head. Like Arthur had helped shrink the walls down to something manageable.

He headed downstairs, the quiet echoing off polished floors and perfect walls. As he passed through the kitchen, the smell of toast and coffee hung in the air.

His older sister, Maeve—already dressed and blasting music through her headphones—brushed past him.

She didn't say a word. Just stuck a piece of toast into his mouth as she swerved by and headed out to the car.

"Hank yu," Eli muffled, before taking a bite.

Maeve was small—even for a girl. She was thin, sure, but she stood at a very short 4'11". Her long blonde hair was scrunched into an untidy ball that had nearly fallen out. She wore ripped baggy jeans and a crop top over a jacket. Maeve was quiet, moody—typical for a seventeen-year-old girl.

She was the kind of pretty that was subtle, like she didn't need excessive makeup. She looked a lot like their mother in that sense.

Outside, the gravel driveway curved past perfectly trimmed bushes and a row of massive oak trees. His mom was already waiting, hands shoved into her coat pockets, staring up at the gray morning sky.

Eli slung his backpack over one shoulder and slid into the passenger seat without a word. The engine hummed, breaking the quiet as they pulled away, heading toward school and the first official day of the year.

"So, Maeve," Rachel Kerrigan said, glancing toward the back seat, "I saw Coach Donald at the grocery store yesterday. He says Danny's probably starting on Friday."

She checked the rearview mirror, trying to see if Maeve was even listening.

"Sooo... are you excited?"

Maeve responded with a half-hearted "mhm," more out of obligation than interest. Her eyes were glued to the window, her headphones clearly cancelling any sound at all.

"Is his knee still busted? First game of the year... would hate for the team to have a limping quarterback," Rachel added, stretching the sentence like it might hook Maeve into a reply.

Nothing.

"You know, Mom," Eli muttered from the passenger seat, "I think the Hawks could actually make regionals this year."

He wasn't even sure who the quarterback of the Hawks was. If it hadn't been for Maeve's little romance—

Even then, he still wasn't sure which of the boys she brought over was the quarterback.

For a moment, his mom glanced away from the road, surprised that Eli was actually paying attention—and even more surprised he knew something about the team.

"Don't tell me you've been sneaking out of your room to watch the games last year," she said, half-joking, half-serious. "That's more than Maeve does for her *own* boyfriend."

She chuckled quietly, already bracing for Maeve's silent treatment to last at least twenty minutes.

“Sorry to break it to you, Mom, but I still haven’t seen them play. Some of the players, I think, were walking by me last Monday, and I overheard something about playoffs.”

Rachel took one hand off the wheel and placed it gently on Eli’s shoulder, smiling at him.

“I know, son. Thank you anyway.”

There was a quiet pause in the car as the engine hummed, the world outside blurred by early morning light. There was no conversation after that, and there hadn’t needed to be. Rachel just turned up the radio and drove. To do anything more than that would have ruined the moment.

Eli glanced out the window as the world shifted from trees and fences to sidewalks and students. The closer they got to Ridgemont High, the more kids he saw—pouring out of cars, lingering in groups, laughing like life hadn’t touched them yet.

And somehow, that made it feel real.

Not the school. Not the building or the bell schedule, or the textbooks. But the moment.

This moment, where he was fifteen and everything felt like it weighed too much. The moment where finding a lunch seat felt harder than calculus, and just existing in a hallway made you wonder if everyone else had already figured out how to be a person, while you were still learning to breathe.

There’s something about being a teenager that makes every interaction feel like a test you didn’t study for. Like your entire personality is being quietly graded.

He pressed his forehead against the glass, watching it all roll by.

It was unbearable, really. The way everyone else seemed to belong so easily.

And then Eli saw her.

Not in the movie way—not in slow motion, not with violins, not with the world suddenly fading out.

Just... there.

At Richie’s Gourmets & Gas, the most cliché-named gas station in a fifty-mile radius, standing beneath a crooked sign that buzzed with half-dead neon. She was filling her car with one hand and scrolling her phone with the other, like she’d done it a hundred times before. Probably had.

She looked up briefly. A glance. Just enough. Her eyes were green—really green, like how moss looks when it’s wet—and they locked with Eli’s through the car window for half a second too long to be accidental.

Why that moment? He thought. *What made her look up? Look at me?*

Eli couldn't help but notice how pretty she was. Not in some over-the-top way, just... real. Her black hair wasn't perfect, but it kind of worked with the way it fell around her face. And those green eyes—bright and sharp—stuck with him longer than they should have. The summer dress she wore was weird for January, but it made her stand out, like she couldn't feel the cold.

No smile. No dramatic expression. Just a look. Like she'd seen him, and he'd seen her, and that was enough.

Eli faced forward again, eyes fixed on the road, trying not to look back. Trying to be casual. Detached. But he couldn't help it. He had to see her again—just to make sure she was real.

Twisting in his seat, he glanced back at the gas station. There she still was.

No, she wasn't still watching the car. Wasn't clinging to the moment like he somehow was. She was already walking toward the glass doors of the convenience store, phone in hand, like nothing had happened at all.

No second glance. No dramatic pause. Just... life, continuing.

It was small, miniscule to the world but something in that moment changed for Eli.

"You okay, sweetie? Did you see someone from school?"

Oh! Was it Gregory? I like Gregory. He's a good boy. You know, when you two were kids, you—"

"Mom," Eli cut in before the memory could drag itself out again. "It wasn't Gregory."

He paused, still half-turned toward the gas station, even though it was long gone in the rearview. "I'm... I'm not even sure who she was."

Rachel hit the brakes. Hard.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Eli jerked forward in his seat, eyes wide as the car jolted to a stop on a main road.

"She?!" Rachel looked over at him, her eyes narrowed in dramatic horror. "Eli Kerrigan, you are far too young for girls."

She wasn't joking. Not like before.

"You know your father and I waited until we were twenty-five to even think about Maeve.

I don't need a mini Eli Kerrigan throwing up and crying you awake in the middle of the night while you're trying to get a diploma!"

The silence was nuclear. Until—

“Oh my God, Mom,” Maeve finally snapped from the back seat. “He’s not *fucking* anyone. Look at him. He’s like... the furthest thing from action I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, Mom, I’m not... fucking anyone.” Eli felt uncomfortable saying something like that in front of his mom.

“Don’t use that language, Eli. And Maeve, what have I told you about swearing in front of your brother?”

Maeve rolled her eyes and put her headphones back on.

“Sorry, Mom. I don’t know any girls. I don’t know anyone, really. Gregory is all, I suppose.”

Rachel sighed, the fight draining out of her. She looked over at her son—red-faced, slouched deep in the passenger seat.

“Well, that’s going to change, okay? This year, you’re going to make so many friends. Just... no girls. Please. Promise me that?”

And if you can’t... then at least, for God’s sake, use protection.”

Eli groaned and turned away, practically pressing his face against the window. “Mommm,” he whined. “Please. Just start the car. This is actually killing me.”

