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How To Survive Your Murder

DANIELLE VALENTINE

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DANIELLE VALENTINE is a pseudonym for bestselling horror novelist Danielle Vega. Her work, which includes the Merciless series, *Survive the Night*, *The Haunted*, and *The Unleashed*, has been optioned for film and television by Lionsgate and Warner Bros., and has been translated into languages worldwide. Danielle lives in New Jersey with her husband, daughter, and two ornery cats. *How to Survive Your Murder* is her first thriller.



Alice Lawrence is the sole witness in her sister's murder trial.

And in the year since Claire's death, Alice's life has completely fallen apart. Her parents have gotten divorced, she's moved into an apartment that smells like bologna, and she is being forced to face her sister's killer and a courtroom full of people who doubt what she saw in the corn maze a year prior.

Claire was an all-American girl, beautiful and bubbly, and a theater star. Alice was a nerd who dreamed of becoming a forensic pathologist and would rather stay at home to watch her favorite horror movies than party. Despite their differences, they were bonded by sisterhood and were each other's best friends.

Until Claire was taken away from Alice.

On the first day of the murder trial, as Alice prepares to give her testimony, she is knocked out by a Sidney Prescott lookalike in the courthouse bathroom. When she wakes up, it is Halloween morning a year earlier, the same day Claire was murdered. Alice has until midnight to save her sister and find the real killer before he claims another victim.

How To Survive Your Murder

DANIELLE VALENTINE



RAZORBILL



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[Dedication TK]





HALLOWEEN NIGHT, LAST YEAR

Mark Evans was practically cradling the chain saw. You'd think it was his baby. "I don't know, Chloe; that doesn't seem safe."

"It won't even have a chain," Chloe pointed out. "A chain saw can't hurt anyone if there's no chain."

"It's still heavy. And loud. And what about all that . . . what's it called? Exhaust? You can inhale it and stuff."

Chloe closed her eyes for a moment, frustration building inside her. Mark was the biggest guy on the track team. Maybe even the biggest guy in their year. Since when was he *such* a wuss?

To be fair, she hadn't chosen him because he was brave or whatever. She'd chosen him because of his shoulders. Mark had the greatest shoulders at Omaha East, all broad and muscular. She figured they'd look seriously sick holding a chain saw, like the guy in that freaky chain saw movie, Jason, or whatever his name was.

"Can't we just, like, play a recording of chain saw noises?" Mark asked. "Or I could make the noise with my mouth, like this." He demonstrated how he might make chain saw noises by blowing air through his lips and kind of clicking his tongue.

Chloe was at a loss for words. What were you supposed to say when a guy made chain saw noises at you?

Chloe had known, from the moment she convinced her parents

to let her rent out Lacy Farms for her Halloween party, that she wanted scary chain saw guys chasing people through the corn maze. Otherwise it was just a pathetic party in a cornfield. Why could no one else see her vision?

“Mark,” Chloe said very carefully. “Listen to me. You’re going to turn the chain saw on, and you’re going to chase people through the maze, and you’re going to be fucking *scary* while you do it, or else I’ll have to tell everyone about that thing you do when you kiss.”

Mark had swirled his tongue around in her mouth when they made out at Kylie Mack’s birthday last year, like his tongue was a weird, wet helicopter propeller. It was seriously disgusting.

Mark paled, then swallowed. “Yeah, okay.”

Thank God, Chloe thought as headlights swept through the corn, alerting her to the arrival of her first guests. She loved this part, the beginning-of-the-party part. Absolutely anything could happen now. She checked her phone screen just in time to watch the numbers switch from 6:59 to 7:00.

Showtime.

The genius of her party was this: people had to go through the scary corn maze and get chased by chain saw dudes before they were rewarded with booze and music at the center of the field. Chloe was pretty proud of it. She knew everything was set up, but she still double-checked that the camping lanterns were all lit, that the keg was ready, that the band was getting its gear together. She greeted her first guests, did a shot, and then did a bonus shot (what the hell, it was *her* party), and that’s when she overheard someone talking about how the corn maze wasn’t even scary, because Mark Evans hadn’t turned his chain saw on; he was just making the chain saw noise by blowing air through his lips.

She felt her jaw clench.

You've got to be kidding me.

The sun had fully set by this point, and the only light came from the camping lanterns circling the edges of the clearing behind her, gaslit flames flickering like fireflies. Chloe beelined for the maze but hesitated when she reached the entrance. It was darker than she'd expected it to be, a lot darker than it'd been when she was talking to Mark twenty minutes ago. The entrance was a gaping black mouth. She imagined it snapping closed around her the moment she stepped inside.

She swallowed. "Mark?" she whisper-shouted, taking a single step forward. Fallen cornstalks cracked beneath her feet, and it struck her that the sound was brittle, like bones breaking. She felt a flicker of fear and quickly pushed the thought away. It was the exact same maze she'd been through a million times in the daylight. There was no reason to get all freaked out. She said, louder now, "Mark, get out here."

No answer.

He was going to make her come find him, wasn't he? Well, fine, if he wanted to do it that way. She turned a corner, and then another, and then—

There. A figure in the shadows, holding a chain saw.

Chloe exhaled. "I thought we'd agreed you were going to turn the chain saw *on*," she said, searching for Mark's giant arms in the shadows. "If you just make the noises with your mouth, it's seriously—"

The moon slid out from behind a cloud, its soft silver light glinting off the chain saw's chain. Chloe stopped talking.

Wait. The chain.

It was old and a little rusty-looking, and even from a few feet

away, Chloe could see the jagged metal teeth, so sharp.

That chain definitely wasn't supposed to be there.

Chloe blinked, twice, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. "What are you—"

The chain saw revved to life, those jagged teeth spinning into a metallic blur. Chloe parted her lips, but she couldn't scream. Her voice had shriveled up somewhere inside her throat. Her mouth flapped open and closed, wordless, her hands flying up instinctively to protect her face.

The scream wouldn't have helped her anyway. It was much, much too late for that. The chain saw flew closer, whirring and grinding, the sound it made an electric howl—

Until it hit bone.



THREE HOURS EARLIER

My friends Millie Kido and Xavier (“X”) O’Hare were staring at me, mouths agape. I never thought I’d have a reason to use the word *agape*, but it was the only one that fully captured their shock and horror. Not only were their mouths hanging open, but Millie was blinking fast behind her fake glasses, and X’s dark eyebrows had practically disappeared beneath the rim of his red beanie.

