

GASLIT

MEGAN
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HARPER FIRE

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*For my kids,
because I will always believe in you*

1

December 31

People say pain can't kill you.

I think they're lying. I might actually die tonight. Or at least be forced to stop living.

But I've worked too hard taming my hair into curls and meticulously perfecting my eyeliner for a migraine to keep me home. My fingers slip on the dress zipper, but I'm fine.

Tonight will be spent with the one friend who hasn't deserted me. We'll meet at her house and drive with her parents through the city. At the dock along Lake Michigan, we'll board the private yacht for her mom's work party. Waiters will serve fancy hors d'oeuvres we don't know the names of, while we drink mocktails and laugh at the old men on the dance floor. Because after weeks of planning, that's how people who are fine get to ring in the new year.

I can still go. It's not that bad.

I can ignore it. Hide it.

The heartbeat in my brain.

The slow, throbbing pulse. The methodical punch to the right side of my skull like a metronome.

Mom knocks on my door before poking her head in. ‘Ella, aren’t you leaving to—’

She doesn’t have to ask why my eyes fight to stay open against the light, why my jaw clenches in pain.

She knows. She doesn’t even look surprised.

‘Come on, let’s get into bed.’ She gently drapes an arm around my shoulders.

I shrug her off and grab my stilettos, the new ones I bought on sale to match the dress. They’ll pinch my toes and kill the balls of my feet with their four-inch heels. I’ll regret wearing them instantly and feel the pain well into tomorrow, and it will be worth it.

I shove my foot inside and fumble with the straps. ‘I’m fine.’ My voice is strong, well-practised at deceiving.

One shoe secured.

‘I’ll get your meds.’

I wince at her volume, which isn’t loud but feels like a jackhammer. ‘I already did. Ten minutes ago,’ I bite out, shoving the left strap against the buckle and failing to get it through. ‘I don’t have time for this.’

I need to get to Sierra’s house in fifteen minutes. After missing her Christmas party and too many dance lessons, and spending so many hours in a doctor’s office or isolated in this room, I deserve this. I will get there.

Mom takes a deep breath and flips off the lights.

I hate the relief it brings, hate the confirmation that she’s right and this migraine is settling in fast and strong.

No. I'm fine. I'm going. Sierra and I will stay up way too late and—

'I'll get the ice pack.'

'I'm not staying.' My voice cracks like a traitor. 'It's not bad. I can still go.' Please. *Please*. My hands quiver in the dark, and I can barely see, but turning on the lights will hurt more. 'Sierra is counting on me and once I get this stupid strap in – ugh!' I rip off the shoe and hurl it across the room, wishing it would break the mirror above my dresser, hoping the crash will wipe away the pain creeping in, or at least distract me from it.

But it hits the wall with a heavy thunk and falls to the floor, doesn't even have the decency to leave a mark. No visible evidence of its crime.

Mom huddles beside me again, and I repeat, 'I'm fine, I'm fine.'

But this time I don't push her away. Like a puppet whose strings are now properly attached, I let her guide me over the accessories littering my floor: my headband with pink feathers and the year in glittery numbers on top, my sunglasses with the matching lenses. I don't resist when she seats me on the bed, removes my shoe like a broken Cinderella who won't be watching the clock strike midnight. I don't fight her when I lie down and she pulls a blanket over me like a child.

Because I desperately want my words to be true.

Two hours later, I pick at the sparkly pink fabric against my pale thighs, trying to imagine some other event on my calendar that might require this many sequins. Not likely.

‘It’s okay you couldn’t make it,’ Sierra says on the video call, her Kentucky accent coating the words with warm sugar, making them even sweeter.

I fold the blanket on my bed and return it to the closet before grabbing the rest of my care kit: ice pack, washcloth, eye mask, meds and water bottle.

Of course the migraine would subside in enough time that I could have enjoyed the party, but I missed my ride to get there.

When the migraines come, they creep in like a fog, a dull haze at the edges, sometimes blurring patches of my sight before the pain sets in. When it does, I’m not able to do anything except lie in my bed, fight off nausea, and pray for sleep to rescue me from the throbbing of my brain.

Thanks to my migraine tonight, Sierra sits on the boat alone, surrounded by more luxury than I imagined. The private airline knows how to throw a party.

‘It’s not okay. Aside from missing an epic New Year’s with my best friend on a dinner cruise, now you have to endure your mom’s work party as the only one on board who isn’t allowed to drink.’

She stirs her blue mocktail with a toothpick, careful to avoid the cherry stuck on the end. ‘If you left now, you could still get on the boat before we leave the dock.’

‘My first experience driving in Chicago probably shouldn’t be on one of the biggest party nights of the year.’ Her hopes don’t help erase my disappointment.

‘Fair. Would your parents bring you?’

‘Doubt it.’ Sierra knows about my mom’s car accident seven years ago. She almost died and spent months in recovery and has been nervous about night driving ever since. ‘Besides.’ I check the time. ‘Doesn’t the boat leave in like thirty minutes?’

‘You know I would throw myself in that lake as an anchor if it meant getting you on board.’