Without a word, Rachel turned the key, flicked the music all the way up, and rolled her window down—just enough to let every nearby student feel the full force of how agonizing it was for the two teenagers held hostage in that car.

Chapter 2

Eli stepped through the school doors, the noise crashing into him like a wave. Lockers slammed, sneakers squeaked, and somewhere a loud laugh sliced through the chatter. He kept his head down, backpack straps digging into his shoulders, eyes flicking over groups of kids who all seemed to move with purpose—except him. Maeve had already met up with her friends, leaving Eli alone on the battlefield.

First class was English, room 204B, upstairs. He stuck close to the right side of the hallway, trying not to get lost. But it wasn’t like when he’d walked through the house with Arthur, mapping every twist and corner. This place wasn’t a puzzle to figure out—it was a maze designed to swallow you whole.

Each step felt heavier. The walls seemed to close in, the noise rising into a roar in his ears. This was the real world—the harsh, brutal one he wasn’t sure he was ready for. Eli found Room 204B, where a group of loud, outgoing teens—who looked older than him, or maybe just more mature—stood outside, waiting for the teacher to welcome them in.

Eli wasn't as close to Gregory as his mother thought, but right now, he wished for nothing more than to see a familiar face.

He hung back by the door, not really sure where to stand. The hallway was noisy and crowded, but nobody seemed to notice him either way. He stared at the floor and tried to blend in, feeling like a ghost moving through the chaos.

The bell rang, and the group started moving inside. A girl with bright red hair passed by, laughing with her friends like it was no big deal.

Eli scanned the room, trying to find a seat without making it obvious he had no idea where to sit.

A tall, slender man with a mustache and thick black hair that reached the bottom of his ears, wearing a cheap but neatly pressed brown suit, waved everyone in.

"Alright, come on in. Find a seat. Welcome to high school. I promise I'll ease you in—just not too gently."

He waited for the room to settle, then added, "I'm Mr. Frenson, and this is English 1. We're kicking things off with *The Catcher in the Rye*. Don't worry, you're not behind—yet."

The room kept buzzing until Mr. Frenson glanced toward the back.

"And Mr. Ekkels... glad to see a familiar face. Let's see if we can turn that D into a C-minus this time."

Eli shuffled in, trying to look like he belonged. He finally found a seat next to a boy wearing odd sneakers.

"I don't need grades, Mr. Frenson," said a deeper voice. "You're gonna see me on ESPN one day."

The guy looked too old to be a freshman—bigger, broader, with a patchy beard and a Ridgemonk Hawks football jacket slung over one shoulder.

Mr. Frenson tilted his head. "What about that knee, Mr. Ekkels? You might need those grades if your knee doesn't heal right."

The boy scowled. "Yeah. Whatever."

Knee... Eli thought. Where had he heard about a bad knee? And then it hit him.

That was Danny. Maeve's boyfriend, Danny. The school's quarterback.

Eli had never paid much attention to the boys Maeve brought home, but still—

What was he doing in a freshman English class?

“Now, where were we?”

There was a short silence before Mr. Frenson caught his bearings.

“Ah, yes. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Raise your hand if anyone is familiar already.”

His voice was deep but gentle, like he understood what it meant to be fifteen—or supposed to be fifteen.

“Don’t worry if nobody has. I’m not giving out brownie points.”

Danny slowly raised his hand, giving the class a laugh.

“Mr. Ekkels! Nice to see you’ve fit it into your training schedule,” Mr. Frenson said without looking up from the roster.

Danny gave a lazy nod and mumbled something that sounded like “Yeah.”

Mr. Frenson paused. “Remind me, then. What’s Holden’s little brother’s name?”

Danny blinked. “Urm... Jake?”

Mr. Frenson just smiled—not unkindly. “Let’s say you’re due for a closer read.”

A few quiet laughs. Not loud. Not cruel. The moment passed.

“Moving on. Throughout the first semester—”

Mr. Frenson’s words blurred as Eli’s attention drifted, soaking in the hum of the classroom. So this was high school. Not terrible, he thought. Not something he needed to escape just yet.

Before he knew it, the bell rang.

Class was over.

Eli blinked down at the notepad in front of him.

Scrawled halfway down the page in messy handwriting:
Holden says he’s ‘yellow’ but picks fights anyway—why?

He didn’t remember writing it.

Was this high school too? Skipping through time, forgetting the moment?

As the students spilled out into the hallway, Mr. Frenson called after Danny.
“And Mr. Ekkels, I hope this is the last year I see you in my class.”

Danny didn't hear the lighthearted jab, but Eli did. He lingered behind, quietly packing his bag. The room was suddenly just him and Mr. Frenson.

"Kerrigan, right?" Mr. Frenson asked, holding up the roster. "I taught Maeve Kerrigan a couple of years ago. Any relation?"

He smiled warmly, waiting for Eli's answer. Eli avoided his gaze, still stuffing his books into his backpack.

"Sister," Eli said softly. "Maeve is my sister."

Mr. Frenson placed the roster on the desk. "Is that so? I liked Maeve. She was quiet—like you. Maybe in a different way, but she was a good student."

Eli gave a faint smirk. "Yeah, she's... uh, she's like that. Danny-well, Danny's her boyfriend." He didn't know what compelled him to share that connection.

Mr. Frenson's smile froze, then twisted slightly into something between surprise and amusement. His eyebrows lifted, mouth parting just a little.

"Danny Ekkels?" he asked, blinking. "That's... an interesting pairing." He scratched the back of his head, processing the fascinating news.

"Well, Eli, it's nice to meet you. I'd hate to keep you from your next class, and well, I have another class of my own to teach." He gestured towards the door with both arms. Eli wrapped his backpack tightly around himself and exited.

Science was far less notable. No Danny Ekkels. No Mr. Frenson. Just a biology classroom filled with kids who all felt familiar with each other, but not with Eli.

He did, for the first time ever, find out that octopuses have three hearts—and that two of them stop beating when they swim.

It didn't make class more exciting, but it stuck with him.

Maybe because it sounded like something that shouldn't be true.

The bell rang again, signaling dinner break — and, for Eli, that meant one thing: School Therapy. Room 107A He'd done a decent job of staying unnoticed up until now, but this felt like one of those situations where being invisible would be impossible.

Eli squeezed his way through the crowded hallways, shrinking with every step. Not that he was small — at fifteen, he was a solid 5'10", taller than most. But the weight of his slouch and the burden in his chest made him feel two feet shorter.

It wasn't just the crowd or the noise. It was the constant reminder that no one here knew him. Worse, no one cared.

Eli had worked his way back down to the ground floor. A bulletin board sagged under the weight of flyers and announcements. At the center, a glossy poster for the Ridgemoor Hawks Season Opener practically swallowed the rest. A red-and-gold blur of a football helmet exploded across the paper, with bold letters shouting *FRIDAY 7PM – PACK THE STANDS!*. Someone had drawn devil horns and a mustache on the quarterback's face using a Sharpie. How cliché, Eli thought whilst chuckling to himself, mainly because he knew who Danny was now and he *didn't* suit the moustache. Beneath it, half-covered, were reminders for track tryouts, drama club rehearsals, and a sign-up sheet for the blood drive. In the bottom corner, a faded "Winter Formal" poster from two months ago still clung on with a single thumbtack.