It was a little over-the-top, actually. You’d think I’d suggested we spend our evening digging up corpses instead of talking about someone who had.

“Guys, come on, you know I’m right about this,” I tried. “Ed Gein inspired *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and even *The Silence of the Lambs*. He’s iconic.”

“I think you mean that he’s a horrendous monster,” X said. “That’s what you meant to say, right, Alice? *Horrendous*. Monster.”

He was scratching the back of his neck now, but maybe that was because the shearling in his jacket was bothering him. For as long as I’ve known him, X’s been pretty consistent in his look: jeans, fitted Henley, boots. Recently, though, he’s gotten a little bolder with his fashion choices. Today, that meant the beanie pulled over his black curls and a jean jacket lined with tan-colored fleece so perfectly one shade lighter than his dark brown skin that he must’ve planned it

that way. There had to be a guy he wasn't telling us about.

"Beyoncé is iconic," Millie added. "Malala is iconic. Ed Gein is just another disturbing white dude."

I mean, she wasn't wrong. At Gein's farmhouse, authorities had found four noses, masks made of human skin, a decapitated head, a lampshade made of skin and bowls made of skulls, lips used as a pull on a window shade, and a belt made from nipples.

It's not like I wanted to start a fan club.

"If we're going to do another true-crime podcast, why don't we use it to highlight stories no one's heard of?" Millie was saying. Unlike X, she was already in her Halloween costume: Velma, from *Scooby-Doo*, who she'd loved ever since she saw the old live-action remakes where Velma was portrayed by Hayley Kiyoko, who's biracial like her. "Like, maybe we could do our first episode on Sam Little? He's the most prolific serial killer in American history, but a lot of his victims were Black women and prostitutes, so he's not even half as well-known as Ed Gein."

"I like that," X said, pointing at her. "We could use Sam Little as a gateway to talk about the everyday horror of anti-Black violence and racism. Like, how missing Black and brown girls don't get the same media attention as missing white girls, we could tie the Black Lives Matter movement to the rise of Black horror films like *Candyman*, *Us* . . ."

"Maybe point out the moment at the end of *Get Out*, when Daniel Kaluuya's character sees the police lights?" I added.

"Yeah!" X seemed excited for a second, but then, frowning, he added, "Jordan Peele's films aren't technically slashers, though."

We fell silent again. The theme of our podcast was supposed to be the intersection of true crime and horror movies. Preferably

slashers, which were our favorites. Millie, X, and I thought we could discuss it in a way that felt intentional and meta, a comment on our culture's fixation on the deaths of teen girls and complete dismissal of the deaths of BIPOC that also managed to be . . . fun? Could you use the word *fun* when talking about murder?

Anyway. That had been the plan. But we were finding the intersection of the two topics a little tricky. At the end of the day, horror movies were supposed to be entertaining. No matter how real something might feel when it was happening in a movie, we still had the luxury of closing our eyes, turning away. Real life, not so much.

Millie opened her mouth and then closed it again. She was blinking a lot again, but I think it was because the lenses in her fake glasses were a little smudged. X, who wore real wire-frame glasses every day seemed to take offense to the fake ones and said, "Millie, if they're hurting your eyes, just take them off."

"Then no one will know who I'm supposed to be."

"You're dressed head-to-toe in orange. They'll know."

We were in the school's podcasting studio. The words *podcasting studio* probably made you think we were fancy, like maybe we were at one of those rich-kid schools where every student gets an iPad instead of textbooks and the cafeteria sells brand-name junk food—but Omaha East wasn't like that. The podcasting studio was just a room in the basement with carpet stapled to the walls as sound-proofing and a couple extra power strips where you could plug in phones and mics. It was pretty crappy.

My phone started playing the *Halloween* theme, which meant I had a text. I glanced at the screen.

are y'all done with your creepy murder club yet??

It was from Eli, my best friend since kindergarten. Most people didn't really get my friendship with Eli, considering a) he was the only person in my life who wasn't a complete true-crime/slasher-film fanatic, and b) 99 percent of our interactions happened in the form of text messages.

All I can say about that is the world is divided between the people who defended you against that asshole Kyle Stahlicker when he said your hair made you look like a deranged clown in the third grade and the people who didn't. The people in the first group are your ride or die. Eli wasn't just my best friend; he was my brother.

5 more minutes, I wrote back.

His response came approximately .025 seconds after I hit send: whatever, I'm out. GBBO isn't gonna watch itself.

GBBO = *The Great British Bake Off*. Eli refused to use the Americanized name out of loyalty to Mary Berry. I shoved my phone back into my pocket.

"I couldn't even finish *Texas Chainsaw*," Millie was saying.

"It was pretty disgusting," X added, but he sounded more impressed than disgusted. He was writing his own slasher, one starring a few Black people, and we all thought he was going to do for slashers what Jordan Peele had done for Black horror at large. One of the reasons he wanted to start this podcast was to start making inroads with Black horror fans so that when he came out with his first film, he had a ready-made audience. X was brilliant like that.

"The thing with the girl on the meat hook . . ." Millie shuddered.

"Totally gross," X agreed, smiling now. "Totally."

"It's too bad Sally Hardesty was such a crap Final Girl," I added, and Millie shuddered again, probably still thinking about the meat hook. Unlike X and me, she wasn't a horror-movie superfan. She

tolerated them, and she really liked some of the quieter, more suspenseful Japanese horror films, like *Dark Water*, but all in all, horror wasn't her genre. She was here because of the criminal-justice angle. *Serial* had been her gateway drug into the world of true crime, and from there it was an easy path to *My Favorite Murder* and *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. But it wasn't the stories about death and murder that got her interested; it was the injustice. Millie wanted to save the world, one wrongfully incarcerated person at a time.

I had this theory that you could understand people better by figuring out the movie genre everyone would star in. Take Millie, for instance. When she wasn't dressed as Velma, she was mostly in overalls (the legs rolled up like five times, on account of how short she was) and her favorite purple Doc Martens, her wavy, dark brown hair pulled back in a bun or a braid, the epitome of effortless cool. She'd be amazing in a '90s-era Julia Roberts-esque thriller where she worked tirelessly to uncover some insane conspiracy. If I ever found myself entangled in a secret government plot, Millie would be my first call.

"Did you know Chloe Bree's doing a *Texas Chainsaw*-themed party this year?" X asked.

