

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

LISA
UNGER

UNKNOWN
CALLER

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1.

The call comes in just as my shift is about to end.

It's been a slow night and I've already packed up my things, getting ready to go. If I don't answer, the call will bounce to Espo, my supervisor, who is by far the best among us here at the Crisis Center. He's calm, steady, soothing, his voice like a warm blanket wrapped around you. He's been doing this a long time. Most people burn out, move on to other, less intense work. But he's still here.

Even though some folks from the next shift are already arriving, sitting down in their cubicles, donning their headsets, I don't even consider not answering. That's why I'm here. The only reason. To answer when someone makes the last call she might ever make.

I click the flashing green button on the phone in front of me, put my headset back on. A number appears on the ID screen right away. Sometimes the caller's name is listed there as well, but not tonight. Just **Unknown Caller**.

"Hey," I answer. Keep it light, keep it casual, like I'm hearing from an old friend. "You've reached the Crisis Hotline." I offer the standard statement about confidentiality. Then, "This is Charlie. I'm listening."

There's a pause, and I wonder if the caller hung up already. Or if it's one of our regulars, gearing up to put me through my paces. Our incel, after another failed Match.com date; he usually asks for me, but he'll take one of the other young women on duty in a pinch. The vet with PTSD, who has bouts of insomnia; that call usually goes to Bruce, who specializes in counseling veterans. The elderly lady who calls when her cat doesn't come in right away at night. She knows us all by name.

"Hi, Charlie."

A young voice, deep. Male, I think, but you can never be certain, and you should never assume. That's one of the

first things Espo taught me. Assume nothing. Be a blank slate for every call.

“Who’s this?”

I glance at Espo, whose large, round-shouldered form fills his chair in the glass-walled supervisor’s office, and wish I could take the words back. But he’s not listening to my call; he’s probably tied up with Darren, who’s still training. Darren’s sitting in another cubicle on the far side of the room. I can hear the low tones of his voice.

What can I call you? or Who am I speaking with tonight? That’s what Espo would have said.

Who’s this? or What’s your name? Those are confrontational, put pressure on the caller, who is obviously under enough pressure. Sometimes people don’t want to give their names, and that’s okay.

Another long pause; I sink into it. *Learn to wait. Patience saves lives.* More Espo-isms, as we like to call them here.

“I’m no one,” the unknown caller finally says.

I try to put a smile in my voice. People can hear kindness; it has a tone and timbre. So do judgment, fear, panic, anger.

“I can’t call you *that*, can I?”

Another pause.

I listen to breath every night. It tells you so much—ragged, shallow, faint, sobbing, waning. His is none of these. His is slow and measured. In the background, I hear music, low and tinny. Something I almost recognize, but I can’t quite hear it well enough to pin it down.

“It’s okay,” I say when he doesn’t answer. “You don’t have to give your name. We can just talk.”

Here’s the thing.

Some people just want to die.

They have their reasons. Grief. A lifetime battle with depression. A terminal diagnosis. And those folks? You can't stop them. Every cop will tell you that there are suicide-hotline phones at the top of most high bridges. Those who really want to die—they park their car, run, and leap. They pull the trigger, double-check the noose, take all the pills, and they walk through that doorway and don't look back. They don't pick up the phone, because they don't want to be talked out of it.

But the people who linger on the edge, looking down, the people who pick up the phone and reach out for help? Most of the time, you can talk them down. They are looking for a way back to the light.

If they've called—Espo taught me—you *can* reach them. They want to take the hand you're offering; they want to be drawn out of the darkness. Much of the time.

“So, how are you?” I say into the sound of his breathing.

Another stupid question. But sometimes it's enough. Because that's a question that gets asked a lot in life, but people rarely wait for the real answer. It's more like a greeting, and we're expected to answer quickly—*Fine! Great! Howaboutyou?*—and move on.

“I called a suicide hotline,” he says flatly. “How do you *think* I am?”

“Good point,” I say lightly. “So, what's on your mind?”

More breathing, growing deeper. I'm pretty sure he's going to hang up. I'm sweating a little, feeling uncomfortable, nervous, like I'm fucking it up. I measure my own breath. Wait. Finally, he speaks again.

“Have you ever lost anyone?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer truthfully.

“Does it ever go away? The pain.”

I draw in a deep breath, release it. “It changes. You find ways to live with it. Your life grows around it.”

I sense his surprise at the honesty. Maybe he was expecting the usual pat answer, a time-heals-all-wounds or we-learn-to-let-go-and-move-on platitude. But that's not my way.

“Who did you lose?” he asks.

You decide how much to give, Espo says. Don't get out in front of a drowning man; he'll take you right down with him.

Meaning don't give so much that you're the one who will need the suicide hotline one day.

“My best friend.”

She was more than that, really, but that's too much, too deep.

“How did she die?”

I think about lying—car wreck, I could reasonably say. But the truth has a tone and a timbre too.

“She killed herself.” The words still stick in my throat. “I wish I had been there for her the way I can be here for you.”

More breathing, measured, deep. Then, “Is that why you're there, answering desperate calls in the middle of the night?”

“That's part of it. Sure.”

I know I've lost control of the call because he's asking all the questions.

“But you didn't call to talk about me, did you?”

“What if I did?”

The music I heard in the background comes up a bit in volume. And then I recognize it, and it makes my heart start to thud, and I'm shuttled back there, listening to the car engine gunning and the sound of her screaming. The rain. The horrible crunch of metal and shattering glass.

“Who is this?” I whisper.

But the line goes dead.

You're allowed to call back, so I do. But the phone just rings and rings, and no one picks up, and it doesn't go to voice mail. I sit and stare at the phone, my heart an engine.

"What happened?"

Espo's voice is in my ear, and I look up to see him watching me, concern furrowing his brow. He pushes back his thick black glasses. He has a wild ring of curls around a bald scalp, like a clown. It's a look that shouldn't work, but it does.

"Caller hung up," I say.

"Did you try back?"

"No answer."

I'm still there, triggered and sandbagged by memories. My hands shake, and I clasp them together.

"Did he say he was going to hurt himself or someone else? Should I contact emergency services?"

"He didn't say that, no."

Espo issues a sigh. "Maybe he'll call again."

I linger, watch the phone for a while longer, still hearing that song.

"Go home and get some rest. Big day tomorrow," Espo says over my headset. He's watching me through the glass wall of his office, gives me a smile and motions toward the door.

I wave, but sit a moment longer and wait, willing the unknown caller to ring me back. But he doesn't, and finally I just go home, still shaken.

2.

The next day, I stand on the small stage at city hall, along with Espo. Steve Esposito is his full name. Jane Martinez, founder and president of the Crisis Center, stands to my right, grasping my hand, while the mayor gives her speech about our lifesaving work.

Espo is sweating, his big belly straining against what looks to be a new plaid shirt, the creases from where it was folded in the package still visible, like he didn't bother to iron it or didn't know he was supposed to. Jane, on my other side, is straight backed in her signature black suit. There's a glittering red heart pin on the lapel, the logo for the Crisis Center. She's perfectly coifed, as always, thick hair styled loose and natural, and her nails are a shiny blood red. She gives off a kind of energy—passion, presence, efficiency. It's electric.

We're here because a couple of months ago, I took a call from the mayor's daughter.

Her call came in late, after midnight, and I was the only one on duty.

“Hey, this is Charlie. I'm listening.”

“I need a reason,” she said, her voice soft, sad. Very young.

“A reason . . . ,” I prompted. It's a technique. To let a sentence dangle and hope the caller picks up the thread.

“Like, *why*? Why should I stay?”

“That's a really good question,” I offered. “What can I call you?”

This is always a difficult moment, the place you most often lose them. When you name yourself, you take responsibility for the call you've made. You admit, in a way, that you don't really want to die.

She hesitated. Then, “Zoey.”

“Zoey, I’m Charlie.”

“Hi, Charlie.”

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” she said, voice heavy with sadness, words slightly slurred.

“Have you taken anything tonight? Been drinking?”

“My mother. Everyone thinks she’s so perfect, so in control. Do you know she has a medicine cabinet filled with bottles of pills? Everything from Ativan, Oxy, you name it. I took some of her Vicodin.”

“How many, Zoey?”

“I don’t know. The bottle is empty now.”

“Okay,” I said easily. “Talk to me.”

I typed a message to Espo: **We need emergency services. Possible overdose.**

“There’s this girl,” she said. “I see her on my social media feeds, in the newspaper. I see the way other people see her. She’s beautiful; she’s smart. She runs track, and she’s the captain of her team, headed to nationals. She’ll graduate from high school next year, and she’ll go to a good college. Anywhere she wants, probably. Her boyfriend is hot. *Anyone* would want to be her.”

“You envy her.”

“Yes,” she said, releasing a sob. “I want to be that girl on the screen. So badly. But I’m not. I can never be.”