Just below the board, a crumpled leaflet lay pinned haphazardly to a cork strip: *Therapy Group A.K.A MONDAY CLUB — Room 107A — Welcoming all students*. The edges were torn, as if no one had bothered to keep it neat. Eli's gaze lingered on the words longer than it had with the rest of the board.

The moment he arrived at Room 107A was far more fearsome than it should have been, with sweat dripping off of his back and a painful stitch in his stomach.

It didn't look like the kind of place students were supposed to go. The windows were covered in that fogged plastic film schools used when they couldn't afford blinds, and a faded sign with a peeling corner marked it as "Faculty Storage." But this was it. He was sure.

The hallway outside 107A was quiet.

A few posters lined the wall—"You Are Not Alone!" and "Mental Health Matters!"—in fonts too cheerful to be comforting. He stared at them for a moment, then looked at the door.

Eli knocked twice. A woman's voice called, sing-song but tired: "Come innn."

He hesitated, hand on the door knob, and slowly turned it, nudging the door open just a crack. At first, all he saw was a narrow sliver of darkness and a faint, stale smell drifting out. He blinked against the dimness.

With a small push, the door creaked open a bit wider. On the left, the corner revealed itself—a chaotic stack of cracked basketballs, dusty helmets, and frayed jerseys piled precariously next to rusted filing cabinets. The smell grew stronger now: something oddly sweet, like burnt Pop-Tarts left too long in a toaster, mixed with a sharp chemical tang that made his nose wrinkle.

He stepped inside, the floor creaking beneath him. His eyes adjusted, and more of the room came into view—a battered AV cart, its wheels frozen in place, leaning against a peeling wall. The stale air hung heavy, like the weight of forgotten years pressing down.

Then, at the center of the room, a loose circle of chairs sat quietly, some empty, some occupied. Eli's gaze scanned the circle.

A tall Black boy with a large afro, wearing a grey hoodie that had “Pixies” written in the middle, leaned back with arms crossed, eyes half-lidded in boredom. Another boy, stockier and fidgety, tapped his jittery knees and chewed a straw wrapper nervously. He wore a red hat with a crocodile on it, mouth gaping open. A woman in a cardigan — probably the therapist — looked up from her clipboard and gave a warm, practiced smile.

And then—

There she was.

The girl from the gas station.

Chapter 3

She hadn’t noticed him yet, mid-laugh, tucked into her seat like she belonged here. She still wore that same white summer dress with black boots. A tattoo on her right arm read “Know Thyself” just above her forearm. Eli’s chest tightened and loosened all at once. He froze.

He closed the door behind him gently, careful to make as little noise as possible. As his hand slipped from the knob, he could feel the gaze of the entire room pressing against his back.

“Rule number one: don’t stare at the new kid like he’s some science experiment.” Her voice was light, soft. Eli didn’t turn around, but somehow he knew it wasn’t the therapist speaking.

“I agree with Bradley. It’s not welcoming to stare,” the older woman chimed in gently to the group.

Bradley... your name is Bradley, Eli thought.

After a moment, he looked up—just for a second—before quickly averting his gaze to the half-peeled ceiling. Then his eyes drifted to the far side of the room, still unexplored. There stood a fridge, its paint chipped and worn away in places, humming quietly. Next to it, a sink with a crooked faucet, and above, cabinets hanging at odd angles. *A kitchen,* Eli thought. *It looked like a kitchen.*

“You must be Eli Kerrigan. It’s so nice to meet you. Your mother speaks very highly of you.” The therapist’s voice cut through his thoughts. She was older—wearing a neat purple sweater beneath a white cardigan, big round glasses perched on her nose, and brown hair tied back tightly, streaked with grey.

She’s my mother. She’s supposed to say nice things about me, Eli thought, folding his arms around himself.

“My mother is, uh... she’s a nice woman.” Eli’s voice cracked as he said it. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

The woman gave him a warm smile and gestured to an empty chair.

Eli carefully placed his bag onto the floor and took a seat. He wasn't sure which one was the safest, so he sat next to the older woman.

"I'm Mrs Collins, I teach mathematics in room 112A, I also run the group you're currently in, Group Therapy or as we like to call it, Monday club."

A long groan came from the tall boy in the hood.

"That name still sucks ass, Mrs. Collins."

A few soft chuckles stirred around the circle. Mrs. Collins smiled, unbothered.

"And yet, here you are, Marcus. On the first Monday of the school season."

"Court orders are a hell of a thing," he muttered, slouching deeper.

Bradley kicked his shin under the chair with her boot.

"Remember when you wanted to call it Trauma Tuesday... on a Monday?"

Eli's mouth twitched, just enough to stop himself from laughing out loud. He glanced down at his hands, twisting the strap of his backpack.

"The tall one is Marcus Baves, the girl is Bradley Turner and this is" Mrs Collins gestured towards the wider boy, he hadn't involved himself in the conversation yet, just sat chewing on a wrapper. "This is Jamie Sullivan." Mrs. Collins continued, nodding toward the boy. Jamie looked up briefly, offering a small, wary smile before returning to his wrapper.

Eli made an effort to remember the names, Bradley's especially.

"Why... why Bradley... the name?" Eli murmured, unsure if the question might offend her.

Bradley tilted her head, eyes narrowing as if searching his face. "I know you..." She scrunched her forehead—an odd little expression, but it only made her look more real, more human. "This morning! At the gas station. God, that bugged me *all* day."

Eli's chest tightened, a strange mix of relief and awkwardness flooding him. He hadn't expected her to remember. Or care.

Marcus smirked, still rubbing his shin. "Gas station romance, I'd love to hear where this goes." he yawned the last part out.

Bradley shrugged off the comment. Eli just stared down at the floor, his face turning more red by the second. He wanted to look at Bradley, admire her but he couldn't.

"Well, new kid, Bradley is off the table. Jamie is right here for the taking, though. I mean, look at his beautiful triple chin. He's even eating that plastic, how fascinating." Marcus and Bradley burst into laughter. Jamie even smirked, finally acknowledging the conversation, taking the wrapper out of his mouth.

Mrs. Collins cleared her throat gently, restoring a bit of order. "Alright, everyone, let's settle down. Eli, I'm glad you're here. This group is about finding a place where you can be heard, not judged."

Off the table, Eli thought. *What does that even mean?*

"So, now that everyone is here, let's get started on everybody's first day back at school!" Mrs. Collins clapped in excitement. "I can't wait to hear how it's going."

Marcus shrugged, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "First day's been whatever. I saw the jocks bullying some freshmen before first class. Same old mess, different day. But hey, at least we're all here, right? Could be worse."

Mrs. Collins let out a surprised cough. "Marcus, you really should report that. Tell me who it was, and I'll make sure it gets to the principal."

"Forget it, I didn't see anything." Marcus looked down at the floor. Mrs. Collins sighed and shook her head.