"Is she?" I said, uninterested. X, Millie, and I weren't exactly "party" people. We spent every Halloween watching horror movies and devouring the amazingness that was pumpkin-spice ice cream with broken-up Halloween candy on top. I mean, we were spending our Friday afternoon in the school basement; do I really need to elaborate on how we weren't exactly the cool kids?

"She rented out the corn maze at Lacy Farms," Millie added. "Our whole grade's going to be there."

She was looking at me like she expected me to say something. In fact, she and X were both looking at me.

“What?” I asked, frowning. They stared a little more intently, and I felt a sinking in my gut as understanding hit. “Guys, *no*.”

“Think of it as a social experiment, like when Jane Goodall went to live with the apes,” said X, flashing me one of his famous, impossibly wide smiles. In addition to a smile that took up most of his face, X had wide, dark eyes and a jawline made for television. The most important thing you needed to understand about him was that no one didn’t like him. He could talk to *literally* anyone. If his life were a movie, it would be one where people traveled the world eating all the best food and soaking up the local culture. He had the kind of infectious enthusiasm that made you think, *Why not eat a cricket covered in chocolate? Could be tasty!* It was almost a shame that he wanted to work behind the camera instead of hosting his own documentary series.

“X,” I said, trying to keep calm. “I get your point, but these are high school boys, not apes. And I thought we were going to watch *Black Christmas*? Millie hasn’t seen that one yet.” Eli had even said he’d show up after we were done, probably with some amazing baked good he learned to make while watching *GBBO*. It was the perfect night.

“You know, I think I’ll live,” Millie said. She glanced at X pointedly.

“And Halloween’s on a Friday this year, so there’s always tomorrow,” he hurried to add. “We can watch *Black Christmas* then.”

Millie said, “I really think our horror-movie night works better on the day *after* Halloween anyway.”

“All Saints’ Day,” said X. “That’s still spooky.”

I frowned again. It was becoming increasingly clear that the two

of them had rehearsed this conversation ahead of time. Without me. They'd known I wouldn't be on board, so they'd practiced what to say to convince me. Which meant I wasn't going to win this one.

"But . . ." I started, then trailed off. I didn't have a particularly good argument here. Who didn't want to go to a party?

Me, that's who. I didn't want to go. I hated parties, and the dark. And corn mazes. And Halloween, for that matter. I preferred my horror confined to my laptop's thirteen-inch screen, where I could pause, rewind, and fast-forward to my heart's content. Where I always knew what was coming next. Movies, even horrible ones, were safe. High school parties, not so much.

I stared back at my friends, working my lip between my teeth as I tried to figure out what to say. Could I claim to be sick? Allergic to corn? Was that a thing?

If this were a horror movie, now would be the perfect time for our first jump scare. I'm not talking about an end-of-the-movie, Jason-grabbing-Alice-from-the-canoe-type jump scare, but an early Act-One, Billy-leaping-in-through-Sidney's-window-type scare. The way I saw it, early Act One scares like that had two purposes: First, they set the tone, reminding audience that they were indeed watching a scary movie long before the plot had a chance to even *get* scary.

And second, they prevented characters from having to answer questions they really didn't want to answer.

Like this one.

I smiled thinly at Millie and X, waiting for a jump scare to save me from this conversation.

Wind pressed against the basement windows. Somewhere in the school above us, someone began to laugh.

Didn't look like I was going to be so lucky.

"Guys," I started, thinking, *Sick*; I was going to have to go with sick. I gave a little fake cough. "You know, I think I—"

"Helloooo?" boomed a voice from the hall. "Anyone down here?"

Millie, X, and I all flinched as my big sister, Claire, leaned into the podcast room.

Here's everything you need to know about Claire: her makeup was perfect, even though she'd just lived through an entire day of school, and she was the only teen girl I knew who could pull off red hair and still look like straight fire.

The hair was dyed, FYI. Claire was naturally dirty blonde, like me. We both had the same small frames and oversize features, but on Claire, the anime-character eyes were balanced by Cupid's bow lips and a shockingly wide smile.

I, on the other hand, had inherited my dad's strong Italian nose and my mother's Resting Bitch Face. Whereas Claire got dad's good, glowy Italian skin that made her look like she was constantly on day two of a perfect beach tan, I inherited mom's Irish paleness that meant I had to slather on sunscreen whenever I even *thought* about the sun. The big eyes just made me look surprised, like the whole world was a little too much for me. Which was fair.

My movie theory sort of fell apart with Claire. She wasn't defined by a single genre like the rest of us were. She was the girl people made movies *for*. She was Emma Stone, Jennifer Lawrence, Saoirse Ronan. Pure Oscar bait. Sofia Coppola was probably writing a screenplay for her right now.

"Alley Cat," she said, aiming her truly ridiculous ridiculously large eyes at me. "You ready to go?"

"Yes, definitely." I stood up quickly and started shoving things

into my bag before Millie and X could get back to the party convo. Saved by Claire. Wouldn't be the first time. "I guess I'll see you guys later."

"At the party?" Millie said.

"Meet at seven?" added X.

"We'll see." I kept my head down so the hair hanging loose from my high ponytail would cover my lying face. "I'll . . . think about it." I'd already ordered *Black Christmas* on streaming, and I had only forty-eight hours to watch it. I know that sounds like a lot of time, but you really need to watch a movie like that twice if you want to catch all the behind-the-scenes stuff, like the fact that some of the snow was fake and a bunch of crew members made cameos. "I'll text you."

I threw my backpack over my shoulder and stepped out into the hall, but Claire grabbed my arm, holding me back.

"Wait, you're thinking about skipping a party?" she said, giving me her patented Claire Look. Picture Amy Adams's sad eyes and Anne Hathaway's trembling lower lip.

You're disappointing me, the Look said. If only the Academy could see her now.

"Claire," I muttered under my breath. There was a reason I was so obsessed with horror movies: It wasn't just the jump scares and the fake blood. In horror movies, the girl everyone overlooked, the smart, mousy, virginal girl who had no business in the starring role—let's face it, the girl like *me*—got to be the Final Girl. The star.

(And yeah, I know Neve Campbell and Jennifer Love Hewitt played Final Girls, and they're both gorgeous, but come on, this is just a theory; it doesn't account for the fact that Hollywood wouldn't even think of casting a woman who actually looked like a real person. Try to work with me.)

No other genre would cast the girl who liked science and reading in the leading role. Real life didn't either. In real life, girls like me stood on the sidelines and didn't place in competitions and stayed home on Friday nights.