“We can never be someone else.” I kept my voice light. “We can only be who we are. And it’s enough, more than enough.”

“That’s the thing,” she said, voice growing softer. I strained to hear. “Who I am, truly am inside. It’s not enough—not enough for my parents, my friends. It’s not even enough for me.”

Even though I was listening to Zoey, I heard that other voice in every call, desperate, frantic. *I thought you were my friend. I thought you loved me. You knew me, the real me that I never show to anyone else. Where are you?* Every call is my chance to be there.

“What *would* be enough?” I asked Zoey.

She issued a heavy sigh but didn’t answer.

Espo hits me back: **We were able to get an address. Paramedics on the way. Try to keep the caller on the line.**

“Zoey, are you with me?”

“I’m here.” But I could tell she was fading.

“Because I promise you, the girl you see on that screen is not the real person. She has all the same doubts and fears that you do. Chances are she doesn’t see herself as perfect. Just like you, she only sees her flaws.”

Sometimes when you get through, there’s a moment of silence, when your words land just right. But then she laughed weakly.

“I know,” she said. “Because that girl is me. I *am* the girl on the screen. And still—I’m nothing like her. She’s perfect. And I’m—broken inside.”

I should have seen that coming. I chose my words carefully.

“That’s everyone these days, Zoey. We broadcast one version of ourselves, cropped and filtered and out there for consumption. But the real person is hidden behind that.”

“Hidden and alone,” she said. “No one wants the real me. They want *that* girl, the perfect one, the one who never loses, who always looks just right, the one who’s always smiling. If they could see me now, they’d hate me.”

I strained to listen, hoping to hear the approach of sirens, and kept talking.

“You’re wrong. We’re all flawed and broken in some way. That’s what makes us unique, special. Imperfection

makes us who we are, because it's real. You're enough, Zoey. I promise."

"You don't even know me."

"I do. In this moment, I know you better than anyone. Because you revealed yourself to me."

She issued a deep, long sigh and then went quiet. Her breath stuttered, and then I heard the phone drop.

"Zoey."

Then in the background, the sirens, finally.

"Zoey?" I said again. I wanted to crawl through the phone and put my arms around her.

"You're enough. You're more than enough. I promise." I hoped she could hear, even if she couldn't respond.

That's what I would have told my friend, if *she* had called and reached the me that I am today, the one who has accepted all my many flaws and broken places, and hers. I could have said those words to her. I am only shattered pieces now, glued together with hard-won wisdom. I'm a better person than I was when she needed me and I couldn't be there. I hope.

I stayed on the line until I heard the paramedics enter the room, a woman's voice crying in the background. *Oh my god, Zoey. Zoey, please, baby, wake up.* I heard all the notes of love and fear and despair. Zoey was loved. She just couldn't see it.

Later, we heard that she'd made it.

I slept well that night. Espo always says: *You can't save them all. But when you do, that's a good day.*

Now, on stage, it's Zoey's turn to speak.

"In my darkest moment of despair," Zoey says after her mother introduces her, "I reached out and found a hand waiting for me."

She turns to look at me, and I'm struck by the dewy quality of her skin, her bright-green eyes. She wears no makeup, her dark hair pulled back from her face. There's a light shining from within her, something bright and mesmerizing.

"The last thing I remember hearing before fading away was: *You're enough, Zoey. More than enough. I promise.* I didn't believe that before. I am starting to believe it now."

She turns to look at me and extends a hand.

Oh, no. I didn't plan to say anything.

But Espo nudges me forward, and I join Zoey at the front of the stage. The audience applauds. Her hand is warm in mine, and mine is sweaty. Standing close, I smell the clean scent of her shampoo. Out in the audience, packed with reporters, all eyes are on me, lots of smiling faces. Because this is a feel-good moment. A moment to celebrate that—sometimes—things turn out okay.

"This woman, Charlie Kroft, was the voice on the other end of the phone. The words she spoke to me that night not only saved my life, but changed it."

Technically, I didn't save her life. Not really. That was the paramedics who gave her Narcan and then rushed her to the hospital, where the waiting ER staff pumped her stomach.

All I did was answer the phone.

"I was lost," she goes on. "I had disappeared behind a fake version of myself, thinking that my avatar was the only thing about me that people could ever love. Since recovering, I have changed all my feeds and I am challenging girls everywhere to do the same."

More applause, camera flashes.

"No more cropping or filtering, no more staged photos, or arched-back bikini poses, no more pretending you're having fun when you're not so that other people are jealous. Stop using the face-altering filters, making your eyes bigger, your skin clearer, your face thinner."

She pauses again. Then, “Let me see your bad hair days, that zit you got right before prom, your muffin top. And then show me your accomplishments—your art, your poetry, your science experiments, the equation you solved after failing a hundred times, your volunteer work at the shelter. Because it’s what you *do with your life* that matters. It’s not about how you look. Because you don’t have to be perfect. No one is. You are enough. You are more than enough. And it’s time to get real.”

Now there is wild applause from the audience, people getting to their feet.

“I’ve been able to raise \$20,000 for the Crisis Center.”

An assistant holds one of those ridiculously big checks from the fundraising campaign Zoey ran on her new Instagram page, @therealzoey. Zoey hands it to Jane, and they stand with it for a moment, smiling, letting everyone take pictures.

More applause, and then Zoey goes on. “This small group of employees and volunteers are standing on the front lines of despair. When you call, they answer, they usher you back into the light if you let them. They are heroes.”

And then I’m alone at the podium with all eyes on me, phones and cameras held up recording.

“I’m no hero,” I say softly, my voice wobbling with nerves. “It was the paramedics who arrived at the scene and the ER staff that saved Zoey’s life. They are the real, everyday heroes whose role in our society is often undervalued. When the worst thing happens, you pick up a phone and this group of strangers comes to save your life. They do it every day, without fail, without question. Without press conferences like this one.”

Behind me, Jane clears her throat.

“The Crisis Center can, however, be the first line of defense against self-harm. When you’re in a place of despair, when you don’t know where to turn, when you think you might hurt yourself or someone else—call us first.

Dial 211. We can help. We can talk; we can offer services. We are a voice in the darkness, a hand before the fall.”

I am distracted for a moment by a hooded figure standing in the shadows at the back of the room. He is taller than the people around him, black jeans, black hoodie over a New Order T-shirt. I can't see his face, just a flop of brown hair over his eyes. His energy is familiar, unsettling. Who is he?

Another nudging cough from Jane snaps me back.

“I'm so glad I could be there for Zoey. But if it hadn't been me, it would have been one of our other team members—cops, EMTs, psychologists, counselors, employees, and volunteers who devote their lives to just being there on your worst day. If you're in trouble, we can help. Call us. Thank you.”

More applause. Zoey and the mayor both pose with Jane and the check. Then Zoey embraces me on the stage.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “The things you said. They changed me.”

I return her hug and tell her she's welcome and that I'm so glad I was there for her. And then she's surrounded by reporters.

She thinks I'm a hero, and maybe here, right now, to Zoey, I am. But this is just a penance. The work I do to make up for all the things I didn't do to save the girl who needed me most. The things I did to hurt her.

I look out into the audience again, and he's still there. I can feel him staring from the darkness of his hood. I return his gaze, until he turns abruptly and leaves the room. Then Jane has her arm around me, pulling me toward the mayor, who embraces me and thanks me tearfully for saving her daughter's life.

“This has been a wake-up call for our whole family,” she tells me. I force myself to focus on the mayor, forget about the hooded figure. “I thought she knew how much we loved her. Not what she does, just who she is.”

“She knew she was loved,” I tell the mayor. “On some level she *did*, or she wouldn’t have called.”

The mayor nods, wipes at her eyes. “Thank you for that. That helps some with the guilt.”

I know all about guilt. She wears it around her shoulders like a cloak. I know how heavy it is. I think of the medicine cabinet full of pills that Zoey raided.

Afterward, Jane, Espo, and I go for burgers and a beer.

“Good work, kid,” says Espo, as we slide into a booth. “On the call and today.”

“You’re an excellent speaker, and you’ve done a great job with all the interviews. It’s been a nice awareness raiser for the hotline,” says Jane, sipping from her pilsner. “Zoey wants to know if you’ll do a couple of events with her, to raise more money for the Crisis Center.”

I don’t see how I can refuse.

“Okay,” I say. “Sure.”

They raise their glasses to me.

The bar is overwarm, and I’m still a little amped up from the press conference. When the jukebox changes tracks, an old U2 song I know too well starts to play. It never fails to give me chills. It’s the same song my unknown caller played. The same one my friend was listening to when she died. Who knows what that song means to me? No one. Just a coincidence, I tell myself.

