

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA PRESENTS

LIFE IS
SHORT



AND THEN
YOU DIE

First Encounters with Murder
EDITED BY KELLEY ARMSTRONG

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LIFE IS SHORT AND THEN YOU DIE:

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA PRESENTS FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH MURDER.

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INTRODUCTION

By Kelley Armstrong

ADOLESCENCE IS A TIME OF FIRSTS. First kiss. First love. First loss. First job. The first taste of adult responsibilities, and the first look at an independent life away from both the restrictions and the security of home.

The joy and pain of firsts has always been one of the major appeals of young adult fiction. For teen readers, it reflects the turmoil in their daily lives. For adult readers, it takes them back to the rawness of those emotions and the confusion of struggling to cope with new experiences.

Teens may also encounter death for the first time as relatives age. While they likely experienced a death in the family when they were younger, it *feels* different in adolescence. Teens are often stereotyped as acting invincible, yet they are intellectually aware they are indeed mortal, and when they experience death, it becomes real in a way that might have escaped them at an earlier age. It is the first death that may bring them face-to-face with their own mortality.

For this collection, the authors have taken another approach to the concept of death and adolescent firsts. Here, they've explored the first time teens are faced with death, not as natural or accidental, but as intentional: the first time they encounter murder.

While mystery is at the heart of these stories, many also deal with the intellectual and emotional impact of encountering murder. For each of these protagonists, it's the first time they've been faced with the reality of homicide: Not only do we all die, but sometimes, we die at the hands of another human being. Each character reacts to this in their own way, giving the anthology a uniquely teen perspective on murder.

In some of these stories, the teen is an unwitting witness to murder who feels called upon to solve the crime. In one, the teen is the victim herself, forced to cope with her own death and the cold fact that someone she loved murdered her. In others, they are caught up in the events

that transpire, where keeping themselves alive is more important than solving a crime. In still others, they are the killer—driven by revenge or self-defense or something deeper and darker that makes them deem life disposable.

While the subject may be murder, the tone of the stories varies. We do get the somber reflections on homicide that we might expect. We also get dark and twisted journeys into the minds of killers . . . and lighter fare, too, leavened with gallows wit and humor. The heart of any examination of death is emotion—the sheer breadth of emotions we can experience when faced with mortality. They all appear here—from grief to horror to confusion to the grim satisfaction of knowing that a criminal has been caught . . . but that does not undo the crime. The dead remain dead, leaving those around them to carry on.

Ultimately, that is the core of this collection: carrying on. For the teens left behind, murder marks a turning point in their lives. They have experienced something horrific and—whether they are witness, killer, or victim—they are irrevocably changed. Some piece of childhood innocence is lost within these pages, and while we can grieve for that, we realize, too, that it is part of the inevitable process of growing up.

Parents do not solve the crimes in these stories. As with any good young-adult narrative, it is the teen's responsibility to act. They take a step away from the family home, marking yet another move toward independence, whether they are solving a crime or committing it. These teens are experiencing a trauma that may scar them, but they will move forward from it, forever changed by the experience of having encountered their first murder.

FLOATER

By Kelley Armstrong

THEY'VE PULLED A GIRL FROM THE LAKE. She's dead. There's no doubt about that; her body's so bloated I wince every time the diver touches her skin. A floater—that's what my mom calls corpses like this. She's investigated cases of people pulled from the lake, and when she comes home after the autopsies, she spends an hour in the shower.

In seventh grade, I found out exactly what happens to a body submerged in water. A mouse body, that is. It was my idea of a cool science fair project. I should probably say that, at sixteen, the memory of that experiment horrifies me. It'd be a lie. I inherited my physician dad's love of medicine and my detective mom's love of problem-solving, along with their complete lack of squeamishness. Put those things in a blender, and you get Kylie Matheson, future coroner extraordinaire.

Okay, maybe don't put that in a blender. Even I'll admit that's kind of gross. Like the time Dad told us about emergency surgery on a guy who reached into a jammed food processor . . . And that's enough of that. I learned long ago that most people don't share my sense of fascination with the mysteries of the human body.

From my seventh-grade experiment, I know what happens to a long-submerged body. Decomposition, of course, but it's different underwater; and fresh water, full of bacteria, kicks things up a notch. You rot, and you bloat as your corpse gives off hydrogen sulfide, methane, and carbon dioxide, and eventually, that brings it to the surface, where you become . . . a floater.

That's what I'm looking down at from my spot on the cliff. The recovery team works right below me, but no one glances up. The dead girl lies on her stomach, and they're discussing whether they should flip her over. I'm ready to jog down and tell them no, please don't move her,

or you'll risk popping her skin. But the diver says exactly that, so I stay where I am.

The body wears jeans and a T-shirt. One sneaker, too, the other gone. Those jeans and that shoe tell me she hadn't been out for a swim.

She has brown hair, the color darker than it would be when dry, and I'm trying to see how long it is. Long-ish? It's impossible to tell with the way it's sticking to her. It's not short. I know that.

Did I know her? That's what I'm wondering, of course. West Mayfield isn't exactly the big city. I almost certainly knew her.

When I think of that, my heart hammers, reminding me this isn't a science experiment, a dead mouse I found in a trap, fodder for my study. This is a person. A girl. A woman. Someone I probably—

Deep breaths.

A distant car door slams. Footsteps pound the path to the beach. I glance over to see Mom coming. I smile and rise from my crouch.

That's weird. She isn't dressed for work, and Dad's with her. She must have been called in while she was home for the day.

I descend the hill, half-scampering, half-sliding. No one looks my way. They're all watching my mother. One of the team says something urgent, and another pulls a tarp over the body. If they thought a floater would freak out Detective Matheson, they clearly don't know my mother.

I'm at the bottom of the hill. She's running full out now, Dad doing the same behind her.

"Mom?" I say.

She doesn't look my way. She's racing toward the body on the beach.

"Detective Matheson," the diver says. "You really should—"

"Is it her?"

"The body is too—"

"Is it *her*?" My mother's voice rings out, loud and sharp.

"Mom?" I say.

She races right past me and drops to her knees beside the body. When Mom reaches for the tarp, the diver takes her hands, firmly.

"I want to see her," Mom says through her teeth.

The diver lifts the tarp just enough to show the body's shirt and arm. Mom touches the gold watch on the corpse's wrist. I see the watch, and I stare at it. Then I lift my own wrist, and gold glints in the late-day.

"Kylie!" Mom screams and falls onto the body.



I am the body on the beach. I am the floater.

I am dead.

Which is impossible because I'm right here, breathing and walking and talking. Except no one hears me. My feet leave no marks in the sand as I run to my mother. I crouch beside her, and Dad drops right on me—through me—as he reaches for her.

I am dead.

No, I'm *dreaming* that I'm dead. I must be. I haven't been to the lake since . . .

A memory snags, only to fall away, and I shake my head. It's been weeks since I've been here.

The last thing I remember is coming home from school with my boyfriend, Landon. I was in his car, and he was talking about . . .

I can't quite remember what he'd been talking about. He was driving me home and . . .