I knew my role, and I was okay with it. Why wasn't anyone else?

I stared at my big sister, pleading, needing her to understand that I really didn't want to do this. Claire frowned, then nodded. Our sisterly bond was working in my favor for once. She felt my inner turmoil. I was sure of it. *Relief*. I exhaled.

"Alice doesn't have to think about anything," Claire said, turning back to my friends. "She's definitely going to this party. We'll see you there at seven."



TWO HOURS AND THIRTY-THREE MINUTES TO GO

“You really shouldn’t have said I would go tonight,” I told Claire.

“Your friends love you and want to party with you; I don’t understand the problem.” Claire gave me a side-eye. “Are you wussing out on me, Alley Cat?”

“I’m the wuss? You couldn’t even make it through the last half of *Hush*.” *Hush*, a 2016 slasher about a deaf writer being stalked by a murderous psychopath in the woods. I’d seen it five times.

“Because *Hush* was boring, not because it was scary. Why would you live in the woods, completely alone, if you were deaf? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Wow, victim blaming much?”

“More like writer blaming.”

I blinked at her. “You did *not* just insult Mike Flanagan in my—”

“*Hush* is a movie, Alice,” Claire said, interrupting me. “This is real life.” She started walking backward so I could see her dramatic eye roll. Everything Claire did was dramatic, but the eye roll was truly a work of art.

We’d just exited the high school, and I was trailing down the front steps behind her like a puppy, like always. It was a disgustingly beautiful day for October. Crisp autumn air. Golden light. It was like Halloween in a movie. Perfect weather for the vintage leather

jacket I'd found at Scout thrift store last weekend. There was even a slight breeze, just strong enough to rustle our hair.

"The party's a costume thing, right?" I glanced at Claire. "I don't have anything to wear."

Claire pursed her lips, taking a second to look me over. In addition to the jacket, my current look involved '90s-style vamp lipstick, a white spaghetti strap tank and layered necklaces, the high ponytail.

"This isn't a costume?" Claire asked, genuinely confused. "I thought you were dressing like that *Dawson's Creek* character from that one movie?"

"Katie Holmes, *Disturbing Behavior*," I clarified. "But it's not really a costume; it's more of an . . . homage." *Disturbing Behavior* was terrible, but I loved it because Katie Holmes seriously stepped out of her preppy tomboy type to play this edgy alternative chick. It was a major fashion moment back in the '90s. Google it.

When I found the leather jacket—identical to the one Katie wore in the movie—the rest of the outfit just sort of came together.

"Homage, costume, whatever." Claire flapped a hand. "You look hot. You should roll with it."

I bit back a grin. Compliments from Claire always meant more than compliments from other people.

We were crossing the street now, heading toward the Mercer College campus instead of the senior parking lot, where Claire's Jetta was parked.

"Are we going to Dad's gym?" I asked. Meaning the Mercer College gym, where our dad coached collegiate volleyball and softball. Claire and I had been hanging out there since we were tiny children with pigtails and scabs on our knees.

Well, I had scabs on my knees. Claire would never do something as prosaic as fall.

“Light’s better in the locker room than at home,” Claire explained. “They have those light bulbs that go all the way around the mirror like in old-timey makeup rooms. And Kiehl’s products in the showers.”

I nodded, barely listening. I was already sliding the elastic from my ponytail as casually as I could. “Does my hair look crazy?”

Claire shook her head. “No, it’s really good right now. The great Katie Holmes herself would be jealous.”

“Well, now we both know you’re lying.”

The gym was nearly empty. The buzzing fluorescent lights looked dull and artificial after all that glorious October sun, and a stale smell of sweat hung so heavily in the air it was practically visible, mixing with the sharp sting of cleaning products. The temperature inside the gym was always ten degrees past comfortable and strangely humid. I could practically feel my shirt wrinkling as I scanned the room.

Erin Cleary was in the back, huffing away on an elliptical machine. Erin was a senior at Omaha East, but all our school’s varsity athletes worked out at the college gym. Erin was a star volleyball player, so she basically lived here, as far as I could tell. It wasn’t much of a surprise to find her here on a Friday, on Halloween.

I heard a crash of weights on the other side of the room and glanced toward the sound, staring for just long enough to catch sight of wavy brown hair and boy muscles turned all glowy from a

thin sheen of sweat. And then, like someone who'd stared into an eclipse and was now worried she was going to go blind, I looked away again, cheeks blazing.

Claire grabbed my arm. "It's Wesley James Hanson the Third."

Oh yes. I was aware.

Wesley James Hanson III had moved here from Boston and started showing up at the gym around the beginning of the summer, giving me just around five months to . . . notice him. He went by Wes. Claire and I both knew he went by Wes, but neither of us could bring ourselves to refer to him as anything other than Wesley James Hanson III. He was worthy of all seven syllables.

He was a freshman in college this year, which meant it wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility that he could be interested in a high school girl. I'd done the math at least once a week.

All summer.

"He's going to see you staring," I muttered to Claire. I put a hand on her back and tried to maneuver her in the direction of the locker room. I'd spent a not-insignificant amount of time over the past five months trying to keep my sister away from Wes.

"I'm fascinated by him," Claire said. Still staring, by the way. Claire wasn't the kind of girl who'd be bothered if the godlike college freshman caught her staring at him.

"I heard that, back in Boston, he was having an affair with a forty-year-old divorcée *and* her daughter, and that his dad had to pay off the ex-husband slash father to hush everything up."

I chewed my lip, adding this rumor to my collection. Claire wasn't the only one fascinated by the mystery that was Wesley James Hanson III. Just yesterday Eli told me he'd overheard someone saying that Wes got kicked out of whatever fancy East Coast

boarding school he used to go to for running a fight club out of the common room in the dorms. Millie said she'd heard he was in the Irish mob. X told me he was gearing up to try out for the Olympic rowing team.

There was no way to verify any of the rumors. Wes wasn't on social media. The one and only time I tried to look him up online, I found an entry for a James Wesley Hanson who died in Georgia in 1940 and nothing else.

The mystery made him even more fascinating. He was like no one I'd ever met before. He completely and totally defied the teen-movie-character tropes the rest of us all fit into so neatly. He was well-off, but not into money. An athlete, but not a meathead (to use a term from some of my favorite old movies.) Gorgeous, but also . . . sort of *dorky*. But in a hot way.