“To the hero,” says Espo, who’s saved more lives in his years on this job than anyone can count. I notice how Jane’s and Espo’s hands touch and I think, not for the first time, that there might be something going on between them—which is a little funny because she’s so pressed and polished, and he’s so, well, not. It would be like Wonder Woman dating Oscar the Grouch.

“I’m not the hero here,” I say, raising my glass to Jane. She’s the hero. She’s the one who took her personal tragedy

and turned it into a crusade to help others in their deepest moment of despair. If not for her, there would be no local Crisis Center.

“That’s what heroes always say,” she counters.

One of the weird things about insisting that you’re not a hero: no one ever believes you.

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3.

I pull up to school in the old junker my father gave me for my birthday. He was so proud of it, and I should be grateful, but the upholstery smells like somebody had been chain-smoking with the windows closed for years, and it rattles like the rusty toolbox Dad carries around the house fixing all the many broken things. I pull to a stop at the edge of the parking lot, far from the new cars that the other kids drive, and breathe through my daily dread.

The sky is a steely gray, with golden fingers of light breaking through the cloud cover. I stare at the view, momentarily distracted, wondering how I could draw that, what blend of light and shadows could make that feel real on the page. Finally, when I know I'll be late if I wait any longer, I drag my bag out of the back seat and walk toward the big metal doors, shuffle in with the rest of the school hustling to make it before the bell rings.

*In English class, I shift into my seat and take out my tattered copy of *The Great Gatsby* and my notebook.*

Laughter. It always startles me. Her laughter especially.

I look up to see Lanie and her new friends gathered by the door. Shiny hair and bodies toned from cheerleading, glossy lips and perfect skin. I smooth down my frizzy mass of dark curls, straighten my denim jacket. It looked cool at home, but in the harsh light of the fluorescents, it looks shabby and cheap.

I watch them a moment, aware of the heft of my own lumpy form, the spattering of acne on my chin.

She catches me watching, gives a wave. "Hey, Chloe!" she calls. It's sickly sweet.

"Hi, Lanie."

The other two stare, brows wrinkling at me, like I'm a strange forest creature they can't quite place. They are so secure in their beauty, in the knowledge that all eyes are on

them always. When I look away, they whisper and laugh. Lanie too. Not nasty, not mean like the other two. Lanie looks at me with pity. Which is way worse.

“Chloe.” Ms. Harding stands beside me, holding my essay. I can see the A-plus emblazoned in bold red on the cover page. “Your essay about the symbolism of the color green in The Great Gatsby was one of the finest I have read.”

She says it loud enough that other students turn to look. Lanie and her mean-girl group do a kind of collective eye roll thing. They are C students at best. Lanie still calls me late at night for help with chem or trig, to read aloud the essay she can't quite finish so I can dictate a conclusion. I'm not sure it's that they're stupid. It's just that they care more about their Instagram feeds, their boyfriends, and that the cheer team is going to some national competition next month than they care about their grades.

“Thank you, Ms. Harding,” I say, keeping my voice low. When I meet her eyes, she looks at me kindly; then her gaze drifts over to Lanie's group.

“Take your seats, girls,” she says sternly.

Then she leans in a little closer to me.

“You're special, Chloe,” she whispers. “Sensitive, artistic, talented. Don't forget that. High school doesn't last forever.”

She, too, has frizzy hair and thick glasses. Her cardigan, as Lanie would say, is “tragic,” pilled and oversize, hiding a tatty floral dress. For her, it seems, high school has lasted forever; she's still here.

“Thanks, Ms. Harding,” I say, and she gives my hand a pat. She passes out the other essays, and there is a chorus of groans, whispered comments, complaints.

I am a ghost in this place, drifting through the halls, attending my classes, eating my lunch with the math-club kids, all geeks like me. But they seem okay with their place in the high school ecosystem; at least they have each other. I

don't feel like a part of their group, either, even though they're kind and funny and they welcome me. The only place I ever felt like I belonged was with Lanie. But that was forever ago.

The day, like every other day, is a slog, and finally it's time to go home. I get into my old beater and wait for some of the other kids to drive off—the boys in their big pickup trucks barreling through the parking lot without looking, the girls in their pretty sports cars. I watch Lanie get into the brand-new Jeep Izzy got for her sweet sixteen. I watched her social media story—a big party with a DJ, towers of balloons, cascades of flowers, and all her friends. Clips of them all dancing, then a walk outside where the bright-blue Jeep was waiting with a big bow on its roof. Lots of squealing and a big hug for her father.

“Stay off that stuff,” my mother warns me. “It's not real life. It's just not true. There are so many more layers to people than what you see on the surface.”

But it is true. It's the only truth.

For my sweet sixteen, we picked my grandmother up from the nursing home and had dinner at a pizza parlor. My family loves me. I'm grateful. I am. I posted about the big cake with sparklers the waiter carried out, and how the whole restaurant sang “Happy Birthday,” and my little brother sang the loudest. I got three likes. Lanie commented: “Happy birthday, girl! Tell your mom I miss her.”

You miss her? I wanted to write. We live less than a mile apart. Every single summer day, we met by the old oak tree on the road between our houses. You used to sleep at my place twice a week at least. We roamed the neighborhood on our bikes for years, climbed trees, waded through the creek, and looked for frogs under the rocks. You were my best friend. Where did you go?

But, as I always do, I just liked her comment and said nothing. Because what can you say when someone takes their friendship away? Even though it feels like someone

took the stars out of the sky, you can't call the friendship police and make them give it back. You can't call an ambulance to take you to the heartbreak hospital even though you feel like that's where you belong.

If someone doesn't want to be your friend, Chloe, *my mom said on one of the many nights I lay on my bed crying, there's nothing you can do. And it's her loss. She'll never find a friend like you.*

How could she do this to Chloe? *I heard my mom whisper later to my dad. I should call her mother.*

Stay out of it, Beth. This is life. She needs to learn how to handle it, make other friends. She's too sensitive.

This is life. *That's what my dad always says about everything wrong, unfair, hateful, frightening, like that's it. There's nothing else to it and nothing to be done.*

I pull up to the house, tires crunching on the gravel drive, and like every day, my little brother, Sean, and our old lab, Bartley, come running out the creaky screen door to greet me, letting it crash behind them. Sean body-slams me as I get out of the car, Bartley running circles around us until I stop to greet him too. And then we all go inside, where my mom has made grilled cheese sandwiches, and Sean talks and talks about his day, his friends, his teachers, how he killed in flag football. He's only in first grade, but it already seems like things come more easily to him than they did for me. I remember crying a lot as a little kid, clinging to my mom when she tried to drop me off. But not Sean. "And I was like bam, and he was like oooof, and Coach said I was superfast." Sean makes my mom and me laugh with his dramatic reenactments of his grand adventures.

And in that space, listening to him, watching my mom smile, I'm okay. I giggle and feel at home in my body. I'm safe.

In my room, though, when I get online and scroll and scroll through the images of everyone else, all the people who are better than me, who have more than me, who are on vacation, or getting a puppy, or having a picnic in the park

with a new boyfriend, or posing in a bikini by the pool and looking like a model. What I see online is nothing like what I see in the mirror, nothing like my life where my parents work too hard and don't always make ends meet, where we can't go away even for the beach weekends we used to have because of how much it costs to take care of my grandmother now, where my only friend has ghosted me, and I've never kissed a boy. And the scrolling never ends. It goes on and on and on into oblivion.

The only relief I get, the only other safe space I've found, is a site called the Dark Doorway.

You don't have to suffer, *it promises*. There is a way out.

Sometimes I spend hours there, reading about the misery and heartbreak of others, and how they deal with it. The betrayed. The lonely. The incels. The abused. Those of us who don't fit in, who are just not good at life. You don't just have to white-knuckle your way through your days, the site asserts, putting up with injustices until you die. There are ways to take back your power, and if all else fails, there's the Dark Doorway.

I stay up late reading stories of revenge, vigilantism. A girl humiliates her tormentor online; a boy finds the man who raped his sister and beats him bloody, leaving him in a wheelchair for life. Maybe it's fiction; maybe it's true. But what gives me the most comfort are the goodbye threads of those who've decided they can't go on.

Your life belongs to you, *the site claims*. You can decide when it ends.

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4.

It's a slow night, and I'm glad for it. When it's quiet I imagine a blanket of peace dropped over the town, everyone sleeping soundly, having pleasant dreams. Matty's here, too, dozing in his cubicle. He's already put in a shift at his EMT job before coming here. He has his ghosts too. I can tell. He usually startles awake as soon as he drifts off, looks momentarily terrified by what he's seen behind his own eyelids. He's a retired marine who served two violent tours in Iraq; now he drives an ambulance. The things he's seen, he says, he can't unsee. He doesn't sleep much, so he might as well spend his time patching up the broken people he can find, helping those who make that call in the night.

Midnight to eight, those are the hours of my watch, he repeats again and again like a mantra.

"Shit," he says, flailing awake.

"You okay?"

