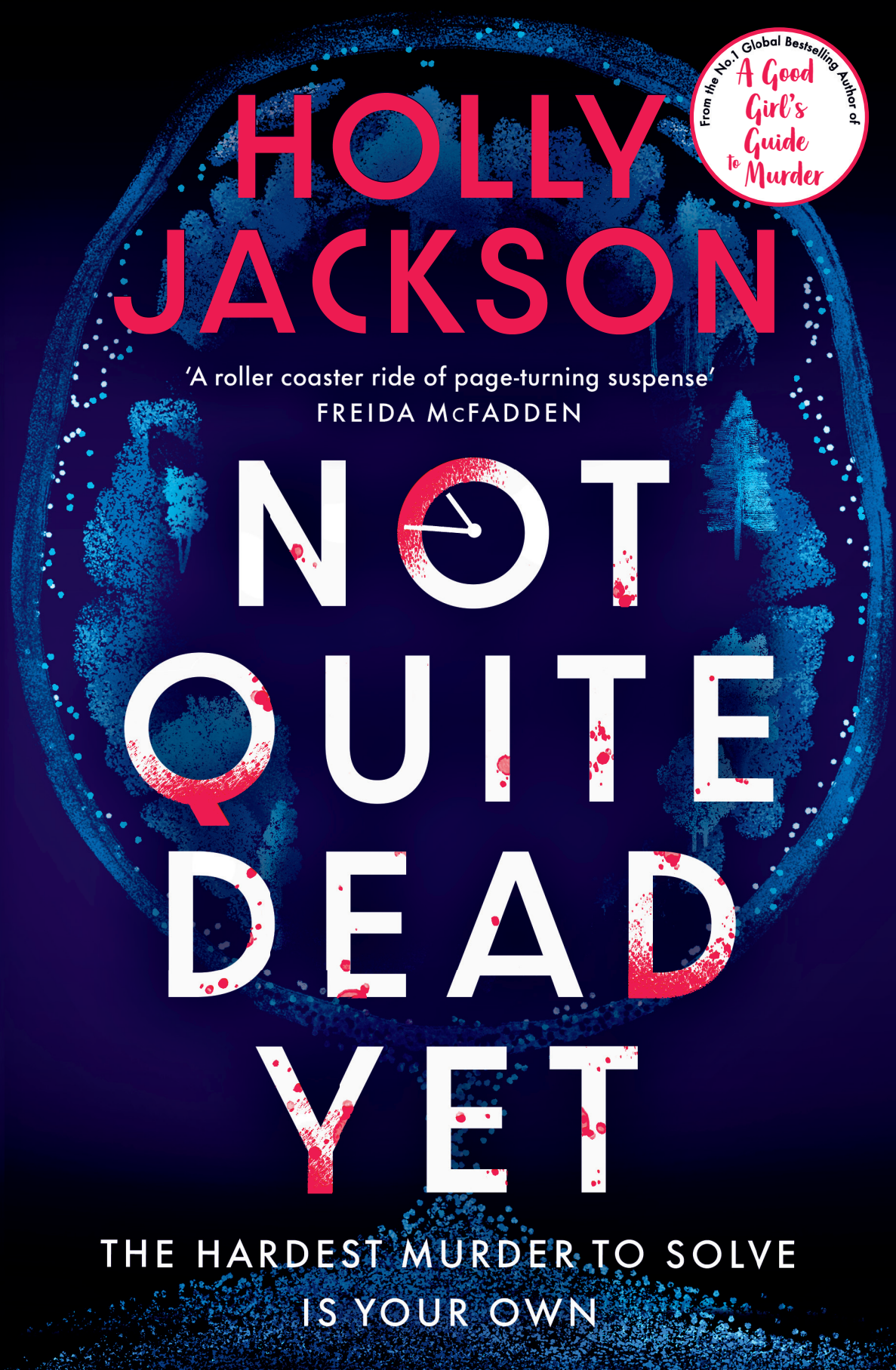

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A Good Girl's Guide to Murder
HOLLY JACKSON
'A roller coaster ride of page-turning suspense'
FREIDA McFADDEN
NOT QUITE DEAD YET
THE HARDEST MURDER TO SOLVE IS YOUR OWN

Not Quite Dead Yet

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By Holly Jackson

Not Quite Dead Yet
A Good Girl's Guide to Murder
Good Girl, Bad Blood
As Good as Dead
Five Survive
The Reappearance of Rachel Price

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Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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First published in the United States of America by Bantam Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC 2025
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Michael Joseph 2025
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Set in 13.5/16pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–75368–2
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–75369–9

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For Jet

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Friday
October 31

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I

Dead gray skin, rotted away to show off the stringy sinews of muscle below. Sunken, rubbery sockets around sparkling hazel eyes. Those were actually hers, though; they moved as she studied herself. Decaying corn-on-the-cob teeth with gore stuck in the spaces between. What did zombies eat again? Just brains, or they weren't fussy about the other guts too? Probably didn't enjoy the candy apple she'd had earlier.

Jet watched her reflection in the funhouse mirror, her dead face – sorry – her undead face. OK, she'd worn the mask for three whole minutes, so Mom couldn't complain, and now Jet couldn't breathe; hot toffee air that turned wet against the rubber, sticking it to her skin. She pulled the mask off. Still pale, slightly less gray, though, but the mirror elongated her round face, distorting her thick brows and upturned nose. Her short blond hair was sticking up now; static buzzed against her hand as she flattened it.

'Jet?'

'– Damn.' She flinched. The mirror warped his face behind her, squashed his muscular frame into accordion ripples, but Jet knew his voice. Of fucking course. JJ Lim. But not with his usual black swept-back hair and clear tawny skin. He wore a garish red wig and denim overalls over a striped shirt, train-track gashes drawn on his face. Chucky. They'd watched that movie together on their third date.

'Didn't mean to scare you,' he sniffed, awkward.

'It's Halloween, that's the point.' More awkward. Jet walked away without looking at the unwarped him, past a

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stall of pumpkin pies and apple bread. *Just $5!!!* yelled the chalkboard sign.

'It's . . .' JJ slipped off his wig and stumbled after her, through a group of freshly face-painted kids. Why was he following her? She'd given them both an easy out. *Again.* 'Sorry,' he continued, 'I was wondering. I just . . .'

Well, this was fun. Jet was super glad she'd come to the Halloween Fair now. The whole of Woodstock, Vermont, swarming The Green in the middle of town, and she'd managed to run into the one person she didn't want to see.

'Trick-or-treat!' a small vampire yelled up at her.

