

THE SATANIC RITES OF PHOEBE TOOMBS

BY

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Chapter 1: What Have You Done With Phoebe?

Staring down the barrel of her second week of senior year, she wondered if she could keep up the act. She knew how hard it was to be a good student, and that's why she rarely tried at it. The easiest week of school was over, and she was caught between worlds, her old self and the new. She lay in bed at 5:35 AM after her body woke her up to pee. Her homework for Monday was done, and it took so much out of her that she felt pathetic for both not trying before and for trying at all. She thought about this past summer, hanging out with Jay and his friends, drinking, smoking, getting up to shit. It was fun until it wasn't. But she craved those warm nights under the stars, sitting on the hood of Jay's van with a joint and music playing softly from the radio. Sometimes, she missed him. But she knew it was for the best that he was out of her life now. She heard footsteps coming from the other side of the house; her mother, Eve, must be awake. Dim light came through the bottom of Phoebe's bedroom door from the hall, and she heard the TV switch on, at first, static, then someone talking. The dry cadence told Phoebe this was a newscaster; she got out of bed to join her mom.

She crept into the small living room, taking in the scene for a moment. Her mom sat in the dark, the TV glow tinged everything in blue light, she was about to just go back to her room, but one wrong step made the floor creak, and her mother (ever sensitive to noise) jolted around to see what was going on.

"Phoebe! Jesus, you scared me!" Her hand was on her heart.

"Sorry, Mom."

Eve clicked on the lamp on the end table. "You must think I'm crazy for sitting in the dark."

"No. Do you want coffee? I was thinking about making some."

"Sure. Couldn't sleep either, I see."

"Yeah," Phoebe said solemnly. She filled up the electric kettle with water and turned it on, then opened the cabinet above the counter to get out the Folger's Instant and two mugs.

She sat next to Eve on the couch to watch the news with her.

'There's been another murder in the town of Birchwood, the second in a month.

Twenty-seven-year-old Sienna Martin has been identified as the latest victim in what is being dubbed the Ritual Murders of Birchwood.'

"Awful, just awful," Eve shook her head.

'The first victim was community college student Carol Tens. Both women had been declared missing before being found dead and mutilated in public spaces. Martin had been found in a parking lot, cut in half at the waist.'

"Change the channel," Eve declared, "I can't watch this."

"Wait, no, I want to hear this."

"You've always been a little morbid, Phoebe." She got up from the couch and poured them both coffee.

'The police believe the killer will strike again, so there will be a town hall meeting Wednesday night to discuss a temporary curfew.'

#

Phoebe rested her head on the cool metal of her locker as she put in her combination. In previous years, she kept fuck all in her locker and just carried everything on her but once again, this year was different. She opens the door and begins to put her textbooks away and pull out what she needed for first period. A notebook dedicated to the class, her copy of *In Cold Blood*, her literature textbook, and her small sketchbook. She closed the locker door only to be greeted by a shorter, unexpected figure behind it.

“Fuck!” She exclaimed.

“Hi, Phoebe.” Ernie waved.

“Dude, why the hell are you lurking there like that?”

“I’ve come to ask you a favor—or, I mean, a question.”

She sighed, “What is it?”

“Do you have any...” he leaned in and lowered his voice, “weed on you?”

Phoebe looked around to make sure no one heard him, “Look, Earnest, I don’t sell anymore.

Especially not to weaselly tenth graders.”

“Well, do you still do drugs—“

“Ern—“

“Because, if you do, maybe we can hang out and smoke pot, you know, since you don’t sell.”

“Ernie, why would I hang out with you? We have nothing in common.” She started to walk away.

“Yeah, but maybe I can help you with school.”

She turned back around, “I already have a plan for that, and her name is Aisha Johnson.”

“What if she says no?”

“If she says no, then I’ll consider calling you.”

“That’s all I ask.”

Phoebe shook her head but reluctantly smiled at the kid.

#

Phoebe tried hard to give her full attention to Mrs. Trevor, but she found herself sitting in the back of class, doodling. She drew a pitch black demon with wide, white eyes and sharp teeth. It crouched on a pedestal. She drew it a few more times in different poses until it filled up the page. She thought about Jay, that night he tried to...

“Miss Toombs!”

Phoebe snapped her head up at Mrs. Trevor.