"Never better." He rubs his eyes, takes a swig of his big coffee. He tracks a hand over his crew cut, bicep bulging against his tight blue polo shirt, still wearing his EMT uniform.

The phone rings, and he glances over at me with tired eyes.

"I'll get it," I say.

"Great. I'm gonna hit the head."

He is the king of too much information.

Unknown Caller. Same number from last night. I put on my headset quickly.

"Hi, it's Charlie. I'm listening."

"Hi, Charlie." The voice, for some reason, gives me chills. It's raspy, but maybe familiar? "I saw you on the

news. I loved the speech you gave about heroes. Nice.”

I clear my throat. “You hung up on me yesterday. How are you feeling tonight?” I ask, keeping the focus on him. “I never did get your name.”

“I told you. I’m no one.”

I scribble down the number, though it will be recorded in the system. “What do you want to talk about tonight? You said you lost someone.”

“I didn’t say that. I asked if *you* had.”

“Did you, though? Lose someone?”

There’s a pause; I hear him breathing. I’m listening, too, for background noise—the music I heard during the first call. I’ve since convinced myself it was a coincidence, or I was just mistaken.

“Yes,” he says, and I hear the heavy pitch of sadness.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

I am at her grave in the rain, watching helplessly as they lower her into the ground. There are so many flowers, a forest of pink roses. Her mother’s face is a mask of grief, glassy eyed, lips parted as if in a silent wail. She’s being held up, it seems, only by her husband’s arm around her shoulder; her knees keep buckling. The little brother is still and pale, leaning against his father’s leg.

“The pain,” he says. “It only seems to get worse, not better.”

“It *does* get better,” I say.

“You said it changed.” His voice is cold as a razor’s edge.

“It does. And you go on living, and life grows over the pain. There can be joy again, love, good times.”

He pushes out a mirthless laugh.

“But not always, right? Sometimes the pain gets darker, deeper. It was my fault, so maybe I don’t deserve all that.”

This is where it gets tricky because here is where I want to say that it's a choice. You choose to move on and live, do what good you can, have a life. Or you choose another path. But sometimes that advice sounds like a confrontation, or even an accusation.

“Do you know about the Dark Doorway?” he asks before I have a chance to speak again, and the question startles me.

We all know about that website.

Jane is on a crusade to have it taken down. So far no luck, though she has testified in front of Congress, made an appeal to the FBI about its danger to those dealing with suicidal depression. The IP address keeps changing. No one knows who's responsible for it, who is hosting it. The best guess is that it lives on a server overseas, someplace untraceable. Meanwhile, over five hundred people a month log on to leave goodbye threads, ask advice on different ways to commit suicide, and get encouragement to do so. There's also a revenge-and-vigilante forum about getting even with people who wronged you before taking your own life.

This is a disease, raged Jane during her testimony. Preying on the most emotionally vulnerable, encouraging violence and self-harm.

It's still up there, more visitors every month.

“The website that shows you ways to die?” I ask.

“Or get revenge.”

My heart is thudding, and suddenly I feel a little lash of anger. “This line is for people looking for help. Do you need help?”

I look around to see if Matty has come back. He hasn't. Espo is off today. I'm the supervisor, so there's no one to reprimand me for losing my cool.

“We all need a little help sometimes, don't we?” His voice has taken on that edge again.

I breathe, regain my equilibrium. Or try to.

“Will you let me help you?” I say, surprised at how desperate I sound.

“They called you a hero,” he says. “Do you think you’re a hero?”

“Far from it.”

That tinny music starts to play again in the background, and I strain to listen. Bono croons about how the heart is a bloom, grows up from the stony ground.

But then the line goes dead again, and I am left with my thumping heart and sandpaper throat.

“What happened?” asks Matty, coming back.

“Caller hung up. Ringing back.”

But the call just rings and rings.

“Can’t save ’em all,” says Matty. It sounds more sad than cold.

I stare at the number scribbled on the scrap of paper, then open another window on my screen to find the reverse directory, a service we pay for. If it’s a cell phone, I won’t find out exactly where the call’s coming from, but I can at least find the address of the owner of the phone. I type in the number, and it’s a street I recognize. My whole body is tingling.

Then I sit, hoping he’ll call back, while also hoping that’s the last I’ll hear from my unknown caller. Silence for a while; then the phone rings again. Matty grabs it first.

“Hey, this is Matty. I’m listening.”

I steal a glance at the call log—there’s a name this time, a different number.

“Hey, Amber,” he says. “I hear that. Parenting can be hard. So overwhelming, right? Tell me what’s going on.”

The phone rings again, and I pick up. A girl who’s being bullied. A boy who’s afraid his father will hurt his

mother. A man who thinks his neighbors are Russian spies. The night winds on; I field the calls. I listen, talk it through, call emergency services twice, send social services once.

Finally, my shift ends and I go home.

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5.

Zoey thinks we're friends now. We've spoken at three high schools, been interviewed for the local morning show, done another interview with the local newspaper. She hugs me a lot, and she's always bringing me some little gift—a bag of candy, a friendship bracelet, tiny stuffed animals.

"Charlie's my hero," she never fails to say. "If she hadn't answered my call that night, I don't know what would have happened to me."

"If it hadn't been me, it would have been one of the other people at the Crisis Center," I respond when she does. "It's what we all do, try to be a lifeline for those in need."

"What led you to do this kind of work?" the reporters always ask.

"I lost someone once. There was no one there for her when she needed it most."

"Who was it?"

"I don't like to use her name. Her family has suffered enough."

And it was my fault, I don't add. I didn't kill her, but I might as well have. I think they call it depraved indifference. When you had the means and opportunity to help but simply stood by and did nothing.

Today, we're talking at the posh private school Zoey will graduate from in the spring. She has already been accepted at Princeton, and she's planning to attend in the fall. Since her suicide attempt and the epiphany that perfection is not within reach, her Instagram following has tripled. I heard her mother is getting her an agent; there's talk of a book deal.

I'm worried that she's just traded one brand of attention seeking for another. Now she's perfect at being imperfect. She bites her cuticles; sometimes they're so raw they bleed.

Looking out into the audience, I see that things haven't changed since my private school days. You have the rich, gorgeous mean girls with their long nails and silky hair, the brains sporting glasses and looking awkward in their own skin, the alternative crowd with tattoos and dyed hair, dressed all in black. The loners, hiding on the edges.

Zoey gives her talk, ending with the words she says saved her: "You're enough. You're more than enough. I promise."

And there are tears, and sneers, and whispers, and nodding heads. Some will hear her; some won't.

We field questions from students, from teachers. I do my bit about the Crisis Center, how we're there if you're thinking about hurting yourself, or if you're not safe at home, how if you know of someone else who is in trouble, you can reach out.

As I'm speaking, I see the hooded figure again. He lingers near the back in the dark of the auditorium. I squint in his direction. He's tall and lean, slouching. I can't see his face, but I can feel the energy of his stare.

As I step away from the podium, my phone vibrates. I surreptitiously steal a glance at the text.

Unknown Caller: Do you ever get tired of pretending to be a good person?

My gaze snaps up in time to see the hooded figure slip back toward the exit, leave through the rectangle of light that forms when he opens the door.

As the applause rings out and a crowd of admirers gathers around Zoey, I move quickly from the stage, excusing myself, and head out of the auditorium. I exit in time to see the heavy metal doors at the end of the hall slam shut.

Are all high schools the same through eternity? Same floors, lockers, lights, smells? I could be back at my high school as my footfalls echo off the walls.

Outside, the air is growing cold in the late afternoon; a thick cloud cover threatens rain. The trees whisper around me in the breeze.

A black Charger roars from the parking lot. I try to read the license plate, but it's too far away.

Who was that? I watch the car disappear, the rumble of its engine fading.

Maybe it's no one. Just some kid cutting early. Not my unknown caller, who apparently has my cell phone number now.

No one.

And, yes, I do get tired of it. Pretending to be a good person. It's fucking exhausting.

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6.

It's late, and I'm up doing a chem assignment I should have started days ago. I've been spending too much time watching all the feeds of the popular girls, the sad threads of the wronged on the Dark Doorway, endless reels of puppies and kittens, scrolling through all the bad news of the world.

When my phone rings, I practically jump out of my skin. No one ever calls me. Lanie's name and a picture of us at the beach years ago come up on my screen. Maybe, just once, I shouldn't answer, let her struggle with math or English or whatever she's calling about. But I'm a loser, so I pick up.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey, Chloe," she says. "What are you doing?"

"Chem homework." Embarrassing, but true.

"It's Friday night."

"Yeah, but it's due Monday."

She breathes out a laugh. "Are your parents sleeping?"

I heard the television go off a while ago. "Yeah, probably. Why?"

We both know that once my parents are asleep, they're hard to wake up. My dad sleeps with a CPAP machine, and my mom wears earplugs and an eye mask.