I let my eyes settle on him for a moment, watching him lift weights on the other side of the room. From the knees up, he was your standard rich jock: gray Nike gym shorts, white Nike T-shirt, bulging muscles. But I noticed he'd paired his tennis shoes with old-man argyle socks pulled up over his calves.

He was always doing stuff like that. Painting his toenails black. Adding a pearl necklace to an otherwise very standard T-shirt and jeans. Tiny details here and there, just enough to make it clear that he didn't care about gender norms, that he wouldn't be boxed in by expectations. God, it was hot.

"I bet he only watches obscure German art films," Claire said, still staring. "Or maybe he does that thing where he pairs *The Wizard of Oz* with *The Dark Side of the Moon* so that the song lyrics match up perfectly."

"Totally," I agreed, even though I knew for a fact that Wes liked

horror movies, like me. Last month, I was waiting to give Dad a ride home, and I was watching *Creep* on my laptop. (Underrated 2014 film starring Mark Duplass as this dude who wants to make a movie for his unborn child. Found footage; amazing.) I was almost to the end, and I was getting excited because it was my absolute favorite horror-movie ending of all time, and who should stop by to watch the last two minutes over my shoulder but Wesley James Hanson III.

“You seen the sequel?” he asked, when it was over.

“No,” I said, which was weird because I’d seen the sequel like two dozen times, but to be perfectly honest, my brain wasn’t so much working as it was saying the words *hot guy* over and over and over again, so really I was feeling pretty proud of myself for getting a word out at all.

“The sequel’s rad,” he said. (*Rad!* my brain screamed.) “You should really check it out.”

I thought I’d noticed his eyes lingering on my legs, but he quickly moved them up to my face when he saw me watching. I didn’t mind. I’d felt good about my look that day. I’m not some sort of weirdo who always dresses like a movie character, but ’90s horror movies got me really into ’90s fashion, and I was wearing this great mini-skirt with clunky black combat boots and suspenders, sort of reminiscent of a young Winona Ryder. Claire had told me my legs were goals in that skirt, and if Claire said it, then it was true.

“Nice . . . suspenders,” Wes had said.

“Nice shorts,” I told him. He’d been wearing these insanely short running shorts that day. Really, they were obscene. Only Wesley James Hanson III could make shorts like that look sexy.

I couldn’t believe I’d been bold enough to comment on them.

But Wes had stared back at me like he wanted to say something else, and there was this supercharged moment where we both waited for the other one to speak first. Neither of us did. I couldn't tell if Wes was trying to play it cool or if he was actually little shy.

After a long moment, he'd rubbed the back of his neck and said, "See you around, Alice."

My heart almost stopped right there. Wesley James Hanson III knew my name. Which meant he'd *asked around* about me.

Was it the suspenders? The fact that I wasn't sporty like all the other athletes at the gym, that I stood out? I had no idea. But when Wes walked away, he left this amazing smell behind him, this kind of musk, mixed with dry grass and suede, like how I imagined a sweaty cowboy must smell. I wanted to make a candle out of it.

After that, it was like we were both acutely aware of each other whenever we were in the gym at the same time. I'd notice his eyes move my way, and I'd feel a little skin prickle whenever he got close. We talked sometimes. If he saw me watching a movie, he'd stop to watch part of it over my shoulder, and then he'd recommend a movie, and then I'd recommend a movie back. I'd started wearing my suspenders-and-miniskirt combo kind of a lot, and I'd noticed that he'd started wearing his short shorts kind of a lot, and oh my God, was this *flirting*? Were we flirting?

Whatever we were doing had begun in September and progressed through October. I hadn't even told Claire about it. I didn't want to jinx anything.

"Alice? You coming?" Claire was halfway to the locker room, but she'd stopped to wait for me.

I blinked, tearing my eyes away from Wes. "Uh . . . actually, I sort of need to talk to Dad. Meet you outside of his office?"

Claire nodded, digging around in her purse for something. "Let me borrow that lipstick you're wearing?"

"No way."

"Please? I love it on you." She pouted. "I want to try it."

"Is there a word that's stronger than *no*? I want to adequately convey the level of no I feel in my heart." If I let Claire borrow my lipstick, it would suddenly become *her* lipstick, and then everyone would tell her how amazing it looked on her, and then it would become her signature color, and I wouldn't ever be able to wear it again. The exact same thing had happened with this pair of platform loafers I found at Scout at the end of last year. Loafers that Claire was currently wearing. I wasn't taking any chances.

Luckily, she let it go. "Fine. Meet you outside Dad's office."

She disappeared inside the locker room. Instead of heading straight for Dad's office, I turned around, allowing myself one last backward glance . . .

Wesley James Hanson III was staring at me. He caught me looking at him, and a smile slowly grew on his lips.

God, he had good lips. Staring at them, I wondered what it would feel like to kiss them, if they'd be rough or soft, what they'd taste like. It had been too long since I'd kissed anyone. The last time had been X at Chloe's birthday party freshman year. X had told me he was gay about two seconds after the kiss ended, but even before that, it had felt like kissing my own brother.

But kissing Wes . . .

A shiver went through my whole body. When I finally turned back around, my legs were trembling.



AN HOUR AND FORTY MINUTES LEFT

My dad's office was the size of a closet, with no windows and an oversize desk taking up one entire wall. Above the desk were a truly shocking number of inspirational posters. Seriously, however many posters you're picturing right now, double that.

Chloe Bree stepped out before I could open the door.

"Allison, *hi*," she said, pushing her long white-blond hair over one shoulder. Chloe has known me since elementary school and has been getting private softball coaching from my dad for over a year, and she still didn't know that my name was *Alice*, not *Allison*.

She'd be perfect in a mob movie where all the women had fake fingernails and bleached-blond hair and were addicted to cocaine.

"Hey, Chloe," I said.

Chloe looked like she was about to say something else when Owen Maddox, this college freshman who worked at the gym as a janitor on nights and weekends, rounded the corner, sweeping. He had long dark hair that fell over his face in a greasy curtain and acne scars.

"Owen, *hi*," Chloe said, her voice a touch fake-sounding. "I'm going to see you both at my party tonight, right?" she asked.

Owen sometimes bought beer for high school students, which meant he showed up at high school parties, but he always hung out

in the corners, not really saying anything to anyone. Millie called him our school's Boo Radley. She wasn't totally wrong.

"Wouldn't miss it," Owen deadpanned. He glanced at me for a moment, then rounded the corner, the sound of his broom brushing against concrete slowly fading.