"My car ran out of gas before school. Had to fill up at the station. Thirty bucks just to get going again — who in their right mind charges a seventeen-year-old that much for gas?" Bradley said, folding her arms. "That's when I saw the new kid... Eli, right?"

"Can we stop calling Eli 'the new kid'? He's here for the same reason you all are," Mrs. Collins said gently. "Thirty dollars is a lot for you kids, though, I hate to admit."

Eli let go of his backpack strap. "It's okay, Mrs. Collins. I don't mind. You know... I started today thinking it would be the worst day of my life, but I'm alive and—"

Before he could finish, something slammed hard against the door. A sharp crash echoed through the hallway, followed by angry shouting. The voices were high-pitched, fast, and furious.

Mrs. Collins shot to her feet. "Stay here," she said quickly, hurrying to the door.

Marcus leaned back in his chair, arms behind his head. "That's definitely not the jocks this time."

Bradley arched an eyebrow. "Cat fight?"

The muffled yelling outside became clearer as Mrs. Collins cracked the door open.

"Enough! Jasmin, *enough!* Come with me—now!"

A moment later, the door swung wide, and Mrs. Collins returned, gripping a girl by the wrist. Her lip was split, her jacket hung crooked off one shoulder, and her eyes swept the room like she was ready to pounce.

"This is Jasmin Collins," Mrs. Collins said, panting slightly. "My daughter... she'll be joining us today."

Jasmin was small, clearly of Asian heritage, with shoulder-length black hair streaked with red near the ends. She had a fringe, it was tangled and frayed from the fight, strands sticking out at odd angles. She didn't speak, just stood there glaring.

Mrs. Collins ran a hand over her own face, flustered. "Actually, why don't the rest of you head off to class? Lunch is nearly over. I need to get Jasmin cleaned up." There was still fifteen minutes of lunch left.

She checked her daughter over for cuts as she spoke, her voice muddled and distracted. "I'm sorry about this, guys. Tomorrow—same time—we'll pick things back up."

The hallway buzzed with leftover tension. Eli slung his backpack over both shoulders, walking beside the others in silence at first. Bradley was the first to break it.

"Well, that was dramatic," she muttered, glancing back at the classroom door. "Mrs. Collins has a daughter? Kind of explains the stress wrinkles."

Before Eli could respond, the bell next to his ear exploded with sound. He jumped nearly a foot in the air.

"Jesus!" he gasped, clutching his chest.

Marcus doubled over, laughing. "Man, you should see your face!"

Even Jamie let out a rare chuckle, slapping Marcus on the back.

"I forgot you're coming straight from kindergarten," Jamie continued to laugh. "Welcome to Ridgemont High."

Eli stopped. He couldn't hear the bell ringing anymore; the ache in his ear had vanished. The realization was fleeting, but he felt it—he was present, even just for a moment. He was a part of it.

Chapter 4

Journal Entry- I didn't hate school or therapy

Before I start, I want to say I'm not always right. Sometimes the way I feel makes sense in the moment... but later it doesn't. If that makes sense.

What I'm trying to say is—the school club, Monday Club (I think that's what Mrs. Collins calls it)—isn't as awful as I thought.

I'm not ready to throw my hands up and say Mom was right. It's still terrifying. I still feel like I'm doing school wrong. But this is life for the next six years, and I think I'm okay with that.

I don't want to write too much today, but I met some people, they seem like good people, like Grandpa would like them kind of good.

Marcus is funny. Sometimes I felt like he was a little mean but then he would do something that made it quite clear that he was joking.

Bradley is really cool. She has tattoos and drives a car and she's only seventeen. I was wondering if I should get a tattoo by the time I'm seventeen, but Maeve's the same age as her and she doesn't have one, so maybe not.

Oh—I also met Jamie and Jasmin. Their names sound kind of similar, so I'm just grouping them together. They don't look the same though. Jasmin is seriously pretty, but kind of scary. And Jamie likes food. Like... a lot of food.

I'm not sure if you care about the teachers I met, mom doesn't, so I won't bore you.

Eli closed the notebook and pushed his chair back from the desk, yawning as he stretched out his long limbs. The lava clock on his desk glowed 9:42 PM. Little red blobs bouncing around behind it.

He looked up, catching his reflection in the dark bedroom window. His long brown hair was scuffed, messy, and just a little too overgrown—not curly, but wavy. He wasn't ugly, not that he cared but he'd gotten his father's jawline and his mother's blue eyes.

A knock came at his bedroom door. Eli turned to get up, but his mother let herself in and sat on the end of his bed.

"So, are you going to tell me how school was, or are you already too cool for your mother?"

She gestured for him to sit next to her, but he preferred the desk chair.

Eli smiled. "I could never be too cool for you, Mom." He placed his hands on his knees. "Remember when Maeve broke her leg in the woods when she was thirteen?"

Rachel stared at him, confused, before finally nodding. "God, your father spent the entire car ride to the hospital hyperventilating. I thought we were going to crash." She shook her head and laughed.

"I asked you if she was going to die. Remember that too?" Eli rubbed his arm as he spoke.

His mother smiled, the memory lighting her face. "They brought her home later that evening, and you spent the night outside her bedroom. You made it all the way to midnight before I found you asleep. Your father picked you up and put you back in your own room."

Eli laughed a little, realizing how silly it all sounded. "I had that same sort of terror about starting high school."

There was a long pause as Rachel thought about it.

“But Maeve survived.” She said softly, her voice catching just a little.

Rachel stood up, smoothing her jeans. “Okay. I’ll leave you to your teenage brooding.”

Eli rolled his eyes, but smiled. “Thanks, I take my brooding very seriously.”

She walked toward the door, then paused with her hand on the handle. “I’m proud of you, you know. Just for... showing up.”

Eli nodded, suddenly unsure what to say. “Night, Mom.”

“Night, sweetheart.”

Rachel closed the door, giving Eli a wave as she left.

Chapter 5

Bradley Turner drove a beat-up Toyota Corolla. The brown paint had started to rust, and it had already clocked 180,000 miles. The car was a gift from her father, who’d picked up extra shifts at Ridgeway Lumber, the mill just outside of town. He’d saved for months to buy himself a brand-new Toyota Tacoma, gleaming red with chrome trim. Then, without much ceremony, he handed Bradley the keys to his old Corolla on her fifteenth birthday.

He loved her dearly—just not enough to give her the shiny new one.

Bradley lost her mom to cancer when she was twelve. She and her father had survived—barely—ever since. One income was enough to keep the lights on, but not much more. They weren’t well off at all and the line between “stable” and “falling under” was always uncomfortably thin.

They lived in a single-story house in a pretty shitty part of Ridgemont, though Bradley spent little time at home. Even after school finished, she was usually out with Marcus and Jamie or working her weekend job at Mintson’s Ice Cream. Her father never demanded she contribute to the household, so much of her small paycheck went toward gas—and several packs of Marlboro Reds. She’d been a heavy smoker ever since losing her mother.