“If you’d rather *draw* than *participate*, I think you should be the one to answer this next discussion question. *And*, I’ll be taking this—“ she plucked the sketchbook right from under Phoebe’s pencil and walked it back to her desk.

Phoebe slumped back in her chair and rolled her eyes.

“How did the town respond to the Clutters’ murders?”

“Well, they responded by turning on each other. They didn’t think strangers could *possibly* infiltrate their small town, and that was their undoing.”

“Good, you did the reading.”

There was a snarky remark on the tip of her tongue, but she’d rather not push her luck.

The bell rang and she put away her books. She waited until most of the class was gone, and she went up to Trevor, who was now sitting at her desk.

“Can I have my sketchbook back?”

“Come back at the end of the day, and I’ll consider giving it back to you.”

Phoebe pursed her lips instead of groaning and turned heel out of the classroom.

#

Phoebe had been figuring out what she would say to Aisha for a week now. She knew she would hang out with her boyfriend, Thomas, and a few of her friends out on the bleachers during lunch, and Phoebe was headed there now.

She got to the football field, and an unfamiliar feeling hit her: nervousness. Don’t get her wrong, Phoebe has experienced many tense, anxiety-ridden situations in her life, but she never thought Aisha Johnson and her entourage would make her nervous. It was stupid.

She trudged ahead, though her body wanted her to turn back.

“Aisha!” She waved from the bottom of the bleachers. They all stopped talking and looked at her like she was a mangy dog.

“Uh, yeah?” Aisha answered.

Phoebe stepped up a few rows so she didn’t have to project, “I don’t know if you know me, I—“
“Of course I know you, Phoebe.” It didn’t sound like she meant that in a good way.

“I, um, we’re in the same math class, and I was wondering if you could help me with my work?”

“I’m not letting you copy off me.”

“No! I mean, help me study.”

“Oh...” She got up from the bench and met her halfway. “Maybe I can tutor you. Meet me here after school, and we can talk about it.”

“Great! Thank you so, so much!”

She gave a polite smile. “No problem.”

As Phoebe walked away, she heard one of her friends say, “Why would you even try to help her, Ai?”

Another one chuckled at that.

She pretended she didn’t hear it.

New leaf, new leaf... she kept telling herself. And that meant picking her battles.

#

Phoebe had AP Art after lunch (her only AP class) and, at that point, she was really missing her sketchbook. Her teacher, Mr. Gould, was a tall, skinny man of about fifty or sixty, she didn’t

actually know. He was the only teacher who was nice to Phoebe even before her change of heart, and, because of that, she respected him the most.

Phoebe usually kept to herself in class, though the students were free to talk to each other while they were working. She didn't want to talk to anyone, and no one wanted to talk to her. She was planning out the piece for her first big assignment, which was a still life of anything she chose. She didn't love still lifes or life drawing, but it was a means to an end. After proving herself capable, she could do whatever she wanted.

She took a piece of printer paper from the big stack on Gould's desk and sat down at the cluster of tables next to the gallon-sized bottles of tempera paint in the back of the class. She pulled out a graphite pencil and started making thumbnail sketches for the bigger artwork. She kept the photos of her still life in her personal sketchbook, but knew them well enough that she didn't need them for less detailed work.

Her still life was of the skeleton from the Biology room in various poses— it wasn't very exciting, she knew, but it was something she knew would keep her busy. She personally loved the one photo of the skeleton's hand in hers; it made her think of her own bones and cartilage and flesh. It was grounding as much as it was terrifying.

The bell indicating the start of class rang, and all fifteen students in the room quieted down. Mr. Gould stood in front of his desk, "Nice to see you today, class. Remember, your still lifes are due in one week. You're allowed to work on it outside of class if you so choose, and if you finish it early, start on another project. I want to see you exercise your creative muscles in this class!" He strode to the center of the room. "Commence drawing!" He said with a flourish. The students began working.

He walked around the room, looking over everyone's shoulder until he got to Phoebe. He sat next to her, "Phoebe, what happened to your photos?"

"Mrs. Trevor confiscated my sketchbook."

"Will you be able to get it back?"

"At some point, yeah."

"A lot of people don't understand the artist's mind; how it works, how it processes— they push it away and sometimes even fear it."

"I doubt Mrs. Trevor fears me."

He chuckled, "Just remember to get it so you can work on your assignment. I really can't wait to see where the year takes you."