"Brad's having a party. Want to go?"

I'm not an idiot. I know she's calling because she needs a ride. Those friends of hers probably left her in the lurch. Because she's not quite one of them, is she? She's just a little less pretty. Her parents aren't rich like theirs are. She's just hanging on to her place in that group, and she knows it.

"It's late," I say. "It's probably over."

“Girl, no,” she says in that mischievous tone that’s almost like a dare. “It’s just getting started.”

There’s a clattering at my window. When I push back the curtains, Lanie’s on my lawn.

“Come on, Chloe. Live a little,” she says, still on my phone.

“I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Let me up. I’ll find something.”

Bartley follows me to the door, but doesn’t bark. Lanie is an old friend, and he wags his tail happily as she pets him and gives him a kiss on the snout. I give him some treats, and he trundles off back to his place beside Sean, who’s a deep sleeper like my parents.

In my room, Lanie sifts through my closet and, as if by magic, pulls out a pair of skinny jeans and a flowery top I’d forgotten I even had. My daily I-don’t-care uniform is leggings, a variety of oversize hoodies, and Converse high-tops. Lanie is sharp in a pair of black jeans, a clingy gray knit top, and thigh-high boots. Her long golden hair spools over a slender exposed shoulder.

I change in the bathroom, annoyed at myself for being so happy she’s here, for abandoning my chemistry homework. I fix my hair into a twist, even try a little makeup. Maybe I look okay.

“Wow,” she says when I come out. “You look great.”

“What happened to your friends?” I ask.

She looks away. “They blew me off.”

I want to say, I would never do that to you. But instead I just say, “That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“There aren’t many friends like you, Chloe.”

She only calls or comes over when she wants something—a ride, help with homework. I know that. And I let her do it, every time. Because we’ve been friends since before I can remember. Maybe you’re still friends with people even after

they hurt you, even if they keep hurting you. Because there's something there. Something true and deep that stays even when it aches.

We sneak out without incident and drift my old rattler down to the end of the drive without starting the engine or turning on the lights until we hit the street.

I would have been grateful to have my own car when I was your age, my dad told me. Not many kids get their own car. Except that it seems like everyone at my school gets a car for their sixteenth birthday—shiny new ones. I'm there on merit scholarship; the exorbitant tuition paid in full. My parents wouldn't be able to send me there if not.

I am grateful. I am.

"So," says Lanie, as we drive to Brad's. I know the way. Brad's mom and mine used to be friends; I used to play in his sandbox. He's never been a nice kid. Once he pushed me off the slide ladder on my swing set. Our moms stopped being friends after that.

"I heard that JJ has a crush on you."

I push out a breath. "Doubtful."

"No, really," she says, nudging me. "He thinks you're cute."

"Isn't he going out with Sloane?" Sloane is gorgeous. You don't go from bombshell to geek. Even I know that. Doesn't matter that we've lived less than a mile apart and known each other since kindergarten and I've been in love with him for almost as long.

Lanie shakes her glossy hair. "They broke up. She's with Racer now."

Racer. What a stupid name. And he's a total tool.

Even so, JJ has never even looked in my direction. Not even when we were little. It was Lanie whose hand he always tried to hold. Now he's a lacrosse captain, but smart. Cute. Soooo cute. I follow him on social and like all his

posts. He doesn't follow me back. No, I'm not in the same universe as JJ.

I say as much, and Lanie makes a clicking noise with her tongue. "Chloe, you always sell yourself short."

We pull up in front of Brad's, and the street is lined with cars, all the windows in the big house lit up, music pouring out the open front door. Wow. How have the neighbors not called the police? I'm nervous suddenly. My parents would kill me if they knew I was here. Maybe I'll just drop Lanie off and go.

"No way," she says when I suggest it. "Come with me."

We find a spot away from the other cars and park. We're both embarrassed by my car, though neither of us says so.

The party, as promised, is wild, and nowhere near ending. We push our way inside, and there they are, Lanie's friends, all gathered in a little clique by the pool outside, visible through the sliding glass doors. There are people lounging, swimming, talking, making out, smoking dope, drinking. I'm invisible. I feel myself disappearing. Even though I haven't been here in years, I see the pool all the time on Brad's Instagram, which is just him, usually shirtless—in various poses that expose his toned, tanned body; his floppy sandy-blond hair—sporting a variety of board shorts and sneakers. He's trying to be an influencer and has some ridiculous number of followers, like thousands.

"Hey, you made it," says Sloane to Lanie when we walk outside, voice high and tight.

"Uh, you were supposed to give me a ride?"

"Was I?" She's so fake. Big eyes, fiery red hair, huge tits, her back in a permanent arch pressing them out into the world. "Oh my god, girl. I'm such a flake. My bad."

"You're here now," says Izzy. She's less slutty, more sly. Hair jet, eyes blue, thinner than the others. Maybe a shade too thin, if there is such a thing. "That's what matters."

Lanie looks back at me. "I came with Chloe."

“Oh,” says Izzy, looking at me like something she’d scrape off her shoe. “Hi, Chloe.”

“Hey,” I say. Awkward.

Actually, though? I wind up having a good time. There are lots of people here. Not just the jocks and the popular kids, but some of the geeks and punks too. My peeps. I wind up talking, drinking just a little. I know better, but just to seem like I’m cool. Even Brad is nice to me.

“Hey, Chloe. How’s your mom? She made the best chocolate chip cookies.”

The night winds on, and I almost forget I snuck out of the house. It’s after one when my phone rings.

Oh, shit. It’s my mom.

“Don’t answer,” says Lanie, wide eyed. She didn’t ditch me totally on arrival, as I suspected she would. She checked in with me now and then, leaving the cool group to come slum with the weirdos, where she seems happier and more relaxed.

“I gotta answer. Hi, Mom.”

“Oh my god. Did you sneak out?” Her voice is low, whispering so as not to wake my father, I suppose.

“Uh,” I say, stupidly. “I guess?”

“You get home right this second, miss. Have you been drinking?”

“No,” I lie.

“Then get home right now. Right now, Chloe.”

“Okay.”

I hang up and look at Lanie. “I should go. Do you have a ride home?”

“Look,” she says. “JJ is watching you.”

I follow her gaze, and sure enough, he’s watching from the upstairs balcony. He gives a little wave, but it’s not for me. It’s for Lanie. He’s looking at her. Obviously. He’s been

watching her, lovesick since we needed help opening our juice boxes.

“Stay,” she says. “You’re already in trouble. Might as well have a good time.”

“Come with me,” I say, moving toward the door. “Nothing good happens after midnight, right?”

“Who knows?” she says with that mischievous grin. “Maybe all the good things only happen after midnight.”

“How will you get home?”

“I’ll find a ride,” she says. “Don’t worry about me.”

She’s staring up at JJ, and he’s looking back at her. Of course she’s not leaving with me. She gives me a hug, whispering, “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

I leave alone, running down the street to my car, and drive carefully home.

Oh, wow, did I ever get in trouble. Yelled at, grounded, dishes for a week.

It was totally worth it.

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7.

I catch Espo and Jane making out in the unisex bathroom.

“Oh my god,” I say, backing out. “I’m so sorry.”

I stand in the hallway, my face burning.

“No, Charlie,” says Jane, coming out. She smooths down her skirt, runs manicured fingers through her thick black hair. “I’m sorry. That was—inappropriate. We can discuss this if you feel violated or triggered in any way.”

“It’s cool,” I say.

Espo comes out, cleaning off his glasses, cheeks pink. “That was our bad, Charlie.”

“Really,” I say. “I’m happy for you. Be happy.”

Jane smiles and gives me a hug. “Now what’s this I hear about a recurring caller?”

“I listened to the logs,” says Espo. “Sounds to me like he was messing with you.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I don’t know.”

I don’t tell him about the hooded figure at my talks, or about the text. That would be a whole thing. Besides, I don’t know who I saw. Or if it was even the same person. But Espo is looking at me, squinty with concern. “Let me know if you need an assist. If he calls again tonight.”

“Will do.”

“Some people take advantage of the crisis line, use it to cause trouble or get attention,” he goes on. “Our resources are limited. We can’t have people abusing our staff.”

But the night is quiet. And the hours unspool with glacial slowness, time seeming to stop around 1:00 a.m. Espo dozes off, and the phone stays dark. It’s unusual for a Tuesday. Weekends are always the slowest, but on Monday and Tuesday, despair seems to be at its apex.

I open the website I haven't visited in a while.

The Dark Doorway.

It's kind of like the opposite of the Crisis Center. When you call our hotline, we try to walk you away from the edge and into the light. When you log on to the Dark Doorway, the people lurking there have different advice. On the Dark Doorway, the people who have committed suicide or acts of revenge are considered the heroes. There's a page dedicated to them and their stories. The "Our Heroes" page is an endless scroll of goodbye threads, news articles about successful attempts, detailed accounts of how and why, final acts of revenge, gory accounts of murder-suicides left by "observers," people tapped to tell the story when there's no one left to tell it.