Jet hoped he'd choke on his slobbery fangs. Were kids always this annoying, or did the sugar rush bring it out of them? It was past ten now; when did parents put children to bed these days? Not fucking early enough.

She picked up her pace, but JJ didn't give up.

'Jet, please.' He reached out for her arm. 'I need to talk to you about something.'

Jet stopped, sighed. *Something* meant *them,* didn't it? And they weren't a *them* anymore, not for months. 'I can't right now.' Lie. 'I'm helping my parents run the fundraising booth.' Bigger lie. 'Did Henry draw those scars for you?' Change the subject.

JJ narrowed his sharp eyes. 'Please, Jet, it's important.'

'Oh, *important,*' Jet snorted, 'like when you said I was the best you could hope for . . . in Woodstock. Such a poet, J.'

'You know I didn't mean it like that. And it's not about *us,* it's –'

'– Hey buddy, think you dropped this,' a voice said over JJ's shoulder, saving her. It was her brother, Luke, bending to retrieve the crumpled red wig from the grass. Pinpricks of string lights reflected in his matching hazel eyes as he straightened up and squared up, passing JJ the wig.

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JJ took it, and finally took the hint too, losing himself in the crowd.

'Saved you,' Luke said.

Jet would never admit it. She was about to tell Luke so when he punched her in the shoulder, aiming for the dead-arm spot. He missed. But – also – he was fucking thirty and a dad now. When would the punching stop?

Jet didn't react, a lesson all sisters learned one way or another. It annoyed them more.

Luke grinned, sharpening his jaw. Actually, his whole head somehow – he'd had his honey-brown hair cut too short again; no honey, just fuzz. But Sophia liked it that way, apparently. And – great – here she was now, holding baby Cameron dressed as an unhappy pumpkin.

'Was that JJ?' Sophia asked, slotting in beside Luke, hip to hip, claiming her husband back. She was dressed as Catwoman, tall and lithe in a tight leather suit that would be unforgiving on Jet's shorter, curvier frame. Remember when they used to share clothes, when they were teenagers? Back when they were the ones joined at the hip. Until Sophia got tall and Jet got boobs.

'Didn't JJ get the message?' Luke surveyed the bustle of the fair, finally starting to die down, thank god. 'How clear can you make it when a guy gets down on one knee and you say no?'

'Literally,' Sophia added, unhelpfully.

'That's not how it happened,' Jet said.

'So, Marge,' Luke said, looking for another reaction. 'What did you come dressed as this year?'

'Oh.' Jet gestured down her black turtleneck sweater and sleeveless denim jacket, black pants and boots. Yes, the boots were also black. 'I thought it was super obvious. I came as a law-school dropout who still lives at home with her parents at twenty-seven.' Made the joke before someone else could.

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Luke hissed. 'Scariest costume here.'

Sophia nudged him.

Something stirred in Jet's gut, burned in her cheeks.

'You're also not wearing a costume,' she reminded her brother.

Luke cleared his throat. 'No, 'cause I'm here representing our family, representing Mason Construction. This is our fair, important to look professional and approachable.'

'With that hair?' Jet laughed, still smarting. Maybe she'd feel better if she took Luke down with her. Just a little. 'Company's not yours yet, Luke.'

A muscle ticced in his jaw.

'Next year.' Sophia squeezed Luke's arm, a red-lipped smile spreading across her face. *Next year,* when Dad retired. No, sorry, *if*. He'd been 'about to retire' three times already. They weren't supposed to talk about that and Jet knew it; she shot him an empty grin, too many teeth.

'Cameron's first Halloween,' Sophia said quickly, switching to something they *were* allowed to talk about. Her baby. All she ever wanted to talk about, actually. 'He's a pumpkin.' She jiggled him on her hip.

'Oh shit, really?' Jet said. 'I thought he was a butternut squash.'

'Jet.' Sophia turned on her. 'Can you not swear in front of the baby, please.'

'Fuck, sorry.' Jet clapped her hands to her mouth.

'Seriously?'

'It slipped out.' It hadn't.

'You still writing that . . . what was it?' Sophia asked. 'That screenplay?'

Jet shuffled, digging the toe of her boot into a fallen leaf. Didn't want to talk about that but Sophia and Luke were

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staring, and she had no choice. 'No, I'm not doing that anymore.'

Luke tucked his hands into his front pockets. Here we go. 'Given up already?' he said, and clearly enjoyed saying it. 'That must be a new record.'

'I'm working on something else, actually.' Jet kept her voice level, walls up, teeth together. 'A new idea.'

'It's not that dog-walking app business thing, is it?' he said.

That feeling burned brighter, churning in her gut. Jet hardened her eyes, an unsaid question.

'Dad told me.'

'Well,' she said, like she didn't care at all. 'I wish you'd all stop talking about me.'

'Well,' he replied, 'I wish we didn't need to.'

'Fuck off, Luke.'

'Jet!'

'He can't talk yet, Sophia.'

'That's the difference between me and you,' Luke said. 'When I have goals, I actually see them through.'

Jet laughed. A dark, husky sound that didn't match her face, people said. An old man's laugh, like she'd smoked a pack a day when she'd never smoked one.

'I've got all the time in the world,' she said, same thing she told herself every Monday morning when her parents went to work and she didn't. Repeated the words until they stuck. Anyway, she shouldn't let Luke get under her skin like this. 'And I think you're forgetting that I won that district spelling bee when I was just ten.'

Luke bowed his head. 'I remember.' Of course he remembered, because that wasn't the only thing that had happened that day.

'Well,' Sophia said, unaware of the dark memory she was

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trampling over with her singsong voice. 'We're heading off. This little guy is getting grouchy.'

'Aw, Luke, haven't had enough protein today?'

Damn, he wasn't even listening, craning his neck to look over the heads of witches and superheroes, toward the stall their parents were manning.

'I gotta go rescue Dad now,' he said, no goodbye.

'Good little CFO,' Jet muttered.

He heard, turning back, a flash behind his eyes.

'At least I'm chief financial officer and not chief fuck-up.'

'That doesn't even match.'

'Jet!'

'That was Luke who swore, not me!'

Cameron fussed and Sophia sighed, watching Luke through the crowd.

'I wish you two wouldn't fight,' she said.

Jet shook her head. 'That wasn't a fight. Just a normal conversation. You wouldn't know.'

'He's under a lot of stress.'

'He's Luke,' Jet said, 'he's always stressed. And I bet he managed to find time to play golf with Jack Finney and David Dale at least twice this week. *Stressed*. I knew him first, remember. Knew you first too.'