#

After another period, the last bell of the day finally rang, and Phoebe left the classroom quickly, heading to the back of the school to the football field. When she came through the double doors, she jogged to the front of the stands and saw Aisha sitting in the first row.

"Hey!" She went up the stairs.

"Hey, Phoebe. I should probably start by saying, I'm not that good at math."

"I could've guessed that's why you're in my class instead of Calculus."

“Yeah, honestly, I barely passed *chemistry*. It was a miracle I got a C in that class, but my parents were pissed anyway.”

“Well, we can focus on other subjects. Really, I just need tips on how to study. I’ve never been good at it.”

“You’ve never been good at it, or you’ve never tried?”

She chuckled nervously, “...I’ve never tried.”

“Well, it’s cool you’re trying now.”

“Even though it’s at the last possible second?”

“Hey, better late than never.”

Phoebe shrugged, “We should meet at my place friday to study.”

“Sure.”

“I live in Portage North, if you know where that is.”

“Yeah, it’s right next to the Town Center, right?”

“Mhm, I’m on Falls Way, house number is 1257.”

“What time?”

“Let’s say six.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

“See ya.”

#

Phoebe got home before her mom every day. Most days, she didn’t see her until six at night if she didn’t see her before she left for work in the morning. Phoebe had a routine to being on her own. She put on some music, loud enough that it could be heard throughout the house, but didn’t exceed it. She made herself an after-school sandwich; some days she would go out to eat at Anchors (a nautical-themed diner that her mom used to work at), but today wasn’t one of those days. Instead of starting on her homework right away, Phoebe reasoned she needed a mental break. She sang and danced along to the music before sitting down and eating. Afterwards, she sat at her desk with her homework laid out in front of her, two worksheets and a written response due. She tried to psych herself up enough to do it.

Come on, it’s not a lot. If you do it today, you won’t have to do it tomorrow.

All she wanted to do was sleep or take a walk or something, anything other than what she was doing currently.

Her brain was bouncing off the walls with the possibility of what else she could be doing, or making, or— *Shit! I forgot my sketchbook!*

She groaned, admonishing herself for forgetting something like that. She looked at her math homework, and, after not getting it at first glance, pushed it aside to look at her World History homework. She understood it better and took the time to read through the questions. She sighed and pulled out her textbook from her bag.

She finished what she could of her homework and left her room, and was so bored she decided to do the dishes. There weren't many, just a couple of plates, utensils, and two mugs. She lamented the fact that she forgot to put on her music or even the radio, but she was already wrist deep in dishwater.

She heard the door unlock over the running water. Eve came in with her jacket and bag on her arm, "Hey, honey."

"Hey, Mom. How was work?"

"It was fine for the most part." Eve put her stuff down on the couch and sat down at the table.

"These weird guys came in at the end of my shift."

"Weirder than any other guys at Rudy's?"

She chuckled, "They were wearing the exact same outfit."

"Were they twins?" Phoebe put the last plate on the drying rack and drained the water from the sink.

"Would that make it less weird?"

"Guess not." She took off the light blue gloves and sat across from her mom, who looked deep in thought.

"They weren't regulars either, I don't think I've seen them before."

"Huh."

"Maybe they're just coming from a different part of town. Anyway, what do you want for dinner?"

"I don't know, we don't really have much in the fridge."

Eve sighed, "Damnit."

"It's okay, Mom."

"No, it's not, I feel like I'm failing you. I haven't gone grocery shopping at all this week, I've been so busy."

"Mom, I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, but you shouldn't have to."

"Mom..."

"Here, I'll go shopping tomorrow between shifts, we'll make a list."

"If you make the list and give me the money, I can just go for you after school."

"Phoebe, you don't have a car."

"Shopper's isn't far, and if I really needed, I could take the bus."

Eve gave a disapproving look, but Phoebe persisted, "I'm not doing anything for half the day anyway, just let me do this."

"Okay, okay. You can do it. I'll put the list on the fridge, and you can go after school."

"Thanks, Mom."

"We'll get Chinese tonight."

#

After the final bell, Phoebe headed to Mrs. Trevor's to retrieve her sketchbook from the tyrant. Her classroom door was closed, and Phoebe didn't want to believe what she knew was true. She tried the door: locked.