Monday was no different. Bradley dropped off her bag at home and changed out of her summer dress, swapping it for shorts and a Ridgemont Hawks hoodie before getting back into her car. She texted Marcus, who then texted Jamie, and the three of them headed toward Pine Ridge Woods, as they had every night.

The woods were large and soggy, pretty creepy too. The three kids met up every night at the same spot—a little cove at the lowest point of the woods. They lit a fire and drank until Jamie usually passed out, leaving Bradley and Marcus to carry his heavy body back to Bradley’s car. Neither of the boys drove, so Bradley was the designated taxi service; the first drop-off was always Jamie, without fail. She enjoyed taking care of them.

Bradley and Marcus often let Jamie sleep for a little on the oak logs placed around the fire—one log for each of them. They'd sit and watch the stars for a while. When the sky showed twice as many stars as when they arrived, they called it a "sign." Jamie actually came up with it on the rare occasion he was still awake by the end of the night. He said it was "The universe telling them to go home."

The boys emptied their bags onto the wet ground. Marcus brought a twelve-pack of Keystones — it was always the same beer. Jamie brought a bag of marshmallows, three hot dogs, two bags of chips, and a crate of Bud Light.

"I bet those hot dogs aren't one for each of us" Marcus laughed as he said it whilst Bradley sparked her lighter, setting ablaze the chopped wood in the middle of the three of them

"I didn't even buy them, dumbass, my mom had three left over in the fridge. I don't even want em" Jamie fired back, knowing full well he would eat at least one of them tonight.

Bradley sat back down, smiling whilst she opened one of Marcus's beers. " I love Mrs Sullivan, she's always cooking something for us."

"And she's hot," Marcus added, causing Jamie to throw a twig at him.

"Is that supposed to make her more lovable, Marcus?" Bradley glared at him, taking Jamie's side.

There was a silence between them. "I'm just fucking with you. Jamie, your mom is *really* hot" Bradley said. The three of them laughed together and before they knew it two hours had passed. The crackling of the fire and the peaceful dullness of the night sky just past midnight, it was.. familiar

"So, the new kid..." Marcus slurred a little as he said it. "He's weird.. but cute."

Bradley scoffed "You're weird. Besides, he was probably shitting his pants. We all had a first day" She stared into the flames " I think he's nice."

Jamie had already passed out, snoring beside them.

"Tell me about Henry," Bradley said softly

The beer was warm now. The stars were quieter than usual. Jamie's snores were softer than a whisper.

Bradley didn't push. She just waited. The silence stretched a lifetime..

"Do his parents know yet?" she asked, gently. "Do.. your parents even know?"

Still nothing.

Then, slowly, Marcus slumped forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice, when it came, was barely there.

He sighed. “Know what?” He wasn’t dumb, he already knew what she meant.

“Marcus, you know what I’m trying—”

He cut her off before she could finish, fiddling with the top of his beer.

“Nobody knows,” He said, “just you.”

He paused, then added, “My parents barely have time for me anyway. I think they’d straight up abandon me if I told them.” He didn’t look at Bradley.

“I hate feeling like a lie. Like I’m a fabrication. There is just so much weight” He sighed, dropping his head.

After a moment Marcus stood up, stretching in the process. “Anyway.. I’ll be okay.” He smiled again, like nothing happened “I think I’m starting to see double. Time to go”

Bradley glanced at the single bottle beside him and the one in his hand “Sure Marcus, maybe some other time. Let’s get the both of you home.”

They left the fire to burn itself out, like it always had.

Chapter 6

The alarm blared its cheerful lie. “Happy birthday, Elliotttt. Happy birthday to youuu!!”

Eli groaned. He hadn’t been “Elliott” since he was twelve—and it hadn’t been his birthday since June.

Eli opened one eye at a time, groaning as he did. He lazily swatted at the alarm — and miserably missed.

“Happy birthday, Elliott—”

The numbers on the clock blinked in red: **7:01 AM**.

Eli turned over in bed and shut it off, one eye still closed.

“Shut uppp,” he moaned, pulling the blanket back over himself.

From downstairs, his father’s voice carried up — shouting into the phone. That wasn’t new. Michael Kerrigan was an accomplished lawyer by Ridgemont’s standards, and he was always dramatically angry at someone — and always in the morning.

Eli dragged himself out of bed and shuffled over to his window, still just wearing just his underwear. He pulled back his blue curtains, revealing a bright beam of sunlight that stung his still-dead eyes. For a moment, he thought he saw Arthur kneeling beside the plants in the garden. His eyes widened. He rubbed them, desperate to make sure it was real — but when he looked again, the figure was gone.

The lavender and bluebells Arthur liked to grow had died completely. Rachel hadn't cleared them out yet, so they lay lifeless and rotten at the back of the large square garden.

"...Well, that's not my jurisdiction, so loop in Peterson and tell him it's on his desk now. No—*now*, not tomorrow."

Eli pulled on a hoodie and some pants and padded into the kitchen, where his father stood in full work mode — dress shirt crisp, tie slightly off-center. His briefcase was open on the counter next to a black coffee.

When he spotted Eli, he broke into a grin — the kind that belonged more at a corporate retreat than a breakfast table.

"Hey, champ!" he said, giving Eli's shoulder a solid clap. "Ready to take on the world?"

Eli gave a weak shrug. "Just school."

"Exactly! That's the world right now, right?" His dad laughed, taking a long sip of coffee. "High school—man, those were the days." "What are you, sophomore now?"

"Ninth grade."

"Right, right. Freshman. Even better — clean slate! Build the foundation early. Set the tone."

Eli nodded, eyes drifting toward the fridge, trying not to cringe.

Michael finally glanced at the clock and grabbed his keys. "Alright, kiddo, go get 'em. Make a few friends. Don't forget to smile. People like confident energy."

"I'll try," Eli said, quietly.

"Atta boy."

And then he was gone — door swinging shut behind him, briefcase in one hand, phone already back to his ear.

Eli checked his schedule- Gym class first lesson. He groaned and headed towards the laundry room, his father always loved skinny, tight shorts for running. They weren't tight or skinny on Eli, which was perfect for gym class.

A sharp *screeech* of a whistle tore through the air as Eli stepped up to the edge of the track. He flinched.

He hadn't been ready. The boy next to him had already taken off in a full sprint.

"Are your legs broken, son?!"

The voice belonged to a massive man in a windbreaker and a baseball cap. He was clapping "Right on, Smith! Keep that up and I'll put you on the track team myself!" His attention had already turned to the more athletic kids.

Eli looked down at his own pale, knobby knees. "Uh, no, they're fine, I think — I just—"

"Then let's get those limbs moving!" the man barked again, now doing exaggerated jogging motions beside him.

Eli started moving.

Not running. Not jogging.

Just... moving.

"Faster! Let's see what you're made of, boy!" The man jogged beside Eli. "There comes a time, son, when you gotta grasp *IT*."

Eli wondered what *IT* was, but before the thought could finish, the gym coach exploded into a full sprint, leaving Eli in his dust.