Because that was the real thing, that cold, barbed thing between Jet and Sophia. You go away to college and your best friend who stopped calling and stopped replying – and stopped caring – sets her sights on your brother instead. Anything to be in with the Masons. Jet didn't know how to talk to her anymore, and she'd never say it, but she thought the baby was boring as fuck.

'Well, I'm going to . . .' She didn't finish, didn't really need to; Sophia looked just as relieved when Jet left her behind, disappearing into the thinning crowd.

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People were starting to leave now, werewolves and serial killers jostling her. A ginormous cat costume headed her way, a mismatched human head bursting from its white-and-ginger-furred shoulders, cat head tucked under one arm. Jet recognized the human part: bald head and dark brown skin, eyes magnified by circular glasses. It was Gerry Clay. He was on the board of village trustees with Mom. Actually, Gerry was chair and Mom was vice, and Mom said she didn't mind that when she was elected, but Mom was a bad liar.

Cat-Gerry was walking between two police officers. Not costumes this time, uniforms. Shields on their chests and guns in their belts. Lou Jankowski, their newish chief of police, and Jack Finney, who lived opposite the Masons; always had.

'Hello Jet.' Jack gave her a familiar smile, tall and broad-shouldered, the gray in his dark hair creeping into his stubble. Sophia used to call him a silver fox when they were teenagers, even though the silver part was pretty new.

'Hi Mr Finney.' She was supposed to call him Sergeant or something, but it had never stuck. Mr Finney was an improvement on *Billy's dad* at least, and that's what Jet had called him for most of her life.

'Billy was looking for you,' he said, like he'd read her mind.

Wow, Jet was Miss Fucking Popular tonight.

'Sorry, Lou,' Jack added. 'This is Jet. Scott and Dianne's daughter. Don't know if you've met?'

'Don't know if we have,' Lou said. His face looked mean, hard eyes, but his voice didn't match, too soft. Yellowy-gray hair, close to mustard, and ketchup-ruddy cheeks. Clearly the man had never heard of retinol. 'It's been a pleasure working with your mom, and Gerry of course. Oh, that's my wife, that scarecrow waving at me. Excuse me a minute.'

'A pleasure?' Jet said, watching the chief go. 'He must have the wrong Dianne Mason.'

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'Ha!' Gerry shouted it, not really a laugh. 'You're a funny one.'

Jet already knew she was a funny one. Sometimes that was all she had.

'What do you think of your new boss, Jack?' the half-cat half-Gerry asked, his attention on the retreating chief. 'Don't tell anyone I said this, Jack, but it should have been you. Made so much more sense to have a chief who's lived here for decades, not some out-of-towner who doesn't know anyone. Of course I voted for you. I don't know why the other trustees – shit, don't tell anyone I said that. But . . . it should have been you.'

Jack's shoulders dropped. He glanced away awkwardly, probably for somewhere else to look, finding a perfect distraction in the stall behind them, where Jet's parents were selling bags of candy corn, fundraising for the town's *Green Spaces*. All sponsored by your friendly local home construction business, of course. The ones who built mansions next to those *Green Spaces*.

Jack coughed, coming back to them. 'I'm sure you picked the right man for the job.'

How had Jet found herself in yet another conversation she didn't want to be in?

'Cool,' she said, trying to break the tension. 'If you want to arrest someone to cheer yourself up, Mr Finney, I nominate my brother. Think we both know he deserves it.'

Jack didn't smile at that, clearly still lost in what Gerry had said.

'Oh,' Gerry piped up. 'There's my kid, Owen, the one taking the photos. He's starting a photography course soon. Let's get a picture, Jack.'

Gerry looped one thick cat arm through Jack's and dragged the poor man away.

'Hey, Jet.'

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For fuck's sake, could she just get one minute?

'Billy Finney.' She turned to face him, her fakest smile. 'You found me. Thank god, because I've hardly spoken to anyone tonight.'

'Really?' he said.

'No. I'm sick of people.'

'Am I people?'

'You sure look like one.'

A tall one, with dark brown curls that skimmed his wide-set watery blue eyes. A mouth that was always open and always slightly crooked, even when he wasn't smiling. He raised his eyebrows at her. She knew that look; Billy hadn't changed much since he was ten years old.

'What?' Jet asked.

'I just spoke to your mom, and she asked me my name.'

Jet snorted.

'I literally grew up next door, spent more time at your house than I did my own.' Billy shrank somehow, even though he towered over Jet. 'She was joking, right? She hasn't forgotten who I am?'

Poor, sweet Billy.

'Don't take it personally, bud.' Jet clapped him on the arm. 'I never do.' Which was, maybe, her biggest lie tonight. 'Is that why you wanted to find me . . . sorry, what's your name again?'

'I'm not ready to joke about it.' Billy frowned. 'Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted to come to the bar on Tuesday. We're doing another live music night. It's me, actually, I'm the one who's playing, I – I think I told you before, a few times. Guitar, singing some songs, some I wrote.' Why was he talking so fast? And – was he sweating? 'Just wondering if you could make it this time. N-no – no worries if not.'

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Jet sucked in a breath. She couldn't, not the last time he asked, not now. Because what if he was terrible and she laughed and then it became this whole thing? 'Sorry,' she said. 'I can't this week. Really busy. Maybe next time?'

He shrank again. 'Yeah, cool.' Billy nodded, his turn to fake-smile. 'There'll be a next time, don't worry.'

Jet wasn't worried but didn't get a chance to say so because a clown was bounding toward them, slipping and stumbling on the grass. A drunk clown, beer bottle in hand.

'You OK?' Jet asked.

Now she recognized him, only a clown from the neck up, a half-assed red nose and wig. Underneath that, it was just Andrew Smith. He rocked on his feet, his eyes unfocused, setting on fire when they found her.

'You,' he slurred, pointing the empty beer at her. 'Where's your brother? I need to speak to him.'

'Luke?' Jet shrugged. 'I think he left.' Lucky prick.

Andrew laughed, a dark, whistling sound. 'Your fucking family. Think throwing this fucking party every year makes up for any of it?'

Billy stepped closer to Jet, into the line of fire. Well, beer.

'All of you. Destroy everything you touch!' Andrew spat.

'I – I think you've had a little too much to drink, huh, Andrew?' Billy said, raising his hands, palms exposed. 'That's OK. How about I get you some water?'

'Don't tell me what to do, boy! Always telling me what to do!'