She groaned and rested her head against the door. She had to go another day without it. She resigned to go back to her locker before she left the campus. She switched out the books she had today for the ones she needed tomorrow. She stood up from crouching and was immediately startled by a little-too-loud voice saying, "Hey, Phoebe!"

"Earnest, stop sneaking up on me!"

"S-Sorry."

"What do you want, dude?"

"Nothing! I just... Uh, I wanted to see if you'd like to hang out."

She closed her locker. "What?"

"You know, like, go somewhere and do something—"

"Ernie, I'm busy. I have errands to run."

"I can help!"

She sighed, "I'm not interested in you the way you're interested in me, you know that?"

"That's... fine. I just want to be friends, y'know?"

"Friendship is fine, just be a little less *enthusiastic*."

"Okay!" He smiled, "So what errands are we running?"

Phoebe almost stopped him when he said '*we*', but she could use the help, and she decided to throw him a bone.

"We're getting groceries; nothing exciting."

"Which store are we going to?"

"Shoppers, it's closest to my house."

"That's like a 20-minute walk."

"Well, we better get to steppin'."

Earnest struggled to keep pace with Phoebe, who walked fast down the sidewalk, mostly because she wanted to get to the store as quickly as possible, but a small part of her just wanted to mess with him.

"Can't keep up?" She teased, stopping her stride for him.

"No—no, I'm okay," he was out of breath.

"Hey, look, we're here, I promise I won't lose you in the store."

"Thanks."

Phoebe got a cart from the long line of them outside the store. She pulled the list out of her jacket pocket and went through it again as they walked into the building.

"Okay, my mom gave me fifty dollars, so keep track of prices for me so I know I'm not going over."

"Okay." Ernie dutifully nodded.

“First bread and bagels. I think that’s over there,” She pointed to the far side of the store. She started down that way with purpose; Ernie manned the cart.

They finished off the entire list in about 30 minutes, give or take, and Earnest, ever the math geek, kept track of prices like he was told, always rounding up the prices so they could have an approximate number and prepare for tax. All the groceries ended up being \$46.79, including tax. Phoebe handed the cashier the fifty, and she and Earnest finished up packing the food into the paper bags.

“Have a nice day,” the cashier said.

Phoebe waved back, “You too.”

“So, how far is your house from here?”

“Three blocks. How far is your place?”

“I live closer to the school.”

“Ah.” There was a brief silence between them. “Can I ask you something?”

“S-sure.”

“Why me? Why did you decide to stalk me?”

“I... I think you’re cool.”

Phoebe chortled, “Why?”

“You just are.”

She rolled her eyes, “Okay.”

Before they knew it, they were at her doorstep. Phoebe put the grocery bags on the ground to unhook the carabiner from her belt loop. She unlocked the door and pushed it wide open.

“Welcome to Castle Toombs.”

“Nice place.”

“Thanks, I guess. Here,” she took the bags from him and started putting things away. Earnest stood a little away from the door, looking at her. After a while, she finally told him, “Don’t be a little creep, sit at the table or something.”

He walked around the L-shaped counter and took a seat at the circular table. He watched as Phoebe put away all the groceries quickly and with ease.

There was a little wall clock shaped like a sun that ticked passed the seconds at what felt like increasingly slower rates.

“Are you okay?” Asked Phoebe.

“Yeah—yes, I just, uh, I should probably go if I want to make it home on time.”

She shrugged, “Alright. Thanks for helping me out.”

He stood from the table and collected his backpack from the floor, “Thanks for having me.”

He fumbled opening the door, accidentally locking it while trying to leave. He got it right the second time and waved an awkward goodbye.

Phoebe waved back.

#

Wednesday was the day of the town meeting. Eve didn't particularly want to go, but she did it out of a sense of obligation. It started at six-thirty and went until question mark. If this were last year or even a couple of months ago, Phoebe would be out doing God knows what with her boyfriend and his friends, but now, she stays inside and draws, reads, or watches TV. Eve was silently grateful for this change; she worried about her daughter since her father died, and she began to slowly go down a dodgy path. First acting out in class, then being more secretive, then, as soon as she was old enough, falling into the wrong crowd. Eve didn't know what to do with her— she didn't have *time* to know what to do with her. Her daughter got into some trouble with law enforcement via her boyfriend; they said they were selling drugs, and she believed them. Eve had been constantly disappointed by Phoebe for years, but she loved her to the end of the earth. Phoebe was a minor with a clean record the first time she was arrested, so she was let go with a warning. She knew she kept selling, buying, using; she wasn't oblivious. Eve couldn't pretend like she wasn't a 'bad' girl too when she was her age...