The rest is gone.

So how did I end up walking on the cliff? I'm here. Very clearly here, and yet as hard as I search my memory, I don't remember coming to the lake, which means I must be dreaming. I've fallen asleep in Landon's car and—



I'm in a hallway. I blink and look around. How did I get—?

"No," says a voice.

I turn to see my fourteen-year-old brother sitting beside me. We're sitting on black steel chairs, like the kind you find in a waiting room.

I know this hall . . .

I know these chairs . . .

A murmured voice, then Will again, snapping, “I said no.”

Dad sighs. He reaches a hand toward Will’s shoulder. Will throws it off with a violent shrug and scowls, his attention never leaving his cell phone.

Dad crouches beside Will. Red rims his eyes. Splotches of dried water streak his glasses.

Now I’m the one sighing, a perfect replica of my father. “Your glasses are dirty again, Dad.” I reach out. “Let me clean—”

“Will?” Dad says. “I know—” His voice catches. “I know what you’re feeling.”

“No, you don’t,” Will snaps again, still not looking up. “I’m fine.”

“I do know,” Dad murmurs under his breath. “And you’re not.”

He rumples Will’s hair before my brother can duck. Then Dad walks down the hall and opens a door.

I know that door . . .

I shake it off and turn to my brother. He’s still staring at his phone.

I lean over to see the screen. It’s a text from me.

You and me. Star Wars VIII. Next Wednesday.
Midnight showing. Be there.

Attached is a ticket, and under it, another text from me:

Yes, yes, I know, you’ll go with your friends,
too, but this is tradition, Pill. You must honor
tradition and suffer through the humiliation of
being seen in public with your big sister.

He taps the movie ticket. It pops open. His finger hovers over the DELETE button. Then he clenches the phone tight, his head dropping. A sound rumbles from his throat—a horrible, strangled sound.

“Hey,” I say, reaching for him. “What’s—”

The door at the end of the hall slaps open. Someone shouts, “You can’t go in there!” but the thunder of running feet drowns her out. It’s Landon, with my two best friends—Mia and Elijah—right behind him.

“Will?” Landon says. “Is it true? They found . . .”

He trails off as Will pulls his heels up onto the chair and his head falls onto his knees. The other door opens. Dad steps out, Mom behind him.

“Kylie?” Mia whispers.

“She’s—” Dad’s voice catches again. “She’s gone.”

Mia lets out a wail and starts to fall. Mom catches her, and they cling together, Mom comforting Mia, stroking her hair.

“No,” Landon says. “It must be a mistake.” He pauses. “Are they sure it’s her? It’s been almost a week, and they said the body was in the water, and I remember Kylie saying that . . . that . . .” His face fills with horror, and he shakes it off. “They can’t be sure it’s her.”

“They are,” Dad says.

Behind him, the door opens into an office, and when I see that, I know where I am. Of course I know. I’ve spent countless hours working here. On that door is a plaque. Dr. Basra, Coroner. Through that office, another door. One that leads to the autopsy room, where the floater will lie on a steel table, a Y incision slicing her from shoulder to shoulder to navel.

Cutting *her*? Cutting *me*. That body in there is mine. Lying on that cold table, my chest cut open.

A dream. I’m dreaming. That’s why I’m not worried. Because I know, in my gut, that this is a nightmare. What else could it be?

“Wh-what happened?” That’s Elijah, moving forward, his face as pale as his white T-shirt.

“They found her in the lake,” Dad says.

“Did she drown?” Elijah says. “She knows better than to swim alone. She can barely do a dog paddle.”

Dad opens his mouth, but Landon cuts in with, “Did she . . .” He swallows hard. “Did she jump?”

“What?” Elijah wheels on him. “Are you asking if Kylie *killed* herself?”

“No, I—”

“Is there some reason why she might?” Elijah bears down on him. “Something she was upset about, asshole?”

“Guys!” Mia lunges between them. “Kylie is gone, and you two are doing *this*? She’s gone. Do you get that?” Her voice cracks. “She’s *gone*.”

“She did drown,” my mother says, her own voice oddly monotone. “Dr. Basra just confirmed cause of death. Kylie drowned after a blow to the back of the head. Someone knocked her out and then left her in the lake to die.”

Voices rise. So many voices. So many questions. I look toward Dr. Basra’s office.

“Would you like to leave now, Kylie?” asks a voice at my shoulder.

I turn sharply. A woman in a lab coat stands there.

“Would you like to leave?” she says. “You’ve seen enough. More than you should have, really.”

“I’d like to *wake up*, yes.”

Her brown eyes soften. “This isn’t a dream. You know that.”

I turn to my family and friends. Grief and anger and confusion whip through the air like a cyclone, yet I stand apart from it. I can see it. I cannot feel it.

“That’s for the best,” the woman says, as if in answer to an unspoken question. “There’s so much to feel, and sometimes, it’s easier not to.”

“What happened to me?”

“You died.”

I spin on her. “I was *murdered*. Who did it?”

Her gaze slides past me to the others.

“What?” I say. “If you’re seriously implying one of *them* murdered me—”

“They didn’t mean to. That is, they didn’t set out to. They just failed to save you. Which is, I suppose, the same thing. It’s still murder.”

Someone knocked her out and then left her in the lake to die.

“Would you like to leave now?” the woman says.

“You just told me that someone I love murdered me, and now you’re asking if I want to leave? Walk away without knowing who did it?”

“I’ll take you back to the lake. Back to the shore before your mother arrived. I’ll come for you there, and you’ll forget all this.”

“I don’t want to forget. I want to know who did it.”

Her gaze meets mine. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

I straighten and look her in the eye. “Yes.”
She nods, and the hall goes dark.



I’m walking to the car with Landon. There’s a spring in my step, as there always is, even after nearly four months together. I met him this past summer, a few days after he moved to West Mayfield. I’d been working at the hospital, and Landon somehow ended up in the basement, cradling a broken wrist. I found him, wandering.

“Doesn’t look fatal,” I said as I walked over.

He gave a start and turned. I pointed at the coroner sign on Dr. Basra’s door. “You’re in the morgue. Unless you’re expecting that break to kill you . . .”

He gave a soft, embarrassed laugh. “No, I just have a lousy sense of direction. I thought the guy said the emergency ward was down the stairs and left.”

“*Up* the stairs and *right*. Come on. I’ll take you.”

I escorted Landon to the ER and whisked him through triage. When my shift ended, I found him waiting out front to offer me a soda at the diner. By the end of summer, we were a couple, and four months later I still marveled at that. He isn’t the kind of guy I expected to end up with, certainly not for my first boyfriend. I’m a science geek, and he’s a jock. I want to be a coroner; he wants to take over his dad’s auto body business. He’s quiet and shy; I . . . am not. It shouldn’t work, but it does.

That day, he’s even quieter than usual as we walk to his old Mustang. He restored it himself—he understands motors the way I understand the human heart. I’m chattering away, and I’m sure it looks as if he isn’t listening, but I know he is. In the beginning, I used to constantly stop myself, presuming his lack of response meant he wasn’t interested, but he always noticed and prodded me to continue.