Andrew half charged, half fell into Billy, shoving him backward. Billy didn't fight back, let himself get pushed.

'It's OK, Mr Smith,' he strained to say, the clown throwing weak drunken punches at his chest.

Why wasn't Billy doing anything?

'Hey,' Jet yelled, doing something, but it was done before

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she could reach the scuffle. Billy's dad – shit, old habit, try again – *Jack* had appeared out of the thinning crowd, Chief Lou on his heels. Jack grabbed Andrew, wrenched him away from Billy. Andrew tripped over his own feet, into Chief Lou, who held him in a barrel grip.

'Calm down, sir!' Lou barked into his ear, the softness gone from his voice. Not super calming.

'I've got this, Chief.' Jack gripped one of Andrew's arms. The clown's head lolled onto Jack's shoulder. 'You OK, Billy?' Jack asked his son, over Andrew's head.

'Yeah, fine, Dad,' Billy answered. 'Just a misunderstanding. He needs to go home, sleep it off. Please don't arrest him.'

'You know this man?' Chief Lou asked Billy's dad.

Jack nodded.

'Know where he lives?'

Jack nodded again. 'He lives in the apartment next to Billy's.'

'All right.' The chief righted his uniform. 'Can you escort him home, Sergeant? Make sure he gets a drink of water.'

'Yes, Chief.'

'Next time,' Lou spoke down to the clown, 'it'll be a night in the cell and a charge of disorderly conduct.'

'Come on, Andrew,' Jack said, leading the man away, toward the road and the streetlamps, holding the clown upright, the man too.

The chief turned to speak to Billy, and Jet slipped away. She was done talking to people and done with this Halloween Fair. Maybe she'd pretend she was sick next year. Actually, it didn't matter: next year she wouldn't even be here anymore. She'd be in Boston again, maybe back in law school, or maybe running her new company. There was time for that. She had time.

'What was that about?' Dad asked when she finally reached their stall.

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'Andrew Smith.' Jet dropped her zombie mask on the table. 'Drunk and sad again.'

'About his house?' Mom said, distracted, counting cash into a lockbox, her sharp haircut swinging around her neck.

'No, probably about his only daughter killing herself last year.'

Dianne hissed, an intake of breath. 'Jet, I wish you wouldn't.'

'Wouldn't what, Mom? Speak? Exist?' Her mom gave her a look, those fierce green-brown eyes magnified by her glasses, but not softened.

'Ah,' Dad groaned suddenly, bending double, his hand pressed to his side.

'Bad again?' Mom turned, a wad of twenties in her hand. 'Take some painkillers when we get home. And don't say no, Scott; you're going in for another checkup.'

Dad could only grunt. He was sweating, his thinning hair stuck down to his temple, new lines etched in his face, pain bracketing the wrinkles.

'A heating pad and a whole bunch of water,' Jet said with a sad smile. 'That works best for me. You can borrow mine.'

She understood the pain. In fact, she was the only one in the family who could. Mom and Luke had never spent weeks at a time pissing blood, or unable to walk because of the pain in their side. Them and their normal kidneys.

'Well.' Jet clapped her hands. 'It's been a pleasure, but I'm going home.'

'You can't,' Dianne snapped. 'You said you'd stay till the end and help us clear up. People are leaving now. You can make yourself useful and take the chairs back to the hotel.'

Jet had never agreed to that, and she hated when her mom told her to make herself useful. It didn't make her feel useful; it made her feel small.

'I'll do it tomorrow,' she said.

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'Your catchphrase, Jet,' her mom sighed.

'That's not the catchphrase,' Dad said, but there was warmth in his voice. 'It's: "I'll do it *later*."'

'*Later* is a great word,' Jet said, voice rising as she turned away from her parents. 'Means I never have to be *useful*. See you at home.'

Mom was distracted again anyway: Gerry Clay was back, a full cat this time.

'Boo!' He jumped out from behind the stall. 'Dianne, I know your deepest, darkest secret,' he said, low and diabolical.

'You're having too much fun, Gerry,' Dianne clipped back.

Jet walked across The Green, onto the street beyond. It was dark, but not yet late enough to worry about it. The town was still thrumming and shrieking with departing cars and the undead. A gaggle of teenagers outside the little church, too loud and giggly for just sugar. Found Mom and Dad's liquor cabinet, she'd bet.

Past the houses beyond, jack-o'-lanterns still glowing outside, mean triangle eyes glaring back at her. Someone hadn't bothered carving theirs; just a bunch of naked pumpkins and gourds lining the steps up to their front door.

Jet turned up College Hill Road, saluting the skeleton hanging outside the Romanos' at number 1, its limbs creaking and flailing in the fall breeze. Up the hill to number 10.

Home.

This big obnoxious house that Dad had renovated and extended, and extended again. It stuck out against the normal houses on the street, against the Finneys' directly opposite at number 7. Jet might just hate the Masons too, you know.

She jogged up the large ringed driveway, past her truck, giving it an affectionate pat on the cargo bed. A Ford F-150 in powder blue. Mom thought Jet had bought it just to piss her off. Mom wasn't totally wrong.

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Just one jack-o'-lantern outside their red front door, but its eyes had blown out, gone dark. A bucket on the front step with a sign: *Please help yourself. One candy per person.* What world did her mom live in? Damn, the bucket was empty. Fuckers.

Jet searched her jacket pocket for her house keys, the Ring doorbell camera eyeing her, so she eyed it back, stuck out her tongue.

She unlocked the front door, and Reggie was at her feet in a rush of red fur and a helicopter tail, the happy squeaks he only made for her. He jumped up and pawed her knees.

'Hello, hello, handsome. Who's a good boy, huh?'

Jet bent to tickle him behind the ears. Those silly, long, English cocker spaniel ears.

The dog ran off, skittering around the corner and back two seconds later.

'Oh, did you bring me some dirty socks?' Jet said, thumbing his muzzle, the proud wiggle of his little body at the sacred offering. 'Thank you so much, my absolute favorite.'

Jet closed the front door and moved through the hall; crisp white walls and Moroccan rugs, too neat, too styled, like a show home, and – man – was Jet in trouble every time she dared to treat it like a home, dropping crumbs or leaving her boots out. Through to the kitchen at the back of the house, Reggie trotting in behind her.

There was a plate of cookies on the kitchen island. Sophia had baked them, dropped them off earlier, black iced bats and orange pumpkins. Sophia did things like that. Baked. Jet picked up a bat, bit off its head. Damn, they were actually good. She finished it off, wiping her sticky fingers on one of the dish towels by the stove, a matching set of three: little marching lemons and oranges and avocados, because everything had to match in this house. Jet turned and passed the

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cookies again. Fuck it, actually; she took one of the pumpkins too, wandering through the wide, corniced archway into the living room.