"You're coming too, right, Allison? It's gonna slay." And Chloe wiggled her fingers at me, walking off before I'd even answered her.

I stepped into Dad's office, knocking on the door frame. "Dad?"

"Hey, Alice." My dad twisted around in his seat, his posture reminding me of boys my age twisted around in their desks. The overhead light caught the gray in his hair and the shadows under his eyes, making him look both old and young at the same time. "Claire with you?"

Ninety-five percent of what my dad said to me was "Claire with you?" or "Have you seen Claire?" In case you were wondering if we were close.

"Locker room," I said. "Uh, I was wondering . . . did you have time to look at my application yet? For the Mercer internship?" The Summer Research Internship at Mercer School of Medicine was one of the most prestigious internships for high school students in the country, the kind of thing that made college admissions boards drool all over their laptops. It was also a pipeline into Mercer's pre-med program, which I'd had my heart set on since I was a tiny nine-year-old playing Operation in my spare time and dreaming of one day pulling the bones out of real people.

I wanted to be a forensic pathologist. That was a doctor who investigated the cause of sudden or unexpected deaths, and sometimes even testified in court if foul play was suspected. Read: dream job.

Since my dad worked at Mercer, I was hoping he might be able to give me some tips on what the committee might be looking for.

For a second, his expression was so totally blank that I knew he hadn't just forgotten to read at my application; he'd also completely forgotten that I'd asked him to look. Maybe he even forgot he had a second daughter at all.

Then he flashed a smile. It was his homecoming-king smile, his class-president smile. Dad had been the king of everything back in high school. When he smiled like that, it was so easy to see why.

Claire had inherited that smile. I had not. "I didn't forget, Alice; I swear. I'll look at it tonight."

I was walking away from Dad's office, my brain still entirely focused on my application, when I turned the corner and walked right into Wesley James Hanson III.

And I mean I walked *right* into him. Like in a movie. Like that scene in *Scream* where Sidney was running from Ghostface and turned the corner and ran into Billy.

I wondered if he was waiting for me.

"Alice," Wes said. "Hey."

He stared at my lips for a moment. My mouth felt suddenly very dry.

"Hey," I said.

Every inch of his skin was tan, like he'd somehow just gotten back from the beach, even though we live two thousand miles from the nearest real beach. He was chewing a toothpick as he spoke to me, and something about this was incredibly seductive.

I could see him in a horror movie. I could see him in *any* movie. He had that thing that never went out of style, that rich-kid, bad-boy thing. He was Skeet Ulrich, Heath Ledger, Timothée Chalamet.

He was . . . wearing a Hello Kitty barrette.

“Hello Kitty,” I said, because apparently I can’t think a thing without saying it.

“Yeah.” He touched the barrette. “It’s from a collab she did with Minnie Mouse. See how she’s wearing Minnie’s red polka-dot bow?”

She was, in fact, wearing a polka-dot bow. “That’s . . . cool,” I said. But I was thinking, *Lucky kitty*.

I’d been wanting to touch Wes’s hair since the day I met him.

Wes moved the toothpick to the corner of his mouth with his tongue. “I watched that movie you told me about. *The Invitation*? It was insane. Thanks for the rec.”

The Invitation, 2015 film about a really messed-up dinner party.

I felt myself loosen a little, like I always did when talking about horror movies. “Right? Like, how the whole first half of the movie was all about building this really claustrophobic feeling of tension, so you just kept waiting to see what was going to happen and making up these ideas in your head about what was . . .” I trailed off as Wes leaned in closer, plucking a golden leaf off my jacket sleeve.

He’d been doing this sort of thing more frequently lately. Finding little reasons to touch me. An eyelash on my cheek. A tag sticking out of my shirt. Every time I felt his skin against mine, it was like striking a match. That instant sizzle.

“I was gonna say it was scary,” he said, letting the leaf flutter to the ground. “You know a lot about movies, don’t you?”

I looked up at him, barely daring to breathe. He'd gotten closer to me when he'd leaned in to get that leaf, right inside my personal space. This wasn't *friends* close. This was *something more* close.

"I do," I said. I could smell that cowboy scent of him all over again. It rendered me momentarily mute.

"I'm thinking about asking you to watch one with me sometime," he said, searching my face.

I blinked. "You are?"

"Yeah, I'm actually pretty nervous about it." He smiled, all shy.

"Well, fear's good for the soul," I said, and his smile widened.

"That it is." He scratched the back of his head. "So, what do you say? You doing anything later tonight?"

One of my favorite Wes rumors was that he spent the last four years writing and directing horror films in South Korea, and that he had to hide out here because his last film pissed off the North Korean government and now he was on a watch list.

If you'd asked me at the beginning of the summer, I'd have told you it was more likely that *that* rumor was true than that Wes would ask me out on a date.

Sometimes life was amazingly unpredictable.

I was still trying to remember how to form words when an obnoxiously cheerful voice from behind me said, "Oh, *hello*."

I closed my eyes. The temperature of my face rose to one thousand degrees.

Wes glanced over my shoulder. "Oh, hey. You're Alice's sister, right?"

I could feel Claire stiffen behind me. My sister had never in her life been referred to as *Alice's sister* before. In my nightmares, I was usually naked when she interrupted one of my conversations with

Wes and stole him away from me. I suppose I should've been grateful that I wasn't naked now. If you're about to watch the love of your life become completely infatuated with your sister, it's best to be fully clothed.

I tried to focus on that as Claire dropped her arm over my shoulder and said, "Yes, Claire is . . . me. *Hi.*" Of course she sounded charming when she said this. I noticed the subtle tightness in her voice only because I know her better than anyone.

"Wes." Wes looked back at me, waiting for me to say something, but for some reason the thing that popped into my head at that moment was this story I once heard about how the movie *Saw* was inspired by a news report about a man who broke into people's houses to tickle the feet of sleeping children.

Do not say that out loud, Alice.

"So. *Wes,*" Claire said. "How do you know my baby sister?"

Wes looked at me again, then back at Claire, frowning. "She watches movies here after school sometimes."

"That she does, Wesley; that she does." Claire looked at me. And now they were both looking at me. It was my turn to speak, but I couldn't speak, because all I could think about were my perfect vintage loafers, now *Claire's* perfect vintage loafers. It hadn't even been her fault that she'd ended up with them. They'd just looked so much better on her. Everyone said so. She wore them one time, and after that, whatever magic they'd had when I first tried them on was gone. What was the point of wearing amazing shoes when I knew I would never look as good as Claire looked wearing them? I'd given them to her the next day.