I’m talking about a symposium Dr. Basra is taking me to next month. It’s on forensic anthropology, and I’m as excited as if she were taking me to Disney World.

I’m in the car with Landon, talking and then . . .

It’s like the scene fast forwards, and suddenly, we’re in my driveway,

and I'm slamming his car door as hard as I can before I stomp across the asphalt.

"Kylie!" Landon calls, putting down his window. "Come back. Let's talk."

"There's nothing to say." I stride past the front of his car. "You've made yourself perfectly clear."

He opens his door and gets out. "No, I haven't. I screwed up, as usual. I just . . . I want to talk. I care about you. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

I snort and hurry up the front steps. He says something else, but I don't listen, just slam the front door shut and jam the bolt into place.



I'm in the kitchen, fixing a plate of hummus and crackers as I Snapchat with Elijah while he works on a History project with Mia. Elijah and I have known each other since we were toddlers. He used to live next door until his parents split and his mom got a townhouse a few blocks away.

I don't tell Elijah what happened with Landon. I want to forget it. Brush it under the carpet and hope it goes away. It might. Landon gets his moods. Something brings him down, and it spills over into our relationship. We've broken up twice because of it—he gets into a funk where he decides we aren't working out, and I deserve better, and he's going to set me free . . . I roll my eyes just thinking about it.

The front door opens. Footsteps slap the mat. Shoes hit the wall, kicked off, possibly even landing close to the mat. Socks whisper over the hardwood. A stair creaks.

"Will?" I call.

He grunts in response. My brother acts like he's been assigned the role of stereotypical fourteen-year-old and is determined to win an Oscar for his performance. When he's home, he's holed up in his bedroom playing video games. If forced to interact with the family, he makes Landon look positively cheerful. When he was little, I called him Will the Pill because he was so annoying, always on my heels, always bugging me to play. Now, I'm lucky if I get a full sentence out of him.

“So how was school?” I call. Then I continue as if he’s answered. “Really? That’s great. Got any homework tonight?” Another pause. “Okay. It’s been good talking to you.”

I expect to hear him thump upstairs as he usually does. Instead, he says, “Got your text.”

I carry my snack plate into the hall. “Excellent. So we’re on for *Star Wars*. You and me—”

“Can’t. Going with Justin and a few of the guys.”

I stop walking. “I bought—”

“So did Justin’s mom.”

“But it’s tradition. We always go.”

“Twice, Kylie. We did it twice. That’s not tradition. Take Landon.”

“He hates *Star Wars*.”

He grumbles under his breath. Like Elijah, my brother is not a Landon fan. Unlike Elijah, he doesn’t seem to have anything against Landon—he just doesn’t think we make a good couple. We don’t “fit.”

“Then take Eli,” Will says. “Or Mia. Just not me.”

He continues up the stairs without even looking my way.

“I’m cooking dinner for Mom and Dad,” I call after him. “Can I get you to make a salad?”

He keeps walking.

“Set the table?”

He disappears into the upstairs hall.

“Show up and smile? Join the conversation? Crazy talk, I know but—”

His bedroom door shuts, and I sigh as I carry my snack into the living room.



We eat dinner early. Mom has to return to the station. She’s deep in a case, which is always tough because you know something’s bugging her, and you can’t ask what it is. She eats with her gaze fixed straight ahead, her fork tapping against the plate when it misses the food.

Dad and I exchange a look and continue our conversation about his day—as much as he can share without breaching patient confidentiality.

Yep, having a doctor and a cop for parents means a lot of weirdly fractured dinner conversations, which might be why we end up with some equally weird—and apparently inappropriate—dinner discussions.

As a kid, I'd get annoyed with my parents for refusing to discuss the "cool stuff" when I had friends over. They said that what passed for Matheson dinner conversation could bother others. I thought they were full of crap, so the next time I had Mia over, I started talking about an article I'd read on flesh-eating bacteria and . . . and it was a long time before I could convince her to have dinner with us again.

Tonight, Dad's telling me how they saved the foot of a diabetic patient with gangrene. Will sits in front of an empty plate, his earbuds in, music loud enough for me to hear the *thump-thump* of the bass. He'd rather scarf down his food and race back to his room, but Mom and Dad make him stay until we've finished eating. They've allowed this one concession to their "screen-free" table rule—he can listen to music. It also saves us from his grumbling and sighing and muttering about the injustice of life for the entire fifteen minutes he's forced to sit with us.

Dad's midway through explaining the procedure when Mom cuts him off with, "Kylie?" obviously not realizing Dad was talking.

"Yes?" I say.

"Have any of the girls at school had problems lately with stalker strangers?"

Coming from a detective mom, this question is as normal as "What'd you do at school today?" I don't ask what she means by "stalker stranger" either. Stalkers can be the rando lurking in the bushes . . . or they can be the guy you broke up with last week.

"Not that I know of," I say. "Do you want me to ask around?"

She shakes her head. "Just let me know if you hear anything." A pause. "And it's nothing to worry about. Just a theory for . . . a case."

Dad starts clearing the table. "Are we still on for tonight's excursion, Kylie?"

"Definitely." I need to catch frogs for an experiment—a behavioral study, nothing invasive.

"Will," Dad says as my brother rises.

Will freezes, hands gripping the table edge, poised like a cat burglar hearing the homeowners return and wondering whether he still has time to escape. He reluctantly pulls out one earbud.

“Why don’t you come to the lake with us?” Dad asks.

“I have homework.”

“And you’re actually going to do it? Awesome. However, it’s six o’clock Friday night, and you have all weekend.”

“I . . .”

“I think you can go to the lake, Will,” Mom says.

That’s not a suggestion, and my brother knows it. Still, he tries with, “I have a *lot* of homework.”

“Take it and do it at the lake,” Mom says. “Your dad would be happy to help. He might even take you for ice cream after.”

Will gives his “How old do you think I am?” eye roll, which turns into full-blown muttering when I say, “Ooh, yes. Milkshakes! I’m in.” And yeah, I kinda do that to annoy him, but that’s what big sisters are for. He shoots me a death glare and stalks off to his room.

“Will?” Mom calls.

“Text me when you’re ready to go,” he says. “And *no* ice cream. I have an online match at eight.”



I’m back in the hospital basement with my family and friends, as if I never left, the memories relived in a blink.

So I *had* gone to the lake.

Had Dad or Will . . . ?

No. The woman said that my killer had let me die, let me drown. I will not believe it was either of them.

Mom had asked me about a stalker. Had someone been stalking teen girls? Is that what happened to me?

The woman had seemed to say my killer was one of my family or friends, yet she hadn’t been clear on that. She’d just waved down the hall, which could mean my killer was somewhere in the hospital. Someone on staff or even a new patient, injured when I fought back.

I did fight back, didn’t I?

I take a deep breath. Going to the lake. Focus on that. I'd gone to the lake and . . .



I'm crouched by a creek, looking for frogs. I don't know where my brother is. He stomped off with his pail an hour ago. I called after him, saying he didn't need to help. He pretended not to hear me.