Cookie in mouth, she reached into her pocket for her phone. Unlocked. Thumb finding Instagram before her eyes did. She bit off half the pumpkin, the sweet orange icing cloying against her tongue. Girls from school or college who were now married, having anniversaries and babies. Or no weddings and babies, but fancy dinners and sipping glasses of champagne to celebrate new jobs. That could have been Jet too, a humble-brag post about a big promotion at a firm with an acronym everyone pretended to recognize. If she hadn't quit and left Boston overnight.

Jet finished off the cookie, sticky fingers against the screen. It didn't matter. Jet had time to find the right thing; she had all the time in the world, remember? And then life would really begin, and when it did, you better believe she'd be shoving it down all of their throats in return. Just you wait.

Reggie stood in front of her, started to whine.

'Sorry bud. Human cookies.'

The whine lowered, sinking into a growl.

'Wh–'

A rush of feet behind.

A fast crack to the back of her head, the wet of splitting skin, crunch of skull.

The phone slips from her hands. No growl anymore but a scream. Jet should scream too but –

Another explosion, harder. The feel of blood, the sound of things breaking inside her head.

Someone's killing her.

Jet can still think that, but she blinks and the light doesn't come back and –

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Woodstock Police Department, Woodstock, Vermont
Emergency call log
Date: 10/31/2025
Time: 11:09 p.m.

DISPATCHER: This is 911, how can I help?

CALLER: Oh my god, oh my god, help! Send help!

DISPATCHER: Sir, please calm down. What service do you require?

CALLER: Fuck. Ambulance. Get an ambulance here. Police. She's not moving, oh my god. No!

[screams in background]

DISPATCHER: Can you give me an address, sir?

CALLER: Yeah, fuck. It's number 10, College Hill Road. Oh my god, Jet. No, please don't be dead, please. Is she dead?

DISPATCHER: What's happening over there?

CALLER: Someone's attacked her. There's blood everywhere. Her head. No, no, no.

[screams in background]

DISPATCHER: Is there anyone else with you at the scene?

CALLER: No, no, it's just me and her. I found her, she wasn't –

DISPATCHER: Who's screaming?

CALLER: That's the dog. This can't be happening, no. Jet! Jet! Please don't be dead, I'm begging you.

DISPATCHER: Can you check if she's breathing?

CALLER: No, no, no. Jet, please.

DISPATCHER: Sir, what's your name?

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CALLER: Billy. Billy Finney.

DISPATCHER: Jack's kid?

CALLER: Yeah.

DISPATCHER: OK, Billy. It's me, Debbie, from the station. I need you to stop crying and stay calm for me, please. The ambulance is on its way. Help is coming. But I need you to check if she's breathing, if there's a pulse.

CALLER: There's so much blood, I don't . . . I can't. Oh my god, Jet, no. Please god, no. She's dead. Someone killed her. She's dead. She's dead.

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Not Quite . . .

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Sunday
November 2

Copyrighted Material

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2

Jet blinked. Something beeped. Someone gasped.

'She's awake! Doctor, she's awake!'

Who's *she*? Talking about her? The room was fuzzy, too white, too bright. It hurt Jet's eyes and the hidden places beneath. She blinked again, smudges of flesh and hair and teeth looming above her.

'Luke. Get the doctor, now. Go!'

Her mom's voice, raw and unfamiliar.

'Mom?' Jet croaked, croakier than usual. She tried to sit up, her body sleep-locked, trapped by thin, rough sheets tucked over her elbows. A white gown, patterns of pale yellow and blue.

'Let me help.' Dad's voice now. Must belong to that smudge there, beside her. Warm hands on her shoulders, she sat up, something stuck to her head, crinkling against the pillows behind her, and a shooting jolt of pain.

She rubbed her eyes, got tangled in the tube sticking out the back of her hand.

'Water?' Mom said, and it was already by her lips. Jet couldn't get the angle. She slurped and she knew Mom hated that, but maybe Mom could forgive her this one time because Jet was in the hospital.

And she knew why. She remembered. The room was fuzzy but her mind was not.

Someone had tried to kill her. Smashed in her head. The crunch of the pumpkin cookie and her skull, and the strange scream of the dog. But Jet was still here, she was

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breathing – gulped one in just to check. This was real – another blink to be sure, her body laid out before her, two hands, two legs that moved when she asked. And she must have a head because she was seeing and hearing and breathing out of it.

She was alive.

She'd survived.

Fuck.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

'Jet.' Mom's face was clearer now, inches from hers. 'The doctor is coming now. She's going to explain to you, and you need to listen, OK? It's very important. They won't do it unless it's your choice. You'll know the right choice, sweetie.'

Mom reached out to stroke Jet's hair, but her fingers stalled. 'Sorry, I forgot.'

'Got her!' Luke's voice, charging into the room, breathless, like he'd run all the way. 'Hey, Marge,' he said softly, not like Luke at all. 'You OK?'

'Got a bit of a headache.' Jet smiled. None of them would look at her. Come on, she was just trying to lighten the mood. She was alive.

The door swung open again, a small woman with dark skin and braided hair, a file clutched in her hand. She didn't smile either.

She cleared her throat, eyes alighting on the bed. 'Good to see you awake. Your family said you like to be called Jet,' she said. 'I'm Dr Lee.'

Jet didn't know what to say. *Nice to meet you?* Why did everyone look so fucking miserable? She was alive, she was awake.

'Can I just . . .' Dr Lee said, coming close, drawing a penlight from the pocket of her white jacket. And, yes, she could just, because she was already doing it, shining the light in Jet's

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eyes. One and the other. Light off. 'How much have you told her?' The doctor turned to Jet's mom.

'Nothing,' Dianne said, backing off. 'We were waiting for you.'

'Guys, it's OK,' Jet sniffed. 'I already know. I remember everything. Someone hit me in the back of the head. Tried to kill me.'

Silence.

'Didn't do a very good job of it,' Jet said. Jazz hands, for effect.

Dad cupped his fingers to his mouth, holding back a sob. A silent tear rolling down his knuckles.

'Mr Mason, please,' Dr Lee said, pulling up a chair to sit beside the bed. 'Jet. I'm a neurosurgeon. You're in Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center.'