I have a login and a password. New ones. When it's slow here, I log on and try to be a guiding light in the chaos. I have been kicked off about five times. Jane is on there, too, sometimes. I occasionally bump into her in the suicide chats. I can always tell it's her because she's not subtle.

Suicide is not an answer. There's more to your life than this moment of despair. Call us at 211.

There's a path back from trauma into the light. Call us at 211 if you want to live and be well again.

Hurting people doesn't make us hurt any less. It's a never-ending cycle of pain. Please call us for better ideas on how to be well again at 211. There's always someone to answer your call.

Jane lost her son to suicide. On a night when she was traveling for work, he reached out for her, and she was on a plane home. He was gone before she landed and heard his message. All this is just her way of trying to keep another mother from knowing her pain. Her zeal and passion drive the whole mission of the Crisis Center. But the high frequency of her message can scare people away sometimes. It also draws hatred and fire from the trolls who linger on the Dark Doorway, taking delight in pushing the unstable into terrible acts of violence against themselves and others.

They rage and rail at her, find her email and send daily death threats via our website.

I'm not as direct as Jane. I lurk in the shadows of the chat rooms and wait. I like the "Partners" page, where people seek others to help them end their lives, or to go out together. My theory is that if you're looking for help, maybe you're really looking for an alternative, a friend.

I click around a while, give some advice to a young woman named Starr who's seeking a partner for a Thelma-and-Louise-style exit. She intends to kill the man who raped her and left her for dead in a park, then got off and is still out there. Then, when he's dead, she plans to "drive off a cliff somewhere." A fiery exit from the hell of this unjust life.

We think that hurting others will make the pain go away. But it won't. There are other ways.

Like what?

Trauma is a head trip; there are people who can help you get past it.

Therapy? Been there. Done that. Still can't sleep at night. Meanwhile he's still out there, loving life.

It takes time. That's the hard part, but there's light ahead. Joy again. Love.

Fuck you. Get off this forum. You don't belong here.

My friend committed suicide, and it destroyed her whole family. If only she knew how many people loved her.

I'm reporting you.

There are so many other ways to feel better.

Then the familiar message from the admin: **Your access to this site has been revoked.**

And I'm shunted back to the home page. *Come with me if you want to die*, it reads.

I am creating another login and password when the phone lights up.

Unknown Caller and his now familiar number.

"Hi, it's Charlie. I'm listening."

"Hi, Charlie."

I glance over at Espo, who is tilted back in his chair, head lolling to one side. He's snoring like a caricature of someone snoring, breath sawing rhythmically.

"Hello again. What can I call you?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light.

"I'm no one."

I feel a little lash of anger, undercut by fear. Who is this? What does he want?

"Was that you in the auditorium?" I ask.

There's a moment of quiet while I listen to him breathe. "What do you think?"

"How did you get my cell number?"

"You're not hard to find."

"Look," I say. "This line is for people who need help."

"I saw you on the Dark Doorway. That was you, right? Charlieangel333?"

I don't respond.

"Do you believe that?" he goes on into the silence. "That there's light ahead. Joy again. Love."

I feel a twist of pain, of sadness. "I do," I say, my voice wobbling, betraying me.

"You're a liar, *Charlie*."

Espo is still snoring.

"Who is this?" I whisper.

But the line goes dead.

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8.

I float through the weekend, even as I do the dishes every night, and listen to my dad's epic poem about responsibility and honesty. I even post some pictures on my Instagram, a selfie with Lanie, one with some of the math nerds trying to look cool, and get tagged in some photos from the party too.

The party. Everyone is talking about it.

The police came a while after I left. But Lanie's posts from before they arrived looked epic. Bikini clad in the pool, drink in hand, posing with her friends. She didn't post the one of us together. But that's okay. Izzy and Sloane blew her off and were clearly trying to shut her out, and I was there for her. She must see that. I keep hearing what she said: There aren't many friends like you, Chloe.

Maybe this will be when things go back to the way they were. But she never calls over the weekend. She doesn't answer any of my texts.

On Monday morning, I find Lanie at her locker. She's alone, which is a rare thing.

"Hey," I say, sliding up beside her.

"Oh, hey, girl. Thanks for the ride this weekend."

She looks fresh and dewy in an oversize red T-shirt and torn-at-the-knees skinny jeans.

"Yeah, thanks for inviting me. I had fun. Want to go to the movies this weekend?"

She's about to respond when JJ comes up behind her, buff and floppy haired, making my heart thunder. For a second, I think he's here to talk to me. But then he drops an arm around Lanie's shoulders, and she looks up at him with stars in her eyes.

"Hey, babe," he says. "Hey, Chloe."

It's like in slow motion as their lips touch. And her eyes meet mine with some expression that's pity and victory and shame. It cuts deep. She knows I've been in love with him since kindergarten. I stare, stupid, dumbfounded.

"Can I let you know?" she asks. "About the movies?"

All I can do is nod, feeling all my happiness from the weekend shrivel into a hard little ball in the pit of my stomach.

She's a user, Chloe. She used you to get what she wanted. That's what my mom said this weekend, and I screamed at her, telling her that she didn't know what she was talking about and asking her why she hated it when I was happy. I slammed the door in her face, and later I heard her crying.

I'm still standing there when the bell rings, and I'm late for class, and Mr. Rand doesn't say anything but gives me a look as I take my seat.

The rumors fly. Lanie stole JJ from Sloane; they slept together while Sloane was skiing with her parents. Lanie and JJ are together now. But Sloane is trying to get Lanie kicked off the cheerleading team. Lanie is saying that Sloane hasn't been the same since her knee injury and she's holding the team back. I stumble on Sloane crying in the bathroom, and I almost feel sorry for her until she snaps at me, What are you looking at, troll?

I go to the nurse and tell her I have my period and bad cramps. She calls my mother, who says I can come home. As I drive home, I think about how one girl on the Dark Doorway planned to drive her car into Quarry Lake. She left a long thread saying goodbye to the people she loved and telling off all the assholes who hurt her. And then nothing. I googled "girl drives into quarry lake," but I never found anything. Did she die? Or did she just go on living but was too embarrassed to come back on the Dark Doorway forum and say she chickened out? Or does she linger on the chat boards like I do, just reading, still trying to screw up the courage to put an end to it all?

My parents are both working, and Sean's still in school. The house is empty except for Bartley, and this would be the perfect time. I feel a floating sense of peace. There's so much advice there on how to die; I know exactly what to do, how to do it.

I get on the Dark Doorway and start my goodbye thread.

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9.

When my shift ends, I plug the scribbled address into my navigation computer and start to drive, following its directions.

Sunrise is just a couple of hours away, and they say it's always darkest before the dawn. It seems like that tonight—the sky starless, moonless, the light from the streetlamps faint and grainy. I drive through the quiet streets and finally wind out of town, taking the twisting road that curves through the thick woods.

I've lived in this town all my life. I thought I would leave one day and have a glamorous life doing—something, anything. I was never sure what. Something artistic. But life happens, and this place has a way of wrapping around you like a clinging vine, and so do the consequences of your actions, and your inactions.

I shouldn't be doing this, tracking down my unknown caller. It's a big no-no. Is he a lost soul, crying for help? A troll looking for trouble or attention, like Espo said? A predator looking for a victim? Anyway, this work. You can't take it personally. That's one of the first things Espo and Jane taught me in training: You are the life preserver, the line dropped down the well. You can only put yourself out there, offer to help. The person in crisis must do the reaching back and the holding on. It's up to them to do all the work. You're just the light to guide the way out.

But my unknown caller. I feel a pull to him, like he's the one holding the rope and I'm the one grabbing for it. But it's not a lifeline. It's a lure with a hook on the end, and I'm as helpless as a fish in a pond.

The road winds on, and the night seems to grow darker.

Finally, I come to a tilted mailbox by the side of the road.

“You have arrived at your destination,” the navigation computer announces.

I pause before making the turn onto the drive, my engine running. I think about calling Espo, but I know he’d tell me to come back right this second and report the caller to the police and leave it at that.

But I know this place. This address.

So, finally, I make the turn.

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10.

So I guess the truth is I'm a coward. Which is just another thing to be depressed about. The only way out of the day-to-day misery of my shitty life is too terrifying a prospect. Even with all the encouragement from people on the Dark Doorway, when the time came to drive my car into the big oak at the end of our rural road, I just couldn't do it.

I never even made it out of my driveway. I just sat there, stuck in some petrified limbo. Then my mom came home early from work, worried about me, and she made me some hot chocolate, and I cried and cried with my head in her lap. And I felt better.