Dad's gone, too. We'd barely arrived before he got a text from work. He had to run back and handle something. He promised Will he'd get us home in time for that eight P.M. match, 'cause those things are important. He also promised me a milkshake.

I only have one frog so far. I'm so much better at collecting dead things. I already found a skeletonized critter that I identified as a possum . . . which may have something to do with the fact that I only have one frog so far.

I'm walking along the creek when I spot something that makes me smile. It's a raft, tied to a tree stump. Every kid in West Mayfield knows it's here, along with the oars tucked under a dead tree.

One summer, Mia and Elijah and I took it out onto the lake almost every day. We'd been twelve, too old for day camp and too young for summer jobs. So we rode our bikes to the lake and paddled the raft out and lay on it, staring up at the clouds as we talked.

That ended when Mom found me at the lake and insisted if I ever went on the raft again, I had to wear a life jacket. *That* was too embarrassing to contemplate. Years of swim lessons had left me able to dog-paddle across the deep end of a pool and nothing more.

Today, I crouch by the raft, running my hands over the worn wood and smiling with the memories. Then mud squelches. A shadow falls over me, and I twist so fast I nearly lose my balance and tumble into the creek. Will plunks his pail down beside me.

"Good?" he grunts.

I look in to see a half dozen frogs of various sizes and types. Exactly what I told Dad I was looking for. I rise and throw open my arms, and he falls back as if I'm going to do something crazy, like hug him.

“Best brother evah!” I say.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m done. I’ll be over at the beach.”

As he turns to go, I catch a flash of movement in the trees.

“Hello?” I call.

The spot has gone dark, the figure having vanished into lengthening shadows. Will mutters, thinking I’m addressing him. He keeps walking. I grab his arm. He goes to shove me off and then sees my face.

He mouths, “What?”

“I thought I saw someone.”

He squints in the direction I’m looking. Then he marches that way. When I scramble after him, I slip on the wet ground.

“Will!” I stage-whisper.

He waves me away and keeps walking. Then he stops and peers into the forest.

Someone taps my shoulder. I spin, shrieking. Dad’s laugh turns to wide-eyed horror when he sees my expression. He pulls me into a hug.

“Sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to startle you. Well, yes, I did, but not that way. I was just goofing around.”

“Smooth move, Dad,” Will says as he tramps back. “Mom mentions a stalker, and you decide this is a good time to sneak up on your kids.”

Dad winces. “I forgot about that. Sorry. Again.”

Will grabs the bucket from me and heads toward the parking lot.

“Hey,” I call. “How’d you know what Mom said when you had your earbuds in? Does this mean you were actually listening to our conversation?”

He shakes his head and keeps walking.



I get my milkshake. Will breaks down and accepts a sundae, but only because if we *must* stop, he might as well get something. It’s not *just* a sundae, either. It’s the banana split for two, which he eats all by himself. Boys.

We're on the road again when Mia texts. She's stuck home alone and looking for company. She also has something to show me. *Ur gonna love it*, she says with a string of emojis and exclamation marks. That makes me smile. She probably found another dead fox in the field behind their place. Mia knows me well.

We'll be driving right by her subdivision, so I ask Dad to drop me off. Will squawks about his match—it's a quarter to eight already. I tell Dad to let me out on her corner. The sun is falling, but her street is well lit and it's a warm night, plenty of people still outside.

I text Mia to say I'll be there in five minutes. She tells me to come around back and to be quiet so I don't spoil the surprise. Is it a *live* animal? As fond as I am of dissection, I'd enjoy watching a live fox more than picking apart a dead one.

I jog down the sidewalk. As expected, her driveway is empty, her parents gone. When I slip around back, I hear voices. Mia is talking. A guy answers. I grin on hearing a male voice. Mia hasn't dated yet—she says she hasn't found the right person. This must be my surprise. *Look, Kylie! I'm talking to a real, live teenage boy!*

His voice is too low to make out words until I'm halfway around the house. Then I still can't hear what he's saying, but I recognize the voice. Landon.

I stop and grimace. I hadn't told Mia about our fight yet. Did Landon reach out to her? I know they talk. Did she invite us over so we can hash it out? That would explain why she told me to come around the house quietly. Don't let Landon know I'm there. Don't give him a chance to bolt.

I consider leaving this intervention, but I know she means well. Mia always has my back. Elijah and I might have grown up together, but my *best* friend is Mia. We met on the first day of kindergarten. Two girls weren't letting her play with the blocks, so we played together, and then I showed her a dead roach I'd found in the corner, and she didn't say, "Eww" and run away. Best friends forever.

I continue around the house. Their voices come clearer now. They're talking about me. Great . . .

"Kylie just . . . She's not listening. I tried talking to her, and she stomped off."

“I know,” Mia said.

“I don’t want to hurt her. She deserves better. She deserves the best.”

“She does.” Mia’s voice is barely above a whisper, and there’s a note in it that sounds like sadness.

They say something I don’t catch, a brief exchange drowned out by the scuff of my shoes on the walkway. I reach the back of the house, and I can see them by the pool, sitting together on a lounge chair.

Landon puts his arm around her shoulders, and she falls against him, and he gives her a one-armed hug. Then he twists. He reaches for her chin, pulls her face up to his and kisses her.

My heart stops. I swear it just stops.

I start to charge in and ask what the hell he’s doing. Mia is upset—clearly upset—and he’s taking *advantage* of it? Elijah’s right. Landon really is a jerk. A complete and total—

Then I realize Mia isn’t pushing him away. He kisses her, and she doesn’t shove him off in shock and horror. She’s kissing him back.

My boyfriend is kissing my best friend. And she’s kissing him back.

I stare. It’s all I can do for at least ten seconds. Then I turn, and I run as fast as I can.



I’m in the hospital again. My heart pounds now, so hard I can barely breathe. I hear Mia’s voice, and I spin toward it with a surge of hate and rage.

You and Landon?

You were my best friend. My best friend. The person I trusted more than anyone else.

Did you do this? Did you kill me?

I remember her swimming pool. I’ve read cases where someone drowns in a pool or tub and gets dumped in a lake, so it’ll seem they’ve drowned there. It never works. The water in their lungs will be different. I know that. Mia wouldn’t. Neither would Landon.

Had I gone back to confront Mia? Had we fought, and had I fallen in and hit my head? Did they watch me drown and then take my body to the lake?

I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on that moment in my memory, as I fled from Mia's house, running until . . .



My phone buzzes with a message. I'm racing down Mia's street, and I ignore it until I reach the end. Then I yank it out, certain it's her. Certain she knows I saw them—she *wanted* me to see them. She sent that text asking me to come over and see something I was going to love.

The thought hits me so hard bile rises, and I have to choke it back.

The Snapchat message is from Elijah. He has the truck, and he just dropped his sister off around the corner from my place. Do I mind if he stops by? Hangs out?

My hands grip the phone as tears splash onto the screen.

I send back:

not tonight

Elijah:

Everything okay?

No, everything is not okay, and it might never be okay again. I lost Landon, and sure, that hurts, but it's nothing compared to losing Mia. Over this. Over a *guy*.