I really didn't want Wes to be like those loafers. Claire could have any guy she wanted; when was *I* going to meet another guy who

looked like Heath Ledger and liked horror movies and appreciated my off-the-wall fashion choices?

Never, that was when. Wes was one of a kind.

I studied his face, expecting to see the dumbstruck expression that every male and a solid percentage of females got when interacting with Claire.

But Wes was still looking at me, somehow resisting the gravitational pull that was my sister's perfection.

Maybe he didn't like perfect? I mean, he paired argyle socks with athleisure. Maybe perfect was too boring for someone like him.

His brows furrowed, a little expectantly, and I remembered that he'd just asked me out on a date. *Me*, not Claire.

My heart did a leap. I should probably answer him.

"About the movie," I said. All casual. "I think I could be into that."

"Cool." He said the word a beat too quickly, a smile touching his lips. He pulled out his phone. "Can I text you later?"

Claire blurted, like she couldn't help herself, "Her number is 402-555-4605."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Claire had never totally figured out how to behave when she wasn't 100 percent the center of attention. To be fair, she didn't have a lot of practice.

"Thanks, I think," Wes said, still looking at me as he typed my number into his phone. "I'll hit you up."

And away he went, leaving his sweaty cowboy smell behind again.

Claire waited until he was out of earshot before turning back to me, all wide-eyed with indignation. "You have *so* much explaining to do."

Her voice was a little jealous, a little awed. I felt a skip of pleasure.

I was always the one jealous of Claire. It'd never been the other way around before. "Do I?"

"How long have you been keeping your love affair with Wesley James Hanson the Third from me?"

"Calm down; there's no love affair. We just . . . talk."

"Yeah, sure, uh-huh." She said this just a touch too fast. Man, she really was jealous. I almost felt guilty. Then I looked down and saw my perfect loafers on her feet.

Claire didn't even like vintage clothes. She'd wanted to try the loafers only because she'd seen someone wear a similar pair on TikTok.

She unwrapped a piece of gum and put it in her mouth, then went to toss the wrapper in the trash and missed. She must not have noticed, because she kept walking, leaving the wrapper on the floor behind her.

I heard the sweeping sound of a broom and looked up as Owen appeared in the hall again. He leaned over and plucked the wrapper off the floor.

I was still a few steps away, so I don't think he saw me. He was staring after Claire, an annoyed expression on his face. As I watched, he lifted his hand, fingers folded to look like a gun.

He aimed it at the back of Claire's head, cocked his thumb, and murmured, "Pow."



CAN'T BE MORE THAN THIRTY MINUTES NOW

Claire and I had just pulled into the parking lot in front of Lacy Farms when I finished giving her the (extremely abbreviated) story of what had gone down between me and Wes. I watched the numbers on the dash switch from 6:59 to 7:00 just as the engine clicked off, almost like Claire had timed it. Which was totally something she would have done. She'd always been superstitious in really weird, small ways. Like, if we made it home without hitting a red light, it meant I was going to ace my bio quiz tomorrow, or if she texted Alex Kramer at exactly 12:34, it meant he was going to fall madly in love with her. According to Claire, the world was gameable.

"Sart hre." Claire leaned over the steering wheel, reading the few remaining letters on the weatherworn sign marking the Lacy Farms corn maze. "Do you think it's a code?"

I stared down the dark, dark path and tried very hard not to shiver because if I did, Claire would never let me hear the end of it.

"I do think it's a code," I told her, all solemn. "It means skip the cheugy, scary corn maze and go right for the party. You could be drinking lukewarm beer in less than five minutes." Sometimes, if I just asked Claire for what I wanted, she'd surprise me and do it.

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought the point was to go through the maze to get to the party."

“Eli told me there’s another entrance around back. Leads right to the party, and there’s zero chance of finding sweaty boys carrying chain saws.” Eli was the kind of person who liked to make a point of knowing things other people didn’t. It was one of his superpowers. For instance: Everyone knew Chloe Bree had rented the entire cornfield at Lacy Farms for her annual Halloween party. But only Eli knew she’d talked the track-and-field guys into dressing up and hiding in the stalks to scare the shit out of people as they made their way through.

“Is Eli always such a baby?” Claire asked, throwing her car door open a little more dramatically than necessary. She was looking across the field now, to where Millie and X were hanging around the corn maze entrance, talking to Sierra Clayton, the best-looking girl in our grade.

X was wearing the traditional Omaha East werewolf mask. Our mascot is a wolf, so every year, the kids at our school buy the same werewolf mask for Halloween as a weird show of school spirit. I don’t know when it started, but it’s a thing now. And Millie was all decked out like Velma from *Scooby-Doo*.

I groaned. “I knew everyone would be wearing a costume.”

“Here.” Claire plucked the cat’s ears off her head and put them on me. “Now you’re a . . . grungy nineties cat?”

“I don’t think that’s a thing.”

“Okay . . . then you’re . . .” Claire’s eyes lit up. “Oh my God, you’re an *alley cat*. Get it?”

Okay, I couldn’t help laughing at that. “But now *you* don’t have a costume.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I don’t mind making the sacrifice if it means my baby sister gets the most perfect costume of all time.”

Claire cut her eyes to me, bold red lips pursed. “Are you really not going through the maze with me?”

“You don’t actually have to be a serial killer to hurt someone with a chain saw, you know,” I said, following her. “A drunk high school boy could manage just fine.” Common sense; it’s like the main rule of being a Final Girl, but Claire just rolled her eyes.

“Come on, Allie, what kind of person skips the scary corn maze? On Halloween? That’s the entire point of the party.” She raised her artfully disheveled eyebrows, daring me to tell her that I was exactly that kind of person, always have been and always will be.

It wasn’t even about fear—it was about being smart. Anyone who’d ever seen a scary movie knew to skip the corn maze, just like we knew not to venture down into a basement or up into an attic, to drive past hitchhikers and heed the warnings of toothless old men at gas stations. If you watched enough horrible things happen on-screen, you could figure out how to avoid them in real life.

The *Halloween* theme started playing from my pocket. I pulled out my phone and glanced at the screen, but Claire was watching, so I stuck it back in my pocket without reading it.

Claire grinned. “What? You aren’t going to read Wesley James Hanson the Third’s text in front of me?”