Phoebe was sitting on the couch, drawing in one of her sketchbooks in charcoal, with one of her demonology books sitting open to an illustrated page.

"Phebs, I'm about to go."

She gave a thumbs up, "Okay."

She left the house, anxious about the next couple of hours.

The meeting was held at the rec center next to the library, about fifty people were able to fit in the sitting room, few people stood trying to keep their young children from wiggling or throwing tantrums. Eve got a seat in the middle row of chairs.

Sheriff Hank Rolands, Mayor Thomson, and a small handful of council members sat in the chairs on the stage.

The Mayor came up to the podium, "Hello, everybody, I hope you're well, and I'm grateful you were able to come to this town meeting. I think we all know why we're here, so I'll give the stage over to your Sheriff Rolands."

A polite clap sounded from the audience.

"Hello, I'll just get down to it. You all know about the murders happening in town recently, and you know we've been thinking about instilling a curfew for the residents of Birchwood. The curfew *is* happening and will be in effect tomorrow."

The audience buzzed with groans of dissent. Rolands went on, "We've decided an eight P.M. to five A.M. is more than fair. We do this for your safety."

The crowd got louder, Rolands kept on, "I'm opening the floor to any of your questions."

#

Eve was thankful to be in her car after the meeting. It was almost dark, and she felt a sort of chill up her spine thinking of the night and what befell this town. She tried not to dwell on it, she put the car in drive and started home.

She returned to Phoebe, sitting on the couch watching TV.

Phoebe looked up at Eve, "So?"

"Well," Eve sat on the couch, exhausted next to her daughter, "there's officially a curfew; no going out past eight unless you're an officer."

"What does that mean for your job at Rudy's?"

"It means my eight-hour shift is gonna get cut to a four-hour one." She sighed.

"Will you still get paid for the lost hours?"

"I doubt it."

"Shit..."

"Shit indeed." Eve flopped on the couch, looking defeated. "Good thing is we're not in a dire situation yet, my day shifts at the pharmacy are going to have to get us through til this is over."

"It's still money lost."

"I *know*, Phoebe, I've been thinking about this since the curfew was proposed." She rubbed her hand on her temple. "I just don't want you to worry."

Phoebe sat down across from her, "I know, Mom, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, sweetie."

#

Tonight was the night Aisha was supposed to come over. Tonight was also coincidentally the night Phoebe started to be self-conscious about literally everything: her home, her clothes, her personality, everything!

Aisha probably had a big, manor-house in one of the "better" neighborhoods, two parents that didn't have to work 24/7 at multiple shitty jobs just to support the family...

Phoebe groaned and put her head on her knees. There was a knock at her room door. Her "Come in!" Was muffled.

Her mom came in in her work clothes. "What time is your friend coming over?"

"We're not friends, she's just helping me study."

"Either way, I'm proud of you, Phoebe."

"Thanks, Mom. She's coming at five."

"Well, I'm off to work. I'll be back at around seven-thirty."

"Okay."

Eve smiled and left the room. Phoebe listened for the front door opening and closing and, as soon as her mother's car left the driveway, she got up from her bed.

In the time between Eve leaving and Aisha arriving, Phoebe took a shower, made toast, and paced around. She was so nervous but couldn't get high about it. The hour passed agonizingly, but luckily for her, Aisha hated being late. At 4:55, the doorbell rang and Phoebe nearly sprinted to open it.

"Hey." She tried to act *so* cool.

"Hi, can I come in?"

“Oh, yeah, of course.”

“Nice place.”

“You don’t have to lie.” It was a small, two-bedroom, one bath with outdated wood paneling and awful yellowing wallpaper. Compared to what she thought Aisha’s home might be, it wasn’t nice.

“I’m not lying, I’m being polite. It’s nice, it’s homey. You don’t have to be defensive around me, you know?”

“Well, why not?”

“Because I’m not an asshole.”

Phoebe laughed at that, not because she didn’t believe her but because she did. She didn’t know Aisha that well, but her candor was her most obvious quality. Maybe the years of photos on the wall and the collection of books and movies were cozy to other people besides Phoebe.