I send a simple yes, and then I run again. I'm a block from my place when I see a familiar pickup. It's Elijah, heading home.

There's no place to run. No chance to duck and hide. He spots me, and he slows. He's out of the truck in a flash, running to the sidewalk, where he catches me up in a hug. He doesn't say a word. Doesn't ask what's wrong. He sees, and he hugs me, and I collapse against him.

Elijah is here for me. He has always been here for me. And I've been . . . I've been a bitch. There's no easier way to put it. We grew older, and we grew apart, and that was on me.

When he finally asks what's happened, I shake my head and look up into his green eyes and say, "Not here. Let's . . . let's go somewhere."
"Sure. Just tell me where."

The idea comes in a heartbeat. I tell him.



I lie on my stomach, watching ripples in the lake, the wood of the raft smooth under my fingers. The moon's reflection floats along on the current. Behind me, Elijah pushes the raft with the oar, launching it from the creek into the lake.

I've told him what happened. He didn't say, "I told you so." He had every right to. He warned me against Landon from the beginning. I think the part about Mia has shocked him to silence. Now he pushes us along, and I watch the night sky shimmer on the lake as my tears slide into the water.

They're tears of grief and hurt and humiliation, but also wistful longing. I'm here, where I'd been so many times with Elijah and Mia, back in simpler times. Maybe that sounds silly—a sixteen-year-old talking about "simpler times," but that's what they felt like. Just the three of us, friends, no complications, no angst. I wish I could go back there right now. Be a kid again, floating on the current with my two best friends.

"I'm sorry," Elijah says.

I nod and don't look up. My head is over the edge, my fingers trailing in the water. He sets the oar down and kneels beside me. A pause, as if he's going to say something. Then he stretches out beside me, and I stiffen at that because . . .

The tears prickle with yet another reminder of those times past. So much simpler. Everything's gotten complicated, and the reason I stiffen is one of those, and then I'm ashamed of the impulse because Elijah is only offering comfort and support. Exactly what I need.

I look over at him, my mouth opening to say something. His face is right there, and then his lips are on mine, and damn it, *no*.

I pull back. "Eli . . ."

His jaw clenches, and he looks away. Anger pulses from him. This is

why I tensed, why things are complicated, why I've withdrawn over the last few years.

The first time Elijah kissed me, we were twelve. I told him I wasn't interested, and he cut it out, and I thought everything was fine. Then he tried again, two years later. After that, he *kept* trying.

"Eli . . .," I say, my voice softening. "No, okay?"

He looks back at me, his eyes hard emeralds. "Why not? He's messing around on you."

"So I'm going to mess around with you? One, I don't want revenge. Two, I'd never do that, because it'd be unfair to you. I'd be leading you on with a promise I don't intend to keep."

"It's not a promise," he says. "It's giving me a chance, Kylie. That's all I want. All I ever wanted."

I sit up. "A chance for what? To get to know you better? I've known you since we were three, Eli. I love you, and you are an awesome friend, but I'm just not interested in you that way."

"Why?"

I throw up my hands. "Who knows?"

"I do," he says as he rises. "It's because I'm a nice guy."

"Don't pull that—"

"You want a bad boy. Like Landon."

I sputter a laugh. "Landon is not a bad boy. At all."

"He's messing around on you. With your best friend. He's an asshole, and you know it."

"No, he's . . ." Pain stabs me. It isn't the pain of remembering Landon's betrayal. It's something else. The exchange between Landon and Mia by her pool that I told myself I didn't catch. I did, though. I heard it just fine.

"*She's my best friend,*" Mia had said. Then, "*I won't lose her, Landon. If I have to choose between you and her, it's her.*"

"*I know, and I don't want that. I wish . . . I wish I could do this without hurting her, but I keep trying to talk to her, and she won't listen.*"

I flash back to the ride home from school. To the part I skipped in my memory. Landon wanting to talk about us, telling me how much he cared about me, how much he didn't want to lose my friendship. I cut

him off because I knew what was coming. We'd been there twice before. He ended it, and I told myself he was just being moody. He wasn't. He had tried to break it off gently, and I hadn't let him.

Landon had fallen for Mia, so he had to end it with me, and I wouldn't let him.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's been vibrating for a while, and I've been ignoring it, but now I take it out to keep Elijah from saying anything more.

It's a text from a number I don't recognize. I pop it open.

Hey, it's Mia. Using mom's phone. Misplaced mine. Again. Can we talk?

I send back:

Are you sure this time?

A long pause. Then she texts:

???

I reread her message, and it slowly hits me. She just said she misplaced her phone. The phone that sent me the Snapchat message to come to her house.

She didn't send the message.

As soon as I realize that, a piece clicks into place. A piece that wouldn't fit before. I've known Mia more than half my life, and she has never done anything remotely cruel. Luring me to see her with Landon wasn't just "slightly out of character." The only explanation for it would be demonic possession. I'd realized that. I'd just been too hurt to think about it.

So who sent the message? I consider Landon only for a moment. He's not underhanded, not devious. It wouldn't occur to him.

How would someone get Mia's . . . ?

I look up at Elijah.

“You were doing a project with Mia after school,” I say.

“Yeah.”

“You know she’s always misplacing her phone. You took it. You’re the one who sent that message. You wanted me to see them together.”

I brace for him to deny it. Instead, he squares his shoulders and says, “Yes, I did. She got a message from him while we were doing our assignment. I saw it. He needed to talk to her. I swiped her phone and saw that they’d arranged to meet at her place after her parents left.”

“You lured me there, and then you drove around waiting for me to run home so you could . . . so you could . . .”

“So I could be there for you.” He straightens. “You had to know, Kylie. He’s an asshole, and Mia isn’t any better. She’s no friend of yours, and he’s sure as hell no boyfriend.”

Elijah is wrong. What I saw tonight wasn’t Mia and Landon sneaking out together. It was them falling for each other and trying to figure out what to do about it. How to handle it with me. Handle it respectfully. Yes, he kissed her, but I had a feeling it was their first, and if I knew either of them, they regretted it now.

“I’m your friend,” Elijah says, leaning toward me. “And I *should* be your boyfriend.”

“No, Eli, I’m not—”

His mouth comes to mine. I push, but this time his arms are around me, and when I fight, he doesn’t let go, just keeps kissing me. Panic ignites. I shove at him so hard that when he does let go, I topple backward, right off the raft, into the lake.

The shock of that hits me hard, my mouth opening, water rushing in. I flail, coughing and sputtering. The panic subsides, though. I’ve gotten away from Elijah, and I’m fine. I just need to catch my breath and get back on the raft.

As I dog-paddle, my heart rate slows. I swipe wet hair from my eyes and look around. Seeing the raft, I start toward it. Elijah paddles away.

“Hey!” I say, treading water. “Don’t be a jerk.”

“Don’t be a bitch.”

“What?” My voice rises. “You—”

“I’ll let you back on if you promise to give me a chance.”

“You call me a bitch and then expect me to go out with you?” I shake my head and squint around. “Forget it. I can swim to shore.”