Eli sat on the locker room bench, sweat dripping off of him. It wasn't grueling Military training but he hadn't walked that fast in years.

The changing room was full of teenage testosterone, sweat and too much genitalia for Eli to handle. He'd never seen another naked boy before—let alone an entire locker room of them and so he grabbed his things and decided to change in the toilets.

After leaving the gym locker rooms Eli walked straight into the middle of the busy hallway.

Jasmin was walking towards him, not because of him but because he took up a large amount of the walking space. She was wearing a black skirt and a black shirt with a skeleton holding the ears of a dead, white bunny. It petrified Eli. He couldn't ever imagine wearing something so... morbid. She also wore some sort of studded necklace that Eli thought looked tight enough around her neck to be hurting her.

He thought, briefly, about trying to get her attention. Maybe say something. But then he thought about what he'd say—what he wouldn't say—and the whole idea crumbled.

There was something about the way she moved. The walk, the sway of her hips, the unapologetic strut in her shoulders—it scared him. He wasn't sure what she was, exactly. Just that she was dark and intimidating and totally out of his depth.

Still, he felt a twitch in his stomach.

What Eli hadn't realised was the path he was taking up, her path. As he stood, deep in his own thoughts she walked straight into him, clashing heads. The blood instantly started dropping from just above her eyebrow.

"Shit," She winced, tapping her head. "What the fuck" She gave him a look of disgust, combined with confusion

Eli's heart stopped. He stood there, completely useless.

"I—I... crap, I'm sorry," Eli stammered, legs turning to jelly.

"I've got band-aids! My mom... She packs band-aids for me every day"

He yanked off his backpack, unzipped it with trembling fingers, and fished around with panic-level speed. Notebooks, a pencil case, an unopened protein bar, the little Ziploc his mom had packed.

Without thinking, he reached out and took Jasmin's arm, guiding her to the edge of the hallway. Away from the stream of students.

The second he did it, guilt slammed into him.

"Sorry! For touching you... and for hurting you" He tried hard not to look at her, terrified by the hatred she must feel.

His hands shook as he peeled the band-aid open. This was the first real thing he'd ever done with a girl. Not just *spoken*, but *done* — and it was blood, and panic, and breathless apology.

"Here," he whispered, gently brushing her fringe back, her hair felt so soft on his fingers. She didn't stop him.

He placed the band-aid just above her brow, trying not to breathe too hard. Trying not to make it worse.

When he finally looked at her, really looked, Jasmin was staring at him with a face he didn't know how to read.

She didn't look angry, Eli thought. Just surprised

She blinked, averting her gaze to anything. "You're so weird."

Eli felt a shiver slither its way down his spine

"Sorry," Eli put his band-aids back into his bag

Jasmin stood up, glancing down at him still on the floor.
She smiled like she might laugh.
“Tell your mom I said thanks...”
Then she turned and walked away, just like that.

Chapter 7

As soon as Eli snapped back into reality, he realised he was late for English. He grabbed his bag and jogged — quicker than he had on the track.

Before Eli got to class he spotted one of the jocks against a locker with a girl.

You guys are late too, Eli thought.

She was wearing a red skirt, way too short for January and a white t-shirt.

As he passed the two of them he realised who it was.

Bradley.

She was laughing with some tall guy — curly hair, a Ridgemont Hawks jacket, baggy blue jeans that hung low like he was purposefully showing off his underwear.

Then they kissed.

For a moment Eli felt his first heartbreak. *So that's what Marcus meant*, he thought. *Bradley's off the table.*

She saw Eli, acknowledged him. She murmured his name midway through the kiss, her eyes looking to the side towards Eli.

He swallowed his breath and kept walking, his head as low to the ground as it could be.

Class had already started by the time he arrived, and when he entered, the entire room turned to look.

If he hadn't already made a complete fool of himself and finally gotten an answer to Marcus's comment all before class then it might have taken more out of him.

Instead, he just muttered, “Sorry, Mr. Frenson.”

The teacher looked mildly surprised, but didn't make a scene.

“Let's not make this a common occurrence, Mr. Kerrigan.”

Eli took his seat — same as yesterday — next to the boy with the odd sneakers.

“Mr. Ekkels, can you start from where we left?” Mr. Frenson asked.

“Uhh, sure, I guess,” Danny got up a lot quicker than the class expected. He cleared his throat and puffed out his chest.

“I’m quite illiterate, but I read a lot. My parents would be quite surprised if they knew how much I actually read.”

Danny spoke every word with unexpected care — not rushed, not performative, just... honest. Like it meant something more to him.

“The thing is, I can’t explain it, but sometimes when I’m in a bad mood I don’t feel like reading. But when I’m not in a bad mood, I just sort of feel like I want to disappear or something.”

He placed a hand over his chest for that last line, not mockingly — like he meant it.

There was nothing significant about those words, at least not to Eli or Mr Frenson or the rest of the class for that matter but it clearly meant something to Danny.

Mr Frenson stared at the boy before clearing his throat “Thank you, Mr Ekkels. That was actually very well read”

Danny sat back down in his seat “I can carry on” his All-American voice had returned.

“That’s quite alright, Danny, good job though” Mr Frenson scouted the class, looking who to pick next.

The class went on as usual. Eli stayed engaged, taking notes and even reading a little when it was his turn.

As the bell rang Danny jumped up out of his seat and ran out of the class, clearly in some sort of hurry.

Eli packed his things just as slow as he had the day before. As he passed Mr. Frenson’s desk, the teacher’s phone lit up. Eli didn’t stare, but he saw enough.

A message from *Amy*, with a red heart beside her name.

“I’m sorry. Lawyer wants us to meet tomorrow about custody.”

Mr. Frenson snapped the phone away quickly, eyes meeting Eli’s for a second. Eli looked down and hurried past.

“Eli,” the teacher called softly.

He froze, shutting his eyes tightly before turning back.

Mr. Frenson opened his mouth like he was going to say something more — and then didn't. Instead, he gave a small nod, "Good work today."

Eli nodded, managing a small smile.
"Thanks, sir."

Chapter 8

The final bell rang

Something was off.

Students weren't rushing to the buses or lockers—they were rushing toward something..

Before Bradley or Marcus could even register it, the school's front entrance exploded with noise—shouts, gasps, phones raised into the air like antennas. Something had happened.

Jamie got there first, before the swarm of bodies hurried past him.

"Shit," he whispered.

Bradley and Marcus appeared beside him just as the sirens cut through the air. A Ridgemont EMT truck screeched to a halt at the curb, doors swinging open before the tires had even stilled.

A crowd parted. That's when they saw it.

Blood. Not a lot—but enough. Enough to make your stomach twist.

A boy lay crumpled near the edge of the parking lot, limbs too still, body curled like a dropped puppet. Two paramedics crouched beside him, checking vitals, shouting commands. One of them raised a hand in the direction of the crowd—"Back! Everyone get back!"

Jamie turned pale. "It was... Danny," he said. "The car hit him. I—I saw it. It was so fast. I don't even know how he got out here before everyone."

Maeve could be heard somewhere to the far right, she was screaming, really screaming like he'd died.