'How long have I been here?' Jet asked. 'What day is it today?' What day, or what year? Fuck – had she been asleep a lot longer than she thought? Oh fuck, had she been in a coma for years – is that why everyone was being so weird? She hadn't turned thirty already, had she? All that lost time.

'It's Sunday,' Dr Lee said, voice calming, reacting to Jet's panicked eyes, 'at 2 p.m. You've been here about thirty-six hours.'

'Fucking phew,' she said. 'That's a relief. I thought I was old.'

Dad turned away, faced the wall.

'Jet, you were in a bad way when you arrived at the ER,' Dr Lee said, fiddling with the edges of the file. 'You were an eight on the GCS on arrival, which means you were comatose, had to be intubated. Suffered cardiac arrest from blood loss shortly after. We were able to stabilize you, get you into surgery. You had a subdural hematoma, here on the left side of your head, under that bandage. That means a buildup of blood on the surface of the brain. We evacuated the blood and there didn't appear to be any significant brain trauma.

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But we believe you were hit three times. Once on the left side of your head there, and twice on the back of your head, near the base of your skull.'

Those were the ones Jet remembered.

Dr Lee swallowed.

'Your skull was fractured. A longitudinal fracture across the occipital bone. The first blow would have caused the fracture, the second would have depressed the bone farther into your brain.' She paused, looked down. 'Considering the site of the injury, the violence of the attack, it's a miracle there isn't significant damage to the vital tissues and vascular structures of the brain, that you're able to move and think and function as you are. I've never seen anything like it. But.'

Jet knew there had to be a *but* coming. Because if it was a miracle, her family wouldn't be looking at her like this. Like she hadn't woken up at all.

Her head was throbbing, the base and the left side; now she knew where to pinpoint the pain. Hot and sharp, an imitation, a ghost of how it had felt at the time. When her head had exploded open.

Dr Lee flipped the file in her lap.

'The fracture was successfully mended during surgery. We've reconnected the skull pieces with screws and wire mesh. Stitched up your scalp.'

It flared and itched as she mentioned it.

'And after surgery, you were sent for another CT scan.'

She pulled out a scan from the file, the plastic quivering with an almost comic *wub-wub* sound, not reading the room. Dr Lee held the scan up, against the afternoon light streaming through the window. A black background. White writing glowed at the very top: *Margaret Mason, Age: 27, 11/01/2025,* more numbers Jet didn't understand. Below was a grid of

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pictures. Different angles of her brain, dissected this way and that, rendered in a strange pale blue.

'There is a bone at the base of the skull, at the deepest part, right in the middle of your brain, called the clivus. The trauma to the back of your head has resulted in a fracture to the clivus.' The scan trembled in Dr Lee's hand, threatening that noise again. 'A clivus fracture is an incredibly rare event, seen in less than 0.5 percent of traumatic head injuries. And if you look here' – she pointed to the scan, to an image taken through the top of Jet's head – 'you can see there is a small piece of bone fragment separated from the clivus.'

Dr Lee's finger pressed against a tiny pale white orb, floating there in the middle of Jet's brain. She pointed it out in the side view too, checking that Jet could see. Not even an orb, just a speck really.

'OK,' Jet said. 'But it's tiny, right? And I'm fine. Look, I'm fine.'

Luke pulled out the chair on the other side, made Mom sit down.

'Jet,' Dr Lee said, her teeth holding on to the *t,* chewing on it, so she didn't have to continue. 'That tiny bone fragment is leaning against the wall of your basilar artery.'

Jet breathed out. 'That sounds important.'

'One of the major arteries supplying blood to your brain.'

Yep. Important.

'A surgery to remove the fragment would normally be considered impossible. It's so deep, so hard to access without damaging other parts of the brain. Too easy to accidentally nick the artery and cause a catastrophic bleed. Chances of mortality far too high. Better to leave it and, in time, the fragment may migrate to the outer edges of the brain, where it could be more easily accessed and removed. But.'

Another *but.*

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The throbbing was a drumbeat in Jet's head now, mirroring her heart, answering fear with fear.

'You have polycystic kidney disease, Jet.'

'I'm well aware.' Jet sniffed. Again, those weeks of pissing blood, pain so bad it doubled you over, the phantom bruises, quitting her job and moving home because it all got too much, the high-blood-pressure pills she took every day, never smoking, not too much salt, even though she'd once loved fries. 'What does that have to do with my brain?'

Dad was standing behind Mom now, hands on her shoulders, lips in a tight white line to stop him from crying.

Dr Lee swallowed.

'A complication of PKD is that patients have much weaker arterial walls, in the heart and . . . and in the brain.'

'Right.'

'I'm sorry, Jet, there's no easy way to tell you this. With the fragment's position, putting extra pressure on an already weak arterial wall, an aneurysm will form at the site. A large one. And when it ruptures, the resulting hemorrhage, the bleeding, it . . . it would be fatal.'

'O-K,' Jet said, nodding, stopping when she realized that hurt. 'And how likely is it that an aneurysm would form?'

'It's a certainty, Jet. And it would be fast.'

'How fast?'

'It's impossible to accurately predict, especially before the aneurysm has formed.'

'Give it your best guess, doc.'

'Jet,' Mom sniffed.

Dr Lee straightened, looked at the floor instead of Jet. 'Given the particular circumstances of your case, I would say we have just days. Maybe a week until it ruptures.'

Jet clicked her tongue, to hide the thrum of her heart, fight-or-flight fast. This couldn't be happening. Was this

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really happening? 'So . . . you're saying that I'd be dead in about a week?'

No one answered.

Dad couldn't hold it any longer, burying his face in the crook of his elbow as he sobbed.

'Dad, it's OK,' Jet said, shifting in her bed. She'd only seen him cry once before like this. A guttural, primal sound. She hoped she'd never have to hear that sound again; seventeen years wasn't long enough.

'It's my fault,' he cried.

'Dad, it's not your fault. It's hereditary. There was a fifty percent chance that me or Luke or Emily could have inherited PKD.' That made Jet the unlucky one. She already knew that, because the other two had normal names and she was the one who got stuck with Margaret. 'So, the surgery, then. Right?' Jet looked from Dr Lee to her family.

Mom nodded, wiped her swollen eyes. None of them looked like they'd slept much, in the time Jet had slept too much. 'It's the only choice, Jet.'

'Please, Mrs Mason,' Dr Lee's voice hardened. 'I need to make something clear to you, Jet, before you make any decision. Like I said, under other circumstances, this surgery wouldn't even be considered. The risk of mortality is high. I have to be honest with you: it was my colleague, Dr Fuller, who performed the initial surgery on you. After the second CT scan, once the situation became clear, Dr Fuller refused to even consider performing surgery to attempt to remove the bone fragment. I said that I would only do it if you had all the information – if you chose this, understanding the risk.'