“It’s a long way.”

“And it’s a calm lake. I’ll be fine.”

I start out. It is a long way, and I’m not sure I can swim that far. I don’t intend to, though. I just need Elijah to think I can. I take a few strokes, and he’s keeping pace alongside, just out of reach. He’s talking to me. I’m paying no attention.

I swim until he relaxes. Then I swerve for the raft. My fingers brush it. He jerks back in surprise. Then he swings the oar. I see it out of the corner of my eye, but I’m focused on holding the side of the raft, ready to heave myself onto it. It’s not as if he’ll hit—

The oar strikes the side of my head. Hits so hard that the moon explodes, lights flashing. Then everything goes dark.



I’m in the morgue hallway. My heart pounds, breath coming fast. My head throbs, and my mouth tastes of lake water.

I turn slowly. Elijah stands against the wall now, his arms crossed.

“You hit me with that oar,” I say as I walk toward him. “You didn’t mean to hurt me. You just didn’t want me getting on the raft until I agreed to your conditions. But the blow knocked me out, and when I went under, you left me there. I’m sure you thought I was fine, and I’d swim to shore, but you never looked back. You were too busy being hurt and angry to even think of me. You left me to *die*.”

He has his chin down, his gaze on the floor. I stand right in front of him. His head jerks up, as if he senses something. I see his eyes. I see grief, and I see remorse, and I don’t care.

“You killed me,” I whisper, and he shivers, arms tightening around himself.

The woman appears down the hall, waiting. I walk toward her.

“You have your answer,” she says.

“I do,” I say as that numbing sense of calm falls again. “Now what?”

“Now you can take me up on my offer. Go back to the lake, to

before your mother arrived. Forget all this. Forget what happened to you. Forget how it happened.”

I look at Elijah again, and my gut clenches.

“I loved you,” I say to him. “As a friend, yes, but I loved you, and now I never can again. Everything you were to me is ruined. All those memories . . .”

I inhale.

“Yes, then?” she says. “Go back? Forget this?”

I turn to Landon and Mia, and the pain stabs harder.

Go back. Rewind to when I climbed into Landon’s car. To that girl, bouncing along with her boyfriend. The girl whose boyfriend wanted her. The girl whose boyfriend did *not* want her best friend.

Go back to the girl who never doubted her best friend. I know this wasn’t Mia’s fault, but it still hurts. It’s still a smudge on our friendship. Not the indelible black stroke of Elijah’s betrayal, but a smudge nonetheless.

Going back would be easier, wouldn’t it? So much easier.

Then I look at Elijah again.

“He doesn’t deserve that,” I whisper.

“Hmm?” the woman says.

I don’t answer. What I mean is that Elijah doesn’t deserve that clean slate in my memory. He doesn’t deserve to go back to being the friend I still cared for, still remembered fondly.

I have no idea whether he’ll be caught. I hear my mother talking about a Peeping Tom—that must have been the case she’d been investigating. She’ll wonder, of course, whether that was my killer. Whether he graduated from peeping on girls to killing one. Maybe the police will get stuck there, searching for a stranger.

They’ll be looking for a big answer to my death. Some terrible and violent explanation, a dark force that stole me from them. Instead, the answer is small. So small and so personal. A fight. A shove. A blow. The end. My life snuffed out in what should have been no more than a night of hard but ordinary truths, one rough bump in the life of a sixteen-year-old girl.

Whether or not they catch Elijah, he knows what he did. And I

want to remember what he did. That will be his punishment. That I will remember, wherever I go from here.

As for Landon, as much as that hurts, I want to remember my mistakes there, too. I liked him as a friend, and I liked having him as a boyfriend. No, I liked having a boyfriend, and part of that had been about erecting a wall between me and Elijah. *See, I have a boyfriend now, so we can't be more than friends.* Landon deserves better. He deserves Mia, and she deserves him, and I don't know if they'll work out after this, but I wish them the best, and I will never forget them.

I walk over to the group, past my friends, to my family.

This is what I want to remember most. That I was loved. If I rewind those final hours, I erase my last memories of my family, and those are all good. I would forget Mom, laughing with me as we washed dishes, her insisting on helping before she went back to work. I'd forget Dad, buying me a milkshake and talking to me and just being Dad. And I'd forget Will bringing me frogs. My little brother—who wanted nothing to do with me these days—finding me exactly the frogs I wanted.

"I love you," I say to them, one by one, finishing with Will, leaning over to kiss the top of his head.

He looks up, startled.

"You're still a pill," I say. "But you'll outgrow that. I just wish I could be there to see it."

One last look at them all, and then I walk to the woman waiting patiently down the hall.

"Where do I go next?" I say.

"Back to the lake?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Forward. I want to keep going forward."

She puts an arm around my shoulders, and we walk down the hall as the voices fade behind us.

THE DAY I KILLED COACH DUFFY

By R.L. Stine

TYLER'S NEW GIRLFRIEND, CATHY, WAS ON THE SIDELINES WATCHING our soccer practice the afternoon Coach Duffy went berserk on him. Cathy is Tyler's first serious girlfriend, I think, and I could see how embarrassed he was, and how hot he was becoming.

His neck turned bright red. Just his neck. His face went white as flour, but his neck darkened to a deep red, almost purple. I've seen it before. Tyler has a temper. Luckily, he never turned it on me. We've been good buddies since the end of middle school, and I know how to stay on his good side.

As the coach let him have it, the two of them standing so close, Duffy actually spit in Tyler's face as he shouted at him. Tyler kept glancing over at Cathy, and each time I could see his neck darken a little more and see that pulse he has on his throat throbbing away.

Truth is, Tyler and I were playing like goofballs. We were never really serious about soccer, and the team is a joke anyway. We've only got one good player, LeMarr Oates, and he was sitting out practice with a sprained ankle. Or so he said. Maybe he just got tired of having to play with so many losers.

So Duffy was right about us today. Tyler and I had a secret contest to see how many balls we could let go through our legs. It was actually a riot, because we were really good at it.

I don't know if the coach had even noticed our little joke, until Tyler and I started to laugh like hyenas and fall on the grass on our stomachs, pounding the ground with our fists.

That's when Duffy called the two of us over to talk, and I knew it wasn't going to be a pep session. Go, team.

He turned to me first. I sucked in a deep breath, kept my eyes to the ground, and prepared to get slaughtered.

But he just shook his head, like he was sad, and said, “That’s about what I expect from you, Doug.”

Then he turned to Tyler and went crazy on him. He shouted and spit and said Tyler used to be a real athlete till he got mixed up with me. Then he called Tyler a waste of his time and said he was going to send him to the girls’ team because he played like a little girlie.

That’s what Duffy said. No lie. He said Tyler played like a little girlie. Everyone knows you’re not supposed to say things like that anymore. Didn’t Duffy have any sensitivity training at all?

Well, Tyler’s neck was red and his bottom lip was trembling. He kept curling and uncurling his fists down at his sides. And the way he stuck out his chest and stood his ground, only inches in front of Duffy, made my stomach tighten in dread. And I silently prayed that he wouldn’t punch out the coach, because I knew that could be the end of Tyler at Johnson Falls High.