One of the EMT's hesitated and then let her in, against protocol.

She jumped into the truck with her boyfriend, still shaking, tears streaming down her face.

Bradley's face tightened, her jaw clenched. Marcus didn't say a word. All three starred as the medics loaded Danny's limp body into the ambulance.

The doors slammed shut.

Then they were gone.

“Alright everyone, let’s all back away. I know this is a stressful moment, but let’s get you home safely,” Principal Shepherd shouted, waving his arms.

But no one moved.

The kids didn’t leave—not one of them. They stayed rooted in place, some talking on their phones, some crying, others just standing there in shock. Like Bradley. Like Marcus. Like Jamie.

Eli finally arrived.

Confused. Nervous.

Why are there so many people? he thought.

He spotted them—Bradley, Marcus, and Jamie—huddled near the front steps. His heart pounded. He was scared to approach, but he had to know.

“Uh, hey guys... what’s going on?”

His voice wavered.

Marcus answered, but didn’t look at him.

“Danny Ekkels,” he said flatly. “He got... ran over.”

Eli dropped his bag in horror. His eyes widened.

“Where’s Maeve?” he asked, breath catching.

Marcus turned to him finally. “Your sister? I think—”

“Where is she?” Eli cut him off. “Tell me where Maeve is. Now!”

His voice cracked. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Panic started to set in.

Bradley finally snapped out of her trance.

“She got in the ambulance with Danny.”

Eli walked away, in a rush, one hand dialing his mother’s number.

“Mom. Danny is badly hurt, Maeve’s Danny. She got in the ambulance with him and I don’t-”

His mother cut him off on the other line. She was still working.

“Slow down, honey. What’s going on? Danny is hurt?”

“Yes... A car. They’re headed to the hospital. I’m still at school. I need you to take me. Someone needs to be with Maeve” Eli was still glancing around as he crossed the same road Danny hadn’t.

“O-okay, Eli. I’ll come right away, honey. Just stay right where you are.” He could hear the tension rising in her voice. She ended the call as soon as she stopped talking.

The journey to the hospital was silent. Rachel focused on the road. The silence only broke when Eli told his mother more than once to be careful, she was just about staying inside legal speed limits. Eli thought about what state Danny was in, how he had *just* shared a class with him and moments later he had been fighting for each breath. How scared Maeve must have been, he wondered if it had made any difference to her if Eli had gotten there earlier.

They arrived at the only hospital in Ridgemont—Belloway Hospice.

The receptionist gave them the room number, warning them not to enter unless authorised. Eli barely registered the words. He was already moving down the hall, his mother close behind.

Standing just outside the room was Maeve, crying in the arms of an older woman. Her shoulders were shaking, face pressed into the woman’s coat.

Beside them stood a man, pacing with a phone pressed to his ear. He was shouting.

“Do you understand the hit this is going to have on my son’s stocks? What school is even going to go near him after this?”

He rubbed his forehead with his fingers, voice tightening with rage.

The man was broad-shouldered and red-faced, wearing a heavy knit sweater with a zip collar and dark slacks. He looked like someone who had come straight from a country club.

Beside him, the woman held Maeve close. She was slender, with grey, shoulder-length hair. Her long black coat had fur around the collar, right where Maeve had her face buried.

“Maeve,” Rachel called gently.

Maeve lifted her head, her face streaked with tears.

“Mom!” she cried, running straight into Rachel’s arms.

She hugged her tightly, sobbing into her shoulder.

“They said it’s a spinal injury and—” she tried to get the words out through broken breaths, “his right leg... and both his arms are broken.”

Rachel gasped and then looked at Danny’s parents.

The woman looked soulless, like any life she had left had just been sucked out of her.

Rachel could see the massacre painted down her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry about your son.” Rachel’s voice trembling with sympathy.

Rachel still held Maeve in her arms.

Eli just stood there, paralysed.

It reminded him of Arthur again—not the hospital, not the accident—but the grief. The soul-crushing realization that the worst-case scenario had become reality.

When Arthur passed, it had been just as sudden as this. One moment he was there—real, alive—and the next, he was gone.

And now, looking at Danny's mother, Eli remembered what it felt like to be that hollow. To be as dead inside as she looked.

Eli walked straight over to the woman, who was still staring at the floor, and wrapped his arms around her.

He hugged her tighter than he'd ever hugged anyone before.

Her heart pounded against his chest. He felt it—fast, panicked.

It was uncomfortable, but he held on anyway.

"I know," he whispered.

The woman broke.

She collapsed beneath him as he let go, her knees hitting the floor. And then came the sound—loud, guttural, full of anguish.

She was sobbing uncontrollably now, her body folding in on itself. It wasn't quiet. It wasn't graceful. It was grief in its purest, ugliest form—and it filled the hallway like a siren.

"Jesus, Mary, pick yourself up." The man next to her put the phone to his shoulder. "You're a fucking mess" He glared at her on the floor.

She quickly raised her head at him. Eyes bloodshot red, like she was going to kill him.

"That is our fucking son in there, John, *your* son." She rose to her feet slowly. Her hair completely messed like she had been in a fight "And all you care about is a god damn fucking scholarship."

The man put his phone into his pocket and just stared at his wife like a lost puppy.

"You're right, Mary. I'm sorry" He tried to hug her but she swatted his arms away.

“Are you, John? Are you really sorry? Do you even know what you’re sorry for?”

Her voice broke.

“Not once in his life have you ever tried to know him. For God’s sake, he doesn’t even care about football.”

The hallway went still.

John didn’t answer.

He didn’t lash out.

He didn’t argue.

He turned and glanced briefly at the Kerrigans.

“Thank you for being here for Danny.” Then he walked past them, heading down towards the stairs.

The silence filled the hallway. Just the clicking of his shoes getting further and further away.

Finally, the door to Danny’s room opened. A doctor stepped out, clipboard in hand.

For a moment, the soft beeping of the heart monitor drifted into the hallway.

He glanced at Mary, then at the Kerrigans—his eyes briefly scanning for John, and not finding him.

“Mrs. Ekkels,” he said gently. “Your son is... well, he’s alive. Thankfully.”

Chapter 9

The hallway didn’t erupt. No one cheered. Just the sound of Mary’s breathing—heavy, trembling.

Eli watched, waiting for the next penny to drop.

“Oh Jesus, Lord, thank you. Thank you so much, sir.”

The doctor didn’t smile. He didn’t even nod.

“Barring any sudden or drastic changes, he should remain stable.”

He placed a steady hand on Mary’s shoulder.

“However, Mrs. Ekkels... at this stage, we believe he’s paralyzed, and it’s unclear whether he’ll regain mobility.”

That was the blow that finally defeated Mary’s spirit. She just stood there, dormant, staring through the small window into Danny’s room.

Again, the silence froze the entire hall.

Rachael wasn't entirely sure whether the best thing to do was to try to hug Mary or take her kids and let the women process what they had all heard in peace. Maeve simply placed a hand on the woman's arm.