Aisha sat down on the couch. “Where should we start?”

“How about history? We’re talking about the crusades.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They went from subject to subject, conveniently skipping over math, for the next hour and a half before deciding to take a break.

“Do you want water or something?”

“Yeah, water would be nice.”

She got a glass from the cabinet and got the pitcher from the fridge.

“So,” Aisha started, “Are you liking *In Cold Blood*?”

“Yeah! It’s really good, but I tend to like crime stories and horror books and stuff.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, is that... weird?”

“I guess not. I just don’t like those kinds of books. Capote’s pretty good, though. Have you read any of his plays?”

“No.”

“Oh, well, I can lend you *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or something.”

“I’ve seen the movie before. If you lend me one of your books, I’ll lend you one of mine.”

Aisha laughed nervously, “I’m not sure how much I’ll like your books.”

“I promise I’ll pick you out something light.”

She laughed again, genuinely this time, “Thomas is picking me up at seven-thirty, so we better get on it.”

“So he’s your boyfriend?”

“*Ex*-boyfriend. But we’re still trying to be friends.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Sorry for trying to be mature about it,” she rolled her eyes.

“Whatever— why’d homecoming king and queen break up?”

“None of your business.”

“Okay, it didn’t interest me anyway.”

Aisha scoffed then asked, "So do you have a boyfriend?"

"No, not anymore." She knew Aisha probably wouldn't like her if she knew Phoebe was a lesbian, so she chose not to mention it.

"Well, what's that about? You were going out with that upperclassman when we were sophomores, right?"

"Wow, I didn't know you kept such close tabs on me."

"I don't! He was a known drug dealer, and I like to know who to stay far away from."

"Suuure."

"Phoebe, I don't do drugs."

"Trust me, I know. You're too uptight."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Let's get back on subject."

"Ugh. Let's just call it quits for tonight and hang out. I feel like my brain is going to fall out of my ears."

"I guess it's only thirty minutes lost."

"Exactly!"

"What do you want to do?"

"Uh, what about watching some TV?"

Aisha shrugged and closed the biology textbook in front of her. Phoebe got the remote off the side table and sat cross-legged on the couch, turning on the television. She flipped for a while, passing the news and sitcoms to get to a movie-of-the-week playing on ABC.

"What do you think of the curfew?" Phoebe asked.

"If it keeps more people from getting killed, then it's good enough for me."

"I don't think it's gonna help anything."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, it's just a feeling."

"I think you might be a pessimist."

"I thought you would be, too."

"What?"

"Like, you're a realist, right?"

"I like to think I am."

"Well, you know, whoever's doing this will be able to find victims no matter what."

"You don't know that. The curfew might curb his ability to find people alone at night."

"Then he'll do it during the day."

"Phoebe, why are you talking about this?"

"Sorry. I just think it's dumb."

They watched the movie in silence until a little after seven-forty-five when the doorbell rang.

Aisha sprang up, "That must be Tom."

"Oh, sure." Phoebe went up to open the door while Aisha packed her bag.

Phoebe greeted him with a smile, "Hey, man."

“Hi, Phoebe.” Thomas didn’t seem happy to see her. He looked through the doorway to see Aisha.

“Coming!” She called to him, slinging her bag behind her and walking over to the door, “Phoebe, I had a nice time, I hope I helped.”

“Trust, you did.”

She waved goodbye and bounded out the door. Thomas looked at her half a second too long and turned around.

“Bye, Thomas.” She said to herself and closed the door behind her.

She had half an hour to herself. She decided to roll a joint, but she didn’t smoke it right away.

She wasn’t in the mood to, and by the time she was, her mom got home.

Phoebe holed up in her room, and Eve didn’t bother to check on her. Phoebe picked up *In Cold Blood* again, wanting to get ahead on the reading. She read until she couldn’t concentrate anymore, then turned off her bedside lamp.

She couldn’t sleep again, but since it was Friday, it mattered less than when it happened on Monday. She tossed and turned, incredibly frustrated:

He plagued her mind; he would pop up at the worst moments, no matter how hard she tried. She supposed it was fitting, though; he had a way of slithering into your conscience and pulling your strings. She leaned her head back on the headboard and took a deep breath in and out. Fuck the curfew, she wanted to take a walk more than anything else in the world.