That JJ is a bad kid anyway, my mom said. I wouldn't let you go out with him even if he was smart enough to ask you. And Lanie, well, she's lost her way, I think. When she calls next time, don't answer.

My mom, she always knows what to say. Her voice is powerful and true.

And all those voices on the Dark Doorway faded.

It's the hero's journey into the unknown.

You can do it.

This world is not good enough for you.

No one ever said: What about your mom?

And then Bartley and I walked to get Sean from the bus stop, and we took the long way back, stopping at the dairy farm up the road and getting a homemade ice cream from Mrs. Miller. That ice cream tasted so sweet, and the air was fresh, and the sun was warm. Sean and Bartley romped around, tumbling and getting grass stains on Sean's shirt. Finally, we walked home with Sean chattering endlessly about his teacher Miss Apple, who he loves.

At dinner, my dad looked sad because Grandma is not doing well, and the bills are piling up, and his job at the tire

factory is a bear. But then he said, Well, even though things aren't good out there, at least they are in here. Meaning at home, with all of us. And I guess he's right. Not perfect, not Instagrammable, not enviable, maybe. But good.

I stay up late doing my honors calculus, which seems like it was invented to give you a migraine. I promised myself I'd stay off the Dark Doorway, and I wonder how many other people wrote goodbye threads and then chickened out. But after my parents' light goes off, I log on again. The despair there is a kind of quicksand, pulling you under.

I start to think about it again.

Then my phone begins to ping and vibrate.

Omg!

Have you seen this?

Lanie is such a slut.

Can you believe she would do this?

Bubbles keep popping up on my screen.

??? I type into the math-geek group chat.

Check your email.

I log on to my web mail and see it right away.

To: Morris High School Families

From: Unknown

Subject line: Lanie Freedman is a whore

I hesitate, but then of course I click on it.

There she is, her long golden hair flowing. She's naked, sitting astride someone whose face can't be seen on camera.

She moans, tilting her head back.

Oh, I think, confused at first. What are you doing, Lanie?

It's the full sex act, Lanie caught on camera bouncing and holding her breasts, crying out in pleasure. It's erotic, revolting, mesmerizing.

Oh, JJ, ohmygod.

He can be heard too. But it's her that you see, only her. She obviously has no idea she's being filmed. My heart breaks into a million little pieces and flutters into my stomach. I feel sick. I wish I could crawl through the screen and cover her up. I'm angry at her—How could she do this? Angry for her—Who would do this to her?

I imagine this in everyone's email, on everyone's phones. How quickly people will upload it to other places, put it on their social media feeds, upload it to those revenge porn sites. It will be out there, everywhere, forever.

I go to call her.

But then I don't.

I can hear my mom's words, that Lanie used me to get what she wanted. I can see the way she looked after she kissed JJ in front of me.

And later that night, when she calls me, once, twice, three times, I don't answer. Just lie awake thinking about her, that look on her face, how she told me JJ liked me when he obviously never did. I realize that our friendship has been like death by a thousand cuts. I've bled out. There's nothing left.

The next day, it's a total shit show at school, parents storming the place, and an assembly called to try to get someone to come forward and identify the perpetrator. A cybersecurity expert is brought in to warn kids about the dangers of exposing themselves online. He tells us Lanie is underage and this is a federal crime.

Everyone knows it was Sloane, who now seems to be back together with JJ. The two of them linger in the back, in the pack of cool kids, beautiful and apathetic. Sloane's smile is wicked, victorious. JJ drapes his muscular arm around

her shoulders. The team goes to nationals this Friday. Lanie isn't in school at all.

He never even liked me, *she texted me last night when I didn't answer her calls.*

It was Sloane's idea to see if I would sleep with him, I guess.

They set up a camera in his room.

I didn't know.

My life is over.

The text bubbles came in one after another.

I know you're there. Please answer.

But I didn't answer.

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11.

The house is how I remember it. Small and dark, buried behind overgrown shrubbery, surrounded by towering trees—oak, pine, maple. It looks abandoned, windows fogged and eaves sagging. The gravel beneath my tires crunches as I bring the car to a stop, surprised to see a light glowing from inside, a faint orange flicker.

The engine knocks and cools as I sit, waiting.

What am I doing here? This is a breach of protocol, a foolish action that has put me in danger, risking my job and the ethics of the center. Common sense takes over, and I start the car again, put it in reverse.

I am about to pull out when the front door opens and a hooded figure steps out onto the porch.

It's so eerie, so spooky, that for a second I feel like I might be dreaming.

He moves closer to the car, and instead of driving away as anyone would, I am frozen. Waiting to see the face of the unknown caller.

12.

The week winds on, and the furor dies down a bit. Lanie still hasn't come back to school, and she has stopped calling me.

A pall has settled over everything, and the world seems grayer and more miserable than ever.

I log on to the Dark Doorway almost every night now, reading the tales of revenge, the goodbye threads, the chats about ways to die. Apparently, there's a meat preservative that's easy to obtain. It's the most popular method for ending your life, or so they say on the site.

*I am starting to wonder who these anonymous people are—*tigercatmouse24* and *mordor18* and *kailowren69*. When I walk through the hallways at school, I stare at faces, wondering if any of the people I know are part of the anonymous chorus urging others to end their lives.*

On Thursday I stay late to get extra help in calculus, because even though I still sort of want to die, I know my parents will kill me if my grades start to slide. Afterward, as I head to my car in the waning light, there's someone standing there, waiting for me. He's leaning against my car and stands up straight as I approach.

JJ.

I can't even look at him, only seeing Lanie on top of him, a porn star with golden hair and moaning lips.

"Hey," he says, dark hair flopping in front of his heavily lashed eyes. He pushes it aside, but it flops right back.

The sky is bruised by dusk, clouds drifting. The football field is lit, Coach blowing his whistle, yelling at the practicing team. The cheerleaders are gone, off to the national competition without Lanie.

"Have you talked to Lanie?" he asks.

I shake my head.

“How could you do that to her?” I ask.

He blows out a breath, looks away. “She wanted it. She wanted me to film her.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“She did, so she could send it to Sloane. So Sloane would know that Lanie and me were together and break up with me.”

I don’t say anything. That’s not what Lanie said, and how am I supposed to know what or who to believe? Anyway, why do I care?

“Anyway, what do you care?” he says, echoing my thoughts.

“She’s my friend.”

“I hope you have better friends than that,” he snaps. “You should hear what she says behind your back.”

My shoulders hike. “What? What does she say?”

“She tells everyone that you used to suck your thumb, that your family is broke, that all she has to do is call and you run right back to her, do whatever she asks.”

Each thing he says is like a punch to the gut. All of it true. I feel sick with the betrayal, my stomach clenching.

He must see how much he hurt me, hangs his head. “I’m sorry.”

“What do you want, JJ?”

“I just—I just wanted to know if she was okay.”

We stare at each other a moment, and I see it—in the deep lines etched in his brow, in the tightness of his mouth. He cares about her, maybe even loves her. That hurts more than all the rest of it.

“She won’t return my calls,” he says.

“Who sent the video to Sloane?” I ask.

He shrugs. "She did, I guess. That was the plan."

Grunting and shouting carries from the field; the sky grows darker, a stiff wind picking up.

"If you talk to her," he says, "will you have her call me?"

I don't answer him, look down at my trashed sneakers.

Finally, he steps aside. I get in my car and drive away, look back to see him walking toward his own car, head bowed, shoulders hunched, a line drawing of despair against the gloaming.

It's late when I log on to the Dark Doorway again.

I scroll through the various pages—more misery and anger, depression, angst. I am about to click off when I see a name I recognize.

LalaKitty17.

LalaKitty has been Lanie's screen name since we were kids playing Animal Jam.

It's a goodbye thread.

I start reading. Her dad is sick, and she got kicked off the cheerleading team. How she made love to her boyfriend, and he took a video without her knowing. That it was a setup, arranged by a girl she thought was her friend, but who just wanted to get her kicked off the team. The video, it's everywhere now. A friend saw it on Pornhub, and it had over twenty thousand views and counting. Her parents called the police, but there's nothing they can do. Even if she changes schools, she knows it will follow her everywhere. She'll never get into college now. And she's been terrible to the only true friend she ever had, and now she has no one. Her mother can't even look at her, and her father doesn't have much time left. His final days will be consumed by the awful thing she's done. Then she apologizes to her mother, her father, her little brother, who's Sean's age.

Finally, she apologizes to me. Chloe, you were a true friend. And I abandoned you. Treated you badly. Used you. I never deserved you even when we were little. I'm sorry. I love you.

The chorus has already started, all the people encouraging her to end her life.

Be brave, girl. The end is a release.

You sound like a horrible person, and the world will be better off without you.

You're a hero for walking into the unknown.

The phone is in my hand.

But I don't call.

I don't chime in with the other trolls, but I don't speak up either.