"I think I'm going to stay here a little longer, Mom." She glanced back at motherl.

Rachael put an arm on Eli's shoulder, turning both of them toward the stairs.

She kissed Maeve on the forehead and gave Mary a sympathetic nod.

"Text me when you're done, and I'll pick you up, sweetheart."

The car ride home felt like it was being driven by a ghost. Not a single word from Eli or Rachael as they both processed what had just occurred. Eli scrolled aimlessly on his phone, not taking in a single thing.

When the two of them got home, it felt... quiet. Like it had when Arthur died—except Arthur wasn't dead. It was a boy neither of them knew much about, and he wasn't dead; it shouldn't have filled the house, but it did.

"Your band-aids came into use today, Mom," Eli said, breaking the tension as he placed his bag on the kitchen counter.

"Did you hurt yourself? Lemme see." Rachael placed her car keys next to Eli's bag.

"No, not me. A girl—I hurt her." He waited a moment before continuing. "Not on purpose, of course. We clashed heads, and I helped her."

Rachael chuckled.

"Well, is she okay? You can be very clumsy."

Eli stood in the middle of the kitchen, trying to find something to do while he spoke. He poured himself a glass of water, drawing the activity out as much as possible.

"Yeah, I think. She told me to say thanks for the band-aids."

Rachael laughed, feeling the noise come back into the house.

"Oh, Eli. You're as naive as I was at your age." She didn't need to find something to do like Eli did. She just sat down on the brown kitchen sofa, stretching her legs.

"What's her name?" Rachael asked.

"Jasmin" Eli responded. He thought about giving her a last name but maybe Jasmin wouldn't like that.

“Do you think she's pretty?” Eli couldn't see the huge grin on Rachael's face.

“Well, I don't know. She looks nice” He fumbled around the words.

“Jesus, Eli, I'm not going to tell her. Do you think she's pretty?” She flicked across apps on the TV mounted on the wall.

“Yes, Mom. I think she's very pretty. Are you done?.”

Eli couldn't even finish his sentence before Rachael erupted into laughter.

Seeing her like this, Eli thought—like nothing had happened today. It was sad. How could she care about something so trivial after what they had seen.

“Do you think Danny is going to be okay?” Eli changed the topic. He was now cleaning already clean dishes.

Rachael finished her laugh and sighed.

“I don't know honey, I really don't.”

The house felt normal again. The passage of time had already healed all wounds—not Danny's, of course—but the hour they had spent on the journey home and the harmless conversation. It was as if the entire thing hadn't happened.

Eli grabbed his bag and headed up to his room. Kicking his shoes off before he climbed the spiral stairs. He arrived at his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

He sat down at his desk and opened his journal.

Journal Entry – Bad things happen and we can't forget

There was a terrible accident today. Maeve's boyfriend, Danny, was hit by a car. I can't imagine the pain of breaking a bone—that hasn't happened to me—but Danny broke a lot of bones.

I wonder if, after a certain point, the pain feels so excruciating that it no longer hurts.

The doctor told us at the hospital that Danny might never walk again. His mom wouldn't stop crying. I'm not sure if Mr Ekkels felt sorry for his son, because he didn't seem to show it, but people react in different ways.

When we left it felt like Danny was forgotten. Mom was interviewing me about a girl at school and I can't just forget, I can't pretend like his life isn't ruined. That's why I want to write it.

He won't ever see this and realize that someone thought about him outside of the hospital, but I want it to be stated somewhere that I didn't forget.

I want to visit Danny, maybe when they allow visitors. I can get Maeve to take me with her. I want to ask him if he's okay. I want him to know that I care, even if he doesn't know me or care that I thought about him.

Oh and also whilst I'm writing I wanted to tell you that I saw all four of the members of Monday Club today, not Mrs Collins though and not all at the same time. I spoke to them at different stages of the day.

First was Bradley. I know what Marcus meant when he said she's off limits. She was with a tall, muscular boy. I guess he's on the football team. They kissed as I walked past and Bradley shouted my name but I didn't want to interrupt them. I don't know why I cared that she has a boyfriend, I shouldn't.

Jasmin is second, it was an awful experience and I know how weird she thinks I am now. We bumped heads because I'm stupid. I gave her a band-aid and placed it on her head. I touched her skin and her hair, it was so soft. I would like to tell her I'm sorry again if I get the chance.

She thanked my Mom for the band-aids, mom laughed at that like it was some kind of inside joke.

Sadly, I met the other two when Danny got hurt, and I was so scared about Maeve that I kind of snapped at them. Bradley was there too. I hope they don't think I'm a nasty person. I'm not.

I am going to stop writing here. I want you to know that I care about the bad things that happen to people and I know their families and the people they love care too. And I know Mom cares, even if she forgets.

Chapter 10

The woods were as they always had been. It was dark and cold, the fire embers just burning enough to keep their bodies warm.

Marcus stretched out, his long legs reaching the tip of the fire.

"Hope Danny's doing okay. I never minded Danny. You know, he lived on the same block as me when we were kids?"

Jamie yawned.

"How riveting. You must continue..."

Marcus sipped his beer before laughing.

"I'm sorry, am I boring you?"

There was a crackling of leaves behind them.

A torchlight shone directly at the fire as the three of them turned, blinded by the brightness.

A deep voice emerged, "So the freaks have a pow-wow hideout in the woods."

The voice came closer. The torch lowered.

"Jesus, Desmond," Bradley muttered, shielding her eyes. "Turn that thing off before you blind someone."

Desmond appeared in the reflection of the light. He wore a heavy coat with a Hawks emblem stitched onto the shoulder. His boots crunched against the frozen leaves, a six-pack swinging from his hand.

"Sorry, babe." He whacked the torch, trying desperately to shut it off.

Marcus and Jamie rolled their eyes and sighed.

"I'm guessing Desmond doesn't spend his evenings wandering Pine Ridge Woods every night," Jamie said.

"His best friend was just in a terrible accident. I thought maybe he could use some company. Sorry, guys." Bradley gave a guilty smile at both of them.

Desmond finally turned the torch off, stepping toward the fire and taking a seat on the log next to Bradley.

There was a silence as Desmond got comfortable, opening the crate of beers he bought — Budweiser.

"Jesus, you guys come here every night? It's freezing" Desmond wrapped his arms around himself.

They'd spent so many nights out here, the cold barely registered anymore. Jamie still wore shorts, Bradley the same skirt and shirt she wore at school, and Marcus came in cargo pants and a thick blue jumper that read *Chicago Mountain Range*.

"We might need to find somewhere new, now Bradley has exposed it to you" Jamie looked around, aching to find a laugh from someone.

Marcus didn't give him anything, he just stared at Desmond then back at Bradley, frowning at them both.

"You got a problem?" Desmond scowled at Marcus and Jamie.

"Didn't realize we were taking +1s now. Should've invited my parole officer." Marcus said whilst opening another can.

Bradley sighed. "Marcus" she rubbed Desmond's arm. "Be nice."

Desmond took her hand and placed it back on her thigh.

"It's cool, babe. I