The drumming in her head quickened, unnatural, like it was counting down to something, racing her heart.

'What is the risk?' Jet asked. 'Can you give me a percentage or something?'

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Dr Lee hesitated, her tongue moving around inside her mouth, bulging through her cheek. 'Less than ten percent chance of survival.'

The drumming stopped.

'So, more than a ninety percent chance that I'd die on the table?' Numb, detached, like she wasn't here in this body, in this bed. Sometimes minds did that, didn't they, to save you from the pain? Or was this a result of the brain trauma, the kind of broken that didn't show up on CT scans? 'I'm not a betting girl, but those don't sound like good odds.'

Jet wasn't good with chance. She'd already lost that game with polycystic kidney disease. And that was with fifty percent. Not ten. Less than ten.

'There's nothing else you can do?'

'I'm sorry, Jet,' Dr Lee said, a tremble in her voice that she coughed to cover. How many times had she had to tell someone they were going to die? Could you get used to a thing like that?

Jet looked at her family. Luke, gray and silent, a muscle ticcing in his jaw. Dad crying, a quieter, more unsettling kind of cry. Mom leaning forward in her chair, taking Jet's hand in her own, giving it a squeeze.

'So.' Jet hesitated, trying to stick her mind back together, to fix what the doctor couldn't. 'My choice is I can die now, or I can die in seven days?'

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3

The room was silent, but the world was not. It carried on; a high-pitched beep from a machine, a low-pitched scream down the corridor, the fall sun beaming through the window because it didn't care about her and her little problems.

What kind of choice was that? Jet couldn't even decide what to have for breakfast most days. Die now, or die in a week? Toast or cereal? Both?

There was a humming too, but that wasn't down the corridor; it was in Jet's head, behind her eyes, playing with her heart. A symphony of the damned. Her throat constricted; she wouldn't let the others hear it.

'Damn,' Jet said. 'You sure there isn't a door number three?'

Her mom replied before the doctor could.

'Everything's going to be OK, sweetie. It's obvious which choice to make,' she sniffed, her grip tightening until it hurt. 'One of them has a chance, the other doesn't. I can't lose you. You have to choose the surgery, Jet. Quickly. The doctor said every minute counts.'

'Mrs Mason –'

'– Not much of a chance.' Jet looked at her. 'Less than ten percent chance of survival. I know it's been a while since high school for you, but that's not great math, Mom.'

'Don't make this a competition, Jet.'

'How was I making it a –'

'– You have to have the surgery.' Mom's eyes filled but they didn't spill. 'I can't lose another daughter. You can't do that to me.'

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The humming became a roar of thunder. Jet could normally leash it, back down and walk away, but maybe that had gotten broken too.

'I didn't bash my own fucking brain in, Mom. *I'm* not doing this. Not everything is my fault.'

Dad stepped forward. 'Jet, your mom didn't mean it like that. She only wants what's best for you. We all do, baby girl.'

He hadn't called her that in years.

'Yeah,' Luke said gruffly, like that added anything.

'But you're going to choose the surgery,' Mom said, tears released, chasing each other down her cheeks. 'You know that's the right decision, don't you? Scott, help me.'

Dr Lee cut in, rising from her chair. 'This really has to be Jet's decision.' Her voice softened. 'You don't have to make it right this moment. The police are outside. They've been waiting for you to wake up. They need to ask you some questions about your assault, before you decide.'

'In case I choose the surgery and don't make it,' Jet said, seeing through the doctor's words. 'They're here, now, to i-i-in . . .' What was the word? Ah, fuck, you know the word she meant. What you do to get a job, same thing when the police ask you questions. Sounds like . . . Jet couldn't remember what it sounded like. 'I-in . . .' What was that fucking word?

'Interview?' Luke offered.

'Yes. Interview.' Jet smacked her hand down on the bed. 'What was I saying?'

Dr Lee's eyes narrowed. 'Jet, are you having trouble finding your words?'

'No.'

Yes. Not some of them. Like *Fuck, fuck, I'm going to die, fuck*. But she couldn't find the word for that thing resting around Dr Lee's shoulders. That long thing with earbuds and

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a metal disc, for listening to hearts. Jet didn't need one; her heart was too loud already.

Dr Lee nodded, like she could read minds, even if she couldn't fix this one.

'One of the blows was to the side of your head here.' Dr Lee gestured to the stick-on bandage. 'The left hemisphere, where the brain's language center is. Sometimes trauma to this area can cause problems with understanding or producing language, called an aphasia. Your comprehension and speech seem mostly unaffected, so it's likely anomic aphasia, the mildest kind.' She paused. 'You may have trouble retrieving certain words, specifically ones you don't use too often. It can be temporary, may only last a few weeks or months, and can be treated with speech therapy.'

Jet shrugged. 'I don't have weeks or months, though, do I?' Not really a question.

'If you have the surgery, Jet –' Mom began.

'– I think we need to let Jet speak to the police now.' Dr Lee gestured with Jet's medical file, sweeping Dianne to her feet.

Luke lingered by the door.

'Who was it, Jet?' he asked, mouth in a grim line, hiding his teeth. 'Who did this to you?'

She exhaled. Three words she definitely knew how to find: 'I don't know.'

'Come on, Luke.' Dad patted him gently on the back. 'Let's let the cops ask their questions. There's not much time.'

Mom pressed her hand to the lump of Jet's foot, beneath the sheet. 'I'll be right outside, sweetie.'

The doctor was the last to leave, looking back at Jet, a sad half-smile. The smile of an execu-exec– fuck, what was that word? You know: the people who wore hoods in movies, swung the ax or dropped the platform?

'She's ready for you,' Jet heard Dr Lee say outside, muffled

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by the door swinging shut. 'Please don't press her too hard. I've just broken the news.'

The news.

Ha.

Extra, extra, read all about it. Jet Mason's got a time bomb in her head.

The door was going to open any second now. Was that enough time to scream?

The hinges creaked. No. Not enough time. To scream. To live.

A man in a suit was the first in, a file clutched in his white-knuckle hands. All this paperwork; lucky her.

'Margaret Mason?' he said gently, overenunciating. 'My name is George Ecker. I'm a detective with the Vermont State Police.'

'It's Jet,' said another voice, one she recognized. Billy's dad – sorry – Jack Finney walked into the room, his badge glinting at her. 'She likes to be called Jet.' His face was wrung out, sleep deprived, but at least it was familiar under all of that.