I glanced over at the sidelines and saw Cathy covering her face with both hands. Was she embarrassed for Tyler? Or was it that she just couldn’t stand the coach abusing him like that?

I couldn’t tell. But suddenly, she lowered her hands, and I saw her unhappy expression. And I watched her turn and run away, her blond hair flying behind her like a kite’s tail. She ran hard, taking long strides across the grass and not looking back once.

When I turned back, Duffy was saying something about Tyler’s whole family being worthless, especially his older brother, Donny, who’s had a lot of troubles since he dropped out of school.

I knew that was going too far. And I almost cried out as Tyler moved forward, his whole face blazing now, on fire, his eyes wide, eyebrows arched, features tight with anger.

Please hold back. Please don’t hit Duffy.

Tyler gave a sudden lurch—and he and the coach bumped chests. Like some kind of manly thing. They bumped chests. And Tyler didn’t back up. He stood his ground, challenging the coach.

Duffy was the one to back up. “That’s it, Tyler. You’re out of here. You’re gone.” He kept motioning with both hands for Tyler to shoo.

“Don’t come back. If you do, I’ll forget I’m a teacher and I’ll grind you into hamburger.”

He really said that. Said he’d grind Tyler to hamburger.

I knew Duffy could lose his job for saying stuff like that. But I didn’t want to be the one to report him, and I knew it wasn’t Tyler’s style, either.

The rest of the guys had backed off to the sidelines and had their heads down, like they were pretending they weren’t there and hadn’t heard any of it. Wimps, but that’s no shock.

Tyler didn’t hesitate. He spun around and started to lope away, trotting across the grass as if he were happy and carefree, not showing anything on his face.

I stood there, my stomach in a knot, cold sweat on the back of my neck. I didn’t know what to do. Should I follow after Tyler? Should I stay for the rest of the practice?

Duffy settled the problem for me. He shouted that practice was over and we should all get out of his sight. He was trying to act tough, like the fight with Tyler didn’t affect him at all. Like it only made him angry.

But I could see his lips twitching, and he was breathing hard, his chest pumping up and down. So I knew Tyler had given back a little of what Duffy had given him.

Too bad. It had all just started as a joke between Tyler and me. But Duffy didn’t seem to have any sense of humor.

I texted Tyler as soon as I got home, but no reply.

I kept thinking about Cathy. Was she embarrassed for Tyler? Or was she just embarrassed?

I mean, they had only been together a few weeks, so I didn’t know her well at all and had no idea of how she’d react. She probably had no idea about Tyler’s hot temper and how he never could back away from a fight.

I guessed she learned that today.

And then after dinner, my phone buzzed and it was Tyler. He sounded weird. “Doug, get over here, okay? Can you come right away? I need you here.”

“Huh? What’s up, Tyler? What’s your problem?” I said.
“I just killed Coach Duffy,” he replied in a harsh whisper.



I kind of froze. A hot electric current ran down my back. My brain stopped thinking for a moment.

“Did you hear me? I just killed Duffy,” Tyler repeated. “Get over here. I need help. I don’t know what to do. Can you *hurry*?”

Of course, I had a whole bunch of questions I wanted to ask him. But I choked them back and said I’d be right over. I told my parents I had a soccer meeting at school—what a joke!—jumped into the car and drove to Tyler’s house.

My brain was spinning all the way there. My thoughts didn’t make any sense at all. I don’t even think they were thoughts. Just little bursts of fright and disbelief.

I stopped halfway up Tyler’s driveway. My headlights poured into the garage like spotlights. The garage door was all the way up, and I saw Tyler standing there at the side, and I saw shoes on the concrete floor. Shoes and legs. And I knew it was true without even getting out of the car. Tyler had killed Coach Duffy.

I ran up to Tyler, my heart suddenly in my throat. Tyler stood stiffly, not loose like usual, as if all his muscles had tightened. “What happened?”

“I killed him,” Tyler said in a choked whisper. He motioned to the body sprawled on its back.

Yes. Coach Duffy. Graying hair falling over his forehead. Head tilted to one side. Mouth open in an expression of surprise. One hand was trapped under his body. His legs were spread as if he were sleeping.

“How? Why?” My voice cracked. “I . . . I don’t believe it, Tyler. Tell me—”

Tyler let out a long whoosh of air. He shook his head. “I think he came to apologize. He just came walking up the driveway all unexpected.”

“Where were you? In the garage?”

He nodded. “Yeah. My parents asked me to dig holes for some tomato plants in the back. I’d just finished, and there he was.”

“And he started to apologize?” I asked.

“I didn’t give him a chance,” Tyler said, gazing down at the body. “I’d just gotten off the phone with Cathy. She broke up with me.”

“She *what*?”

“Broke up with me. She said she didn’t know I was such a jerk, and it just wasn’t going to work out with the two of us.”

“Oh, wow,” I muttered.

“I tried to discuss it with her, but she said to stop whining, and she hung up on me.” Tyler took a deep breath. It was a cool evening, but his forehead was drenched in sweat. “I’d just gotten off the phone, feeling really bad. You know. It sucks. I still had the garden shovel in my hand, and there was Duffy walking into the garage.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Nothing. I wrapped my hands around the handle and slammed the shovel into the back of his head as hard as I could. He made this *unnnnh* sound and his eyes rolled up in his head. And he went down. Dead. I dropped the shovel and bent down beside him and saw he was dead.”

“And then you called me?” I said.

He turned to me and his eyes were watery and kind of pleading. “I don’t know what to do, Doug. So I need your help. Maybe—”

“Where are your parents?” I said. “Do they know you’re in the garage?”

“They’re not home,” he said. “They’re in Cleveland. My cousin is sick there. I’m all alone here.”

I swallowed. My mouth was suddenly as dry as cotton. My heart was pounding too hard for me to think straight.

“What can we do?” Tyler asked in a high, shrill voice. “Think, Doug. We’ve got to do something. My life . . . My whole life could be over.”

“First thing,” I said, “we’ve got to close the garage door. Anyone who passes by can see the body.”

Tyler shook his head. “No. Not a good idea. The batteries are weak. If we close the door, it may not open again. We could be trapped in here. We—”

“We’ll get out,” I said. “Close the door.”

Shaking his head, he crossed to the wall and pushed the garage door control. We both stared as the door slid down with a loud hum. A hard *thud* as it slammed shut.

“Now what?” Tyler demanded. “I can’t think, Doug. How can you think when you’re totally messed up?”

I put a hand on his shoulder. It was trembling. “We’ll think together,” I said. I gazed at the body. The open mouth, the wide-open eyes.

“Do you think anyone knew Duffy was coming here?” I asked.

Tyler shrugged. “Beats me. You know, his wife died last year. So he didn’t have her to tell.”

“Maybe no one knows he was here,” I said, my mind spinning. “So we could move him.”

“Move him?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Stuff him into the back of my car. Take him someplace. Maybe the old rock quarry in the canal basin.”