She got the joint, her headphones, a portable cassette player, and her copy of *Paradise Lost’s Gothic*.

She knew her mom had to be asleep by now, so she crept from her room to the front door carefully and slipped out undetected.

She didn’t know how many cops would be out tonight, if any, but she decided to go to the park because there were about a million places there to not be spotted.

She walked down the block, trying to clear her mind. She turned down the street to the paved descending pathway leading down to the playground. She walked down to the equipment and sat underneath the slide, in the wood chips, to avoid detection.

She pulled the joint from her flannel pocket and brought it to her lips. She flicked the lighter on, brought it to the tip of the joint, and inhaled. She felt happy to smoke again; she hadn’t done it in a while.

The tape ran out of side A, so she ejected and flipped it. She started to think about the future: she never thought she’d make it this far, despite her only being eighteen. And, even if she did think she’d be alive past seventeen, she’d never thought she’d be anything but a burnout with a reputation going around with Jay.

Jay.

She hated him, she hated him even before the overdose. He flipped out on her weekly and didn’t like it when she hung out with other people besides him and *his* friends.

‘I just want you to be safe!’ He’d say, ‘You can’t trust many people these days.’

She smoked the joint almost down to the thick paper filter just to make sure she got it all. She knew it was silly, but she couldn’t help it.

Jay...

He always wanted to know what she was doing and who she was doing it with since they started dating when she was sixteen. Most of her friends— what little she had— drifted away from her... or, she supposed she drifted away from them... either way, they weren’t there for her anymore, and it killed her. Jay said she was better off without them, and, at the time, she believed he was right. She didn’t want to think about him, or be reminded of him, or anything. She just wanted her brain to be quiet for once. For a second, she got her wish. Her music blared as she stared down at the grass, and she spaced out, focusing on the drums in particular. But there was a noise. A strange one coming from somewhere near her. It sounded like someone yelling. She took off her headphones and paused the tape. It happened again: a pained scream, coming from behind her. She whipped her head around and stood up. It was quiet again, but Phoebe was paralyzed with fear.

One more strained exclamation came from the woods. Her instinct was to run, and run she did, but towards the sound, not from it.

The light of the street lamps faded away as she sank deeper into the woods. Her heart beat fast, she didn’t know where to go, but it couldn’t have been far. Just as suddenly as she started, she stopped herself. There was a trail nearby she could follow instead of hopelessly tearing through the trees. She took deep breaths and then jogged to it. She came out near one of the many curves in the pathway and went to the right. It would’ve been closer to her house anyway, so if there was an emergency, she could get to a phone. The path felt as if it went on forever, each side lined by trees, and she was incredibly aware of the fact that something could ambush her at any time. She only walked for less than five minutes when she saw it in the distance: a figure lit only by the moon, they were standing in the middle of the trail over *something* in a heap. That’s all she could make out.

“Hey!” She called out to them. The standing figure hesitated a moment, then ran into the woods.

“*Shit!*” She ran to the thing in the middle of the trail. *It’s just a deer*, she told herself, *just a deer and someone who probably hit it with their car.*

She reached the thing and bent down to the ground. It wasn’t a deer. It was a person— a *body*, wrapped in trash bags. Their face was caved in, like it had been hit repeatedly with a large, heavy object. There was no recognizing it.

She had the slow realization that she was kneeling in a pool of their blood, so she jumped up. She felt the blood seep into her socks and shoes from her pants. Her breathing became irregular. She began to hyperventilate. She wanted to scream; she *tried* to scream, but she couldn’t. She walked backwards faster and faster, staring at the body in front of her, until she tripped over herself and fell on her ass onto hard ground, scraping her already bloody hands. She scurried up and ran, forward-facing this time, in the direction in which she came.

Tears streaked her face, and as soon as she broke the tree line, she stopped running. She thought she was going to collapse, or throw up, or both.

She walked out onto the empty road in a daze. Shins and hands covered in blood, she tried not to dirty any other part of her. She needed to find *someone*. She needed to get home. She got about a fourth of a mile out when she heard the telltale whoops of a cop car behind her. She instantly turned around to see two policemen getting out of the car, one of them with his hand on his holster.

“Stop right there!” The trigger-happy one shouted.

Phoebe didn’t know what to do; all she could sputter out was, “H-help. Help me.”