Chief Lou Jankowski was the last in, shutting the door behind him with a click. He nodded. 'Hello again, Jet.'

George Ecker cleared his throat. 'The chief said you might want Sergeant Finney in here. That you know each other.'

'All my life,' Jet said.

Jack bowed his head, like it hurt to hold her gaze. Mourning her before she even had the good grace to really be gone. Pre-dead. Un-dead. Fuck sake, a *zombie,* that's what she was. Talk about foreshadowing. And Jet was surprised she *could* talk about it – shouldn't that be a word lost to the black hole in her head? So many syllables.

The three of them stood around her bed, like silent sentries, Jet's neck craning to look up at them.

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'I didn't see who it was,' she said. 'Before you ask. They attacked me from behind. I didn't get a chance to turn around.'

Detective Ecker clicked and unclicked a pen, scribbled something in his file. 'Did you hear or see anything that might help us identify them?'

Jet swallowed. 'So you don't know who it was either? Isn't there evidence or something?'

'The scene is still being processed,' the detective said. 'Anything at all?'

'Footsteps,' Jet answered. 'Coming up behind me.'

'Did they sound heavy?'

'I don't know.'

'Could you tell what kind of shoes? Boots? Sneakers?'

'I don't know, it was just footsteps. It was so fast.'

'One set or more?'

'One. It was one person.'

Detective Ecker flicked to a previous page. 'Do you know what was used to hit you?'

'No.' She paused. 'Wait, so you don't have the murder weapon either?'

She didn't even realize until she'd just said it. *The murder weapon*. That's what it was, though, wasn't it? Because Jet hadn't just been attacked, or assaulted – those paler, one-size-fits-all words. She'd been . . . murdered. Someone had killed her. More than ninety percent killed her, unless Jet was due another miracle and the surgery actually worked.

'The weapon was not recovered at the scene,' Ecker said, omitting the vital word that made them all uncomfortable.

Jack removed his cap, held it by his side.

'Who found me?' Jet asked him, not this stranger with her file. 'Was it Mom and Dad?'

Jack coughed. 'Billy found you.'

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'Is he OK?' she asked. A strange thing to ask, for someone who was much less than OK. But Jet was tough, everyone said so. Billy was soft. Used to cry when Jet stomped on spiders.

Jack didn't answer.

'Margaret – sorry – Jet.' The detective pressed closer, bringing her attention back. 'Can you think of any reason, any reason at all, that someone might want to hurt you?'

She wanted to make a joke, to trick that drumbeat in her head, cobbled together with wire mesh and screws. *Who, me? I'm fucking delightful.* But she couldn't this time, couldn't drown out the dread.

'No,' she said, voice almost failing her. 'I can't think of any reason someone would want to kill me.'

But someone had had a reason. You didn't smack someone three times in the skull if you didn't. The *why* was almost as confusing as the *who*. Would Jet ever know the answers? Not if she chose the surgery and the percentage played out as percentages tended to do.

The detective clicked his tongue and Jet wanted to rip it out.

'Can you tell us where your ex-boyfriend is?' He paused to read out the name from his notes, finding it with his finger. 'JJ Lim. Know where he is?'

Jet clicked her tongue too. 'I dunno if anyone's told you, but I've kind of been unconscious in the hospital.'

Ecker raised his eyebrows.

'No, I don't know where he is, Detective. Why?'

'We've been unable to reach him. He's not answering his phone. We've spoken to his brother – Henry – who doesn't know where he is either. Says he left town suddenly on Friday night, on Halloween. Didn't say where he was going.'

Jet straightened up, peeling away from the pillows.

'You don't think he's a suspect, do you?'

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But by the looks on their faces, they clearly did.

'How long were you together?' the detective asked.

Why was that relevant?

'Almost two years,' she answered. 'Look, JJ didn't do this.'

'But you didn't see your attacker?' the chief chimed in now.

'No. I didn't. But . . .' Jet didn't know where that was going, left it dangling in the stale room.

'One last thing we need to ask you,' Ecker said, turning another page. 'Your cell phone is missing. Do you know what model it is?'

'They took my phone?'

'It wasn't on you and it's not at the scene.'

'iPhone. A 14, I think.'

'That's what your father guessed.' Ecker made a note. 'And – finally – you were wearing an Apple Watch during the attack. We have it now. Can you tell us the passcode, so we can access the data? It would help speed the process along, so we're not waiting on telephone records.'

Jet glanced at her bare wrist. 'Yeah. It's 0709.'

'You sure?' Ecker eyed her.

'Yes, I'm sure. My passwords didn't get knocked out of my head.'

The detective sniffed awkwardly, and that's when Jet knew, realized why he was double-checking. If she chose to have the surgery – if she died on the table like chance said she would – then this was their final chance to speak to her. That's why they had to be sure. Because they were talking to a dead woman.

'0709,' she said again.

He wrote it down, Jet's eyes following the swish of his pen. He nodded, glancing over at Chief Lou and Jack, closing the file.

'I think that's everything we need from you now, Jet,' he said.

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'No, wait.' She sat up, brought her knees closer to her chest. They couldn't be done, because if they were, that meant it was time for Jet to decide, to make her choice. And maybe, maybe she could put it off just a few minutes more. Not right now. Later. Later. Let her choose later.

'It's OK, Jet,' Jack said, voice gruff and raw, like it had been overused since she last saw him. But his eyes were kind, glittering with the threat of tears. 'I promise you, kiddo. We will get the person who did this to you. I promise. I will do that for you.'

Jet locked onto his eyes, blinked. Didn't he know? She couldn't let people do things for her, because what did that prove? That her mom was right; that Jet was born useless and would die that way too? Now she had no time to prove anything at all. This wasn't fair, it couldn't be happening.

Jack wiped his eyes, following the other officers to the door. He thought she was going to choose the surgery, didn't he? That this was goodbye.

'Goodbye, Jet,' Detective Ecker said, leaving no room for doubt.

The door swung shut, taking them away, Jet's last hope with them.

She was out of time.

Alone for less than four seconds before the handle twitched again, Mom in first, followed by Dad and Dr Lee.

'Luke, come on,' Mom barked, beckoning him into the room too.

Dr Lee stood there, holding her own hands, arms crossed in front of her, watching the family assemble around Jet's bedside. Luke was breathing so heavy that Jet couldn't think, and she needed to think; they were here for her choice, and she needed to think.

'Luke, shut up,' she snapped.

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