“No one has to know he was here,” Tyler repeated.

“Yeah. And look. There’s no blood. We take him away. No trace of him. No one will have a clue how he got there. How he got hit in the head.”

“Maybe you’re right, Doug,” Tyler said. He started to look a little more like himself. “Maybe you’re a genius. We take him away, and there’s no trace of him here. Yes. We can do it. I know we can do it.”

He raised a fist and we bumped knuckles. “You’re a real friend, Doug. Seriously.”

That’s when Coach Duffy sat up.

Tyler and I both screamed. I staggered back against the garden tools shelf.

Duffy uttered a long groan and rubbed the back of his head. He shut his eyes and twisted his head as if seeing if it could swivel on his neck.

Tyler took a step back, his eyes bulging, mouth hanging open.

“Nooooo,” I moaned. “Nooooo.”

With another groan, Duffy pulled himself to his feet. He grabbed onto the wall with one hand, catching his balance. He rubbed the back of his head again and winced in pain.

Then he turned his attention to Tyler and me.

“I’ve been listening,” he said. His voice was clogged. He coughed and cleared his throat loudly. “Listening to you both talk about me.”

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

“Coach Duffy—” Tyler started. But no words followed.

“You wanted to carry me away,” Duffy said, talking to both of us. “Hide me at the quarry. Was that your plan?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. His eyes burned into mine. “I believe that was *your* plan, right, Doug?”

“I . . . uh . . .” I guess I was in total shock. I couldn’t put two words together.

“So you thought you killed me, Tyler?” Duffy said, no expression on his face, his eyes dull, his mouth set, hardly moving as he talked. “You were about as good at killing as you are in soccer.”

“I’m sorry,” Tyler choked out. “I . . . I can’t explain it. I just lost it and—”

“You don’t have to explain it,” Duffy said, twisting his head on his neck again. “You’re worthless. A worthless person.”

“I realize—” Tyler started. But he stopped as Duffy bent and picked up the big shovel. Duffy lowered the blade to the garage floor and leaned on the handle.

“I took a hard blow to the head,” Duffy said softly, so softly I could barely hear him. “So I may not be in my right mind. But—”

“We can take you to the hospital,” I said, finally finding my voice. “Let me drive you—”

“I may not be in my right mind,” Duffy repeated. “But I think in order to settle this and make it even . . . one of you has to die now.”

I gasped.

Tyler uttered a sharp cry. “No—!”

The coach raised the heavy steel shovel in front of him. “We want to settle this right,” he said calmly, his voice thin, still just above a whisper. “Even if I’m not in my right mind. I took a blow. Now one of you has to take one. It’s only right.”

I froze. My knees felt about to fold. I glimpsed Tyler. I saw where his eyes were. On the garage door control against the wall.

I nodded, signaling Tyler to go for it. I knew we had to get out of there. I took a step toward the coach to distract him. "Let's talk about this," I said.

Tyler dove for the door control and pushed the button hard.

The door made a squeaking sound. And didn't budge.

Tyler pushed it again.

Silence.

"I knew it," Tyler said. "The batteries."

Duffy had a strange grin on his face, sort of lopsided, as if he were drunk. "Looks like it's just the three of us in here," he said. "Now, I'm probably a little crazy from the blow I took. But which one of you should die?"

Tyler and I exchanged a terrified glance. Neither of us spoke.

Duffy raised the shovel. "It doesn't seem fair that you *both* should die," he said. "Just one death will settle the score." He waved the shovel in front of him. "Which one? Which one should die? Come on. Let's have an answer. I'm dizzy and I'm in pain. I don't have all night."

"Please, let's stop this," I said. "No one has to die. Let's get out of here. We can get you to the hospital."

"So, it's you who should die, Doug?" he said, ignoring my words.

"No!" I cried. "Please—no." I pointed to Tyler. "He's the one who hit you. I wasn't even here. Why should it be me?"

"It was *Doug's* idea to take you to the quarry," Tyler said. "It wasn't my idea."

The strange smile lingered on Duffy's face. "So I guess you think Doug should die? Is that right, Tyler?"

"I . . . I . . ." Tyler couldn't answer.

"Well, guess what, Tyler?" Duffy said. "I choose you."

"No, wait—" Tyler tried to back away but there was only wall behind him.

"I choose you to die," Duffy repeated. "And that will settle it between us, won't it."

"Coach, you're not right," I said. "Don't do this. Please. You're not thinking right."

"I think I am," Duffy said. "Am I the only one here who believes in justice?"

He handed the shovel to me. “Go ahead, Doug. Get a good grip. And swing it at the back of Tyler’s head. Give it a hard swing.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You want *me* to do it?”

Duffy nodded. “It’s only fair. If you don’t do it, I’ll have to kill you both. That’s the way it has to be.”

Without speaking, Tyler and I both made a run for the garage door. Maybe we could pull it open by hand. But Duffy got there first. He stuck out both arms, blocking our way.

Now Tyler had his back turned to me and I held the shovel.

“Go ahead,” Duffy urged me. “Stop wasting time. Raise the shovel, Doug. I don’t want to kill you both, but I will. Kill Tyler, Doug. Now. Or else you both go.”

How could I do this? My whole body was shuddering. My hands were cold and wet and trembling so hard, I could barely hold the shovel handle.

“Hurry!” Duffy screamed. “Hurry. Swing now. Kill him, Doug. Then you and I will walk away from here, everything even.”

Walk away? Walk away from killing Tyler?

“We’ll take him to the quarry,” Duffy said. “No one will ever know.”

He took a step toward me, raising both hands. I shuddered again. Was he going to strangle me if I didn’t kill Tyler?

I raised the shovel. It suddenly weighed a thousand pounds.

“Turn around!” I shouted at Tyler. “Turn around—now!”

“You’re not doing this,” Tyler said.

“I have no choice!” I cried.

Tyler started to turn away from me.

I gripped the long handle tightly. I raised the blade and pulled the shovel back.

And I swung it as hard as I could—into Coach Duffy’s face.

I heard bone break. I saw bright red blood come gushing up like a fountain.

Duffy didn’t utter a sound. His knees bent and he went down hard, cracking his head on the concrete floor. He didn’t move.

Tyler dropped to his knees beside Duffy. He held a hand over the coach’s chest. Then he put a finger under Duffy’s nose.

“You killed him,” Tyler said. “You killed Coach Duffy.”

“I had to,” I said. “He didn’t give me a choice, did he?”

“You killed Coach Duffy,” Tyler repeated. He raised his phone. “I got it on video.”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you see my phone? I got the whole thing on video,” Tyler said. He climbed to his feet, raised the phone, and began punching numbers.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I stammered, struggling to catch my breath.

“Phoning 911,” Tyler said. “I have to report it.”

“What?” I cried. “*What* are you doing?”

“I have to call the police,” Tyler said. “You killed Coach Duffy. I can’t let this ruin my whole life. It isn’t right. I have it on video. I’m innocent. You killed him, Doug.”

“But—but, listen—” I struggled to speak.

“Hello, 911?” Tyler said into the phone. “I need to report a murder.”