I can't stop thinking about her telling all those mean girls private things about me, how she used me and knew she was doing it, bragged about it.

I could have called her, or her parents. I could have called the police.

But I didn't. And when she called me a little while later, I didn't answer.

That night, as I was tossing in my bed, Lanie stole her parents' car. Later, police would learn that her blood alcohol was twice the legal limit. She drove the car to the bottom of the road that separated our houses. Then she drove the pickup at eighty miles an hour into the oak tree, dying on impact, just as the chorus on the Dark Doorway promised.

The next day I finally listened to her messages, each more desperate than the last, until the final one:

I thought you were my friend. Why won't you answer me?

Her voice was taut with misery and despair.

Then all I heard was the engine revving, Lanie screaming in rage or in fear or both, the music blaring, Bono singing about how you're on the road, but you've got no destination. And then a terrible crash, crunching metal, shattering glass, and then nothing.

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13.

The figure approaches, and even though I'm afraid, shaking, I put the car in park and climb out. I see the light break over the horizon, and the tall, broad form is just a shadow, a wraith moving toward me.

When he's upon me, he takes down his hood. A gasp escapes my throat; I never thought I'd see him again. The world we inhabited as children is as far away as the moon, even though it's just a few miles from where I live my life now, just a few short years ago.

His eyes are sunken, stubble darkening his jaw. His clothes hang off him, shoulders slouched as if he's carrying a huge weight. I remember his light, his beauty, the glint of intelligence and mischief I thought I saw in him. But now he's a hollowed-out version of the person he used to be.

We both are.

"How do you live with it, Chloe?" JJ asks, his voice edged with anger and sadness.

JJ, my childhood crush. Chloe, the person I used to be.

I shed her like dead skin, using my middle name, Charlene, Charlie for short, to move forward in my life after Lanie killed herself exactly the same way I had intended to kill myself. Did she read my goodbye thread? Is that where she got the idea? I'll never know. Could I have saved her? Could I have talked her out of it if I had answered her calls? I think so. But I didn't do that.

I had to kill Chloe to survive the pain of losing Lanie, of my failure.

"I made a choice."

I saw what Lanie's suicide did to her whole family. Her mother died of a heart attack a year later; her father killed himself. Her brother is in jail for drug dealing. I promised

myself that I would live. No matter how painful it was to do that.

“What kind of choice?”

That’s when I see it. The gun in his hand. It’s flat and black, full of menace.

“The choice to live, to use my life to do better, to spend my days repenting by helping others the best I can.”

I didn’t go to college, though everyone expected me to. When I turned eighteen and graduated from high school, I trained to be an EMT and spent the next few years driving an ambulance around, rushing from accidents to scenes of domestic violence to elderly folks dead in their beds. Then I met Jane when she came to make first responders aware of the Crisis Center.

I saw something in you, she told me later. The knowledge. Of life and all its pain, the decision to stick around and do better. That’s what heroism is, you know? It’s not goodness. It’s not bravery. Not just. It’s the courage to keep fighting, keep trying to be a light in the darkness even when you’ve failed at that already.

I’ve been working for her ever since. Now I’m taking classes toward my degree at the community college and hoping to become a family therapist. My parents wanted more for me, but they’re supportive of my path. Sean is a star student, about to graduate with honors. He’ll do great things, no doubt.

JJ is crying, big tears falling from his eyes, shoulders shaking. Does he still live here, in the house where he grew up, just a short distance from my childhood home? It looks run down and deserted, but he’s still here. He’s remained, frozen in this place, in his grief. It happens.

“I can’t make that choice. I have no right,” he says. The gun is down by his side. “It was me. I did set up that camera for Sloane. Lanie didn’t know.”

This does not surprise me. I never knew the truth, but I suspected. Lanie wasn’t always a good friend, but I could

never quite believe she'd do that to Sloane, herself, or anyone.

“We were kids, JJ,” I say. “All of us. You couldn't have known it would end in Lanie killing herself.”

He wipes at his eyes with his free hand, looks away.

“Don't forgive me,” he says. “I don't deserve it.”

“It's all any of us deserve.”

I think I've reached him, see his shoulders soften. But then he lifts the gun to his temple.

“That's not true,” he says. His voice is high pitched and full of rage. “Sloane—she doesn't even care. She went on with her life. You know she's married now, some rich guy?”

Yes, I follow Sloane on Instagram. She's as gorgeous as ever, a wellness influencer, married to a hedge fund-manager husband, with two toddlers every bit as gorgeous as she is. They live in a huge house not far from where we all grew up. If her feed is to be believed, her life is perfect, not a single shadow cast by what she did to Lanie.

“I asked her about it,” he says, weeping now. “Sloane said that *she* didn't kill Lanie. Lanie killed Lanie. All she did was leave the bait—me. *Lanie* was the one who slept with her best friend's boyfriend. Lanie chose to die. She deserved what she got.”

I close my eyes against the pain of all these memories.

“Do you forgive Sloane too?” he yells when I don't answer.

It's hard to explain forgiveness to people in the throes of pain, clinging to the way things are supposed to be, should have been. Forgiveness is not saying that certain deeds are acceptable or forgotten. Forgiveness is an acknowledgment that we are all deeply flawed, and some of us make terrible mistakes or do horrible things. But to cling to rage, hatred, or grief, to rail against what is or has been, is to kill yourself again and again, rob yourself of what life you have left, what good you can still do.

I forgive Sloane and JJ. I forgive Lanie.

I still work on forgiving myself—that's harder. Jane says that it comes in time. A kind of peace, a certain brand of happiness with sadness stitched in like a slub in the fabric of your life.

"I forgive us all," I say. "What else is there to do now?"

His hand shakes, the gun wobbling.

I calculate—Can I rush him? No, too risky.

"My life," he says. "I've done nothing. I have no one. I am no one."

So it *was* a cry for help, those calls. Not just a way to torture me by playing the song he must have known Lanie loved. It could be that he didn't know it was our favorite song, or maybe she told him that about me too. Or he was just listening to it as a way to feel closer to her, as he reached out for the only person he thought might be in as much pain as he was.

"JJ," I say. "If you end it now, you never have a chance to do better. To *be* better. Every time I talk someone through a crisis in their life, I save Lanie. Sloane—she's right, in a way. Lanie made her choice. But you and I? We can make a different one."

Very faintly in the distance, I hear the approach of sirens. I bet Espo listened to the logs and then tracked the Crisis Center car I'm driving.

JJ hears them too. This is the moment when he'll choose.

We lock eyes, the gun still quaking in his hand, his shoulders still heaving.

Finally, he drops to his knees, folds onto the ground, the gun dropping harmlessly to the grass. I feel a rush of relief and move to him quickly, kicking the gun away, then helping him to his feet.

He falls into me, and we hold on to each other, as the sirens close in.

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14.

Zoey and I are still on the circuit, speaking at schools and doing press interviews. But I've started talking about Lanie more because I realize that I've been hiding that dark part of myself. I thought I had killed Chloe, but that lost and awkward teen has been raging inside me all these years, wanting only to finally be forgiven.

I stand at a podium in a big public school out of town.

I see all the kids—the popular ones, the brains, the jocks, the punks, the burnouts. They are not who they will become. This moment, teenage life, it feels like the whole universe, but it's only a millisecond.

“When you compare your messy three-dimensional life to the filtered and curated two-dimensional version of everyone else you see on social media, you're not getting the whole picture. Real life is what happens *between* those posts. And you only know the version people show you on Instagram. It's a fiction. And I guarantee every single one of those perfect people you see out there is feeling as lost and insecure as you are.”

Zoey joins me.

“Charlie is my hero,” she says. “She taught me that I am enough—flawed, broken, bad hair day, late for school, zit on my chin, blew my chemistry exam. That's everyone. No one's perfect, and no one *needs to be*.”

“Call us at the Crisis Center if you need to talk, if you're thinking about harming yourself or someone else. Close down your social media feeds, and go out and feel the sun on your skin, play with your dog, listen to the birds.”

I find myself thinking about JJ, how we took a walk in the park yesterday and talked about Lanie. How the sun was shining and the leaves whispering. And how there was a new kind of peace in that moment for both of us.

“You'll find true happiness in the smallest things.”

There are some tears, some sneers, some whispered smart-ass comments. Some nodding smiles.

Do they hear us? I hope so.

In the back of the room, I see her. Lanie.

She's as bright and as beautiful as she ever was, washed in golden light. My friend.

Even though she hurt me, and I abandoned her in her hour of need, and she's gone now, the silvery, bright love of our childhood friendship never died.

It lives. Apart from us. Despite us.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Unger is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Secluded Cabin Sleeps Six*, *Confessions on the 7:45*, and many other books. Her short story “The Sleep Tight Motel” and her novel *Under My Skin* were both nominated for the Edgar Award, and her story “Let Her Be” was selected for *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2021* anthology.

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