Ignoring that. “I’m going to go talk to Millie and X.”

Claire was already most of the way to the maze, but she turned around and started walking backward so I could see just how ridiculous she thought I was being. “Come on, Alley Cat. You’re not seriously going to let me go through the scary maze on my own, are you? If you don’t come with me, I might die.” And then she grabbed her neck and made these gross gagging noises, like she was being choked, before disappearing into the corn.

If you don't come with me, I might die.

Those were the last words my sister ever said to me.

Really.

I read my text. I was expecting a cool-guy, one-word text—*hey* or *sup*—but Wes sent me this:

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I have lived through this horror." I can take the next thing that comes along. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

I smiled, then read it again.

What a weirdo.

X, Millie, and I made our way around the maze to the back entrance, following the sounds of voices down a single camping-lantern-lit path to a big clearing in the corn. A ton of people from school were already there, but Claire wasn't with them, so we grabbed Solo cups of warm beer and talked about how annoying it was that all Sally Hardesty did in the original *Texas Chainsaw* was scream, that *Scream's* Sidney Prescott was iconic, and that the best slashers of the '70s and '80s were the ones where the Final Girls actually fought back.

“Maybe that’s what our podcast is about,” Millie said. “Like . . . we can teach listeners how to be a Final Girl?”

“How to be a *good* Final Girl,” X added.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen.

Twenty.

Millie and X went to refill their cups. I sent Claire a text, but she didn’t answer. She hadn’t answered the last three.



SHOWTIME

If this were a real slasher, this is when the music would start. The camera would close in on my face.

“Buccinator muscle,” I murmured under my breath. It was this weird thing I did when I wanted to get out of my own head. I would try to remember the names of the different muscle groups I’d had to learn in the college-level anatomy class I took over the summer. As I waited for Claire, I ran through the jaw, picturing the long, pink slabs knitting together beneath my cheeks. “Masseter muscle, temporalis muscle . . .”

The sun had fully set by the time I’d finished, and the only light came from the camping lanterns. I peered into the entrance of the maze, holding my breath, like you do when you drive by a graveyard. It was dark inside. Seriously dark. I couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of me. Looking down, I couldn’t see my own shoes. I turned the flashlight app on my cell on, but that almost made it worse. Now there was a two-foot-wide circle of bright white that left everything outside of it even darker, filled with twitching shadows and things that went still the second I moved the beam to look directly at them.

Somewhere in the corn, the hard metal-on-metal grind of a chain saw roared to life.

I froze, fear twitching through me, then took a breath. Claire was just messing with me, right? To punish me for being too chicken for the maze. The whole thing was such a horror-movie cliché. If I were smart, if I were following my own damn rules, I'd turn around and go back to the party.

But this was real life. No matter how well you know the rules, no matter how smart you think you are, you're never prepared for your life to turn into a horror movie.

"Claire?" I called, walking into the maze.

A breeze blew through the corn, shaking the stalks. The sound was like a low, snickering laugh. But no one answered.

"Okay, Claire, you got me," I said, going a little farther. Dead leaves crunched beneath my sneakers. Wind played with my hair. Something rustled in the corn, followed by the dragging sound of footsteps.

I took a right at the fork in the path, and the light from my phone bounced over a short dress, a pale face.

Not Claire—Chloe Bree. In a true homage to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, she'd made it look like her arm had been cut off at the shoulder. A pale stump of flesh and a broken, yellowed bone protruded from the strap of her dress, and fake blood gushed down the side of her body and clumped in her long, pale blonde hair.

I felt a kick of fear and had to bite my lip to keep from gasping.

It looked so real.

"I . . . uh, admire your commitment to the theme, Chloe," I told her, swallowing.

She didn't answer. There was a glazed, drunk look to her face. Her eyes were all glassy, like she'd just thrown up, and her hair was soaked with sweat and fake blood. She took a single step toward me, and her legs knocked together.

I reached out to steady her. “Whoa, did you have a little too much to drink?”

Chloe opened her mouth, and I saw that her teeth were slick with blood. She looked down at her shoulder, drew a long, sobbing breath—

And screamed.

The Wilhelm scream is a stock sound effect that’s been used in films, television, and video games since the ’50s. It’s been in *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones*, even a few Pixar movies.

And now, apparently, my life. Because that’s exactly what this sounded like, like a horror-movie scream.

Blood oozed over Chloe’s lips and chin, thick drops of it that looked black in the light of my phone. That blood wasn’t fake. The smell of it was so strong, it clung to the insides of my nostrils. I could taste it in the back of my throat—

I don’t remember running. My body seemed to move on its own, legs lifting me and propelling me through the corn, heartbeat thudding like crazy in my throat. I had to get out of there. I had to call the police; I had to get an ambulance for Chloe. Long icy-cold breaths knifed through my lungs. Cornstalks whipped into my face and arms. Twigs snapped beneath my shoes.

And then I turned another corner of the maze, and there she was.

Claire knelt on the ground, crying. She had blood in her hair, and there was blood and dirt streaked across her face, but she didn’t appear to be hurt. Not yet.

A guy stood over her. Tall and skinny, with lean, ropy muscles; pale skin pockmarked with acne scars; long dark hair. I recognized him. I knew I recognized him.

Owen, I thought. It was Owen, the janitor guy from the gym.

What was he doing here?

Owen had a mask balled up in one hand, and his other hand was groping his stomach, which was already dark with blood. There was something sticking out of him, something small and pink, and it took me a second to realize that it was the little pocketknife Claire carried in her purse for self-defense.

The next few things happened very quickly.

First, Claire looked up and saw me standing in the corn. A relieved smile flickered over her lips, and she started to say my name. "Al—"

And then my foot caught on something lying across the field, and I fell, hard. The ground slammed into me, pushing my lips back into my teeth. The taste of blood hit my tongue.

I groaned and glanced down, wanting to see what had tripped me.

It was a chain saw.

The same chain saw this psycho had used to cut off Chloe's arm.

I heard noises then. Grunting and a sort of wet, meaty sucking sound. My head hurt like hell, and I could barely move, but I managed to look up just as Owen jerked my sister's knife out of his stomach.

"No," I moaned. I tried to push myself back to my feet, but I was too slow. My arms were shaking too badly, and I couldn't quite regain my balance.

I couldn't reach them in time; I couldn't stop him.

And so I watched as Owen Trevor Maddox lurched forward and stabbed my sister once, right in the chest.

I watched him kill her.