‘Thanks, but save the polar plunge for tomorrow.’

‘Are you out of your mind? I am not submerging this head in freezing water simply to feel a thrill.’ She scrunches her twist-outs, pouting, but then drops her hand and turns serious. ‘Better to miss tonight than our recital in two weeks.’

‘Definitely.’

Like I get a choice. My migraines could take dance from me too, including the recital we’ve been preparing for the past six months.

‘You sure you’re okay?’

I smile too bright. ‘Absolutely. I’ll be fine. Look, Oreos.’ I lift the package I keep at the bottom of my care kit, a reward for making it through another episode.

‘Hear, hear.’ She raises her glass. ‘To not controlling the disruptions in our lives, but controlling our reactions to them.’

The still-dim light of my room hopefully hides my cringe at her dad’s therapist-speak sneaking in again. One thing’s for sure: next time I’ll fight harder. These migraines will not tear apart my life, no matter how hard they try. I toss the once-cool washcloth into the hamper.

Sierra’s mom mumbles something in the background and

Sierra sighs. ‘I have to go. Apparently there’s some other pilot I *have* to meet.’

‘Go have as much fun as you can.’

‘Won’t be much without you!’ She waves, her brightly painted nails practically glowing.

Mom hovers in the doorway as I hang up.

‘I thought I heard you talking. Feeling better?’ She runs a hand along her dark, slicked-back ponytail, swiping for stray hairs that aren’t there.

‘Yeah.’ I pull a shirt off the floor before she has a chance to point it out. I could call some of my other friends – if I can still call them that – to crash their New Year’s Eve plans. I haven’t spoken to them much since winter break started. Kayla claims I’ve ‘pulled away’.

She’s not wrong. But she’s also not brave enough to ask why. Or doesn’t care.

That’s another reason I hate cancelling tonight. I don’t want Sierra to think I’ll always bail, that I’m not worth inviting in the first place. She lives in another county, so seeing each other outside of dance doesn’t happen very often, but since my school friends already ditched me, I won’t have anyone left if Sierra does the same.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ Mom says, ‘about your next doctor’s appointment.’

My phone buzzes, a perfect distraction. ‘Aunt Julie’s calling.’

Mom ignores the interruption while my phone continues vibrating in my hand like a timer reminding me this conversation

could be over. ‘Well, it’s on the third at ten in the morning, which means you—’

‘Have to miss dance.’ We say it in unison, except Mom says it with hesitation and I say it with irritation. Of course the appointment can’t be rescheduled.

‘I know you hate that, but—’

‘I’ll let Madame Leheller know.’ I answer the video call. ‘Hi, Aunt Julie.’ Her wild curls and infectious smile take up nearly the whole screen, but a little head manages to peep up in the corner, straining against a seat belt in the back seat of the car. ‘Joey!’

He holds a hand up to his mouth like a radio and says, ‘*Crrrr*, this is your captain speaking. Please keep your hands inside the plane at all times.’ Then he screams and waves like one of those inflatables outside a used car dealership.

‘Happy New Year’s Eve.’ I laugh, pretending to get six-year-old humour.

‘That’s actually why I’m calling,’ Julie says, biting her lip. We have the same blue eyes, the ones I got from my dad, Julie’s brother. ‘We’ve had a change of plans.’

‘Oh?’

Mom sighs in the background, like she expects last-minute changes from her sister-in-law. Honestly, the fact that Julie has plans feel like a feat given her usual live-in-the-moment lifestyle.

‘Joey and I were headed to Blake’s for the evening. You remember him, right?’

Julie’s latest boyfriend. They’ve been together longer than

most of her relationships – if you can call them all that. But Blake stands out because he's one of the few who's stuck around long enough to meet the family, and he actually has a stable job.

‘Yeah, he was nice!’ He let Joey be his partner when we played euchre the day after Thanksgiving, and never got mad at his mistakes – though I’m pretty sure he bet money on me and Joey’s older brother Chris losing the next game . . .

‘Well, he just called to cancel because he’s not feeling well, thinks it’s that bug going around. He sounded miserable on the phone, and I’d like to check in on him or bring him some chicken soup or something.’ She notices a smear of purple paint on her forearm and scratches at it. ‘But I’d hate to expose Joey to that or ruin his New Year’s – he’s been looking forward to staying up till midnight for the first time – and Chris drove to his friends’ right after we left. I’m picking up a few things for tonight before heading to Blake’s, but I don’t want to call Chris home and—’

‘Julie. I’d love to come babysit Joey.’

‘Wahoo!’ Joey squeals in the back seat. At the same time Mom says, ‘Ella . . .’

Julie strains to be heard over Joey but hardly stifles her laughter at his excitement. ‘I hate to ask or have you cancel plans—’

‘Nope.’ I pull my feathered headband from the floor and pop on the pink sunglasses. ‘I’m all dressed up with nowhere else to go!’

‘Ella—’ Mom says again.

‘Ooh, you do look divine! Can’t wait to see it in person. We’ll finish up at the store and then meet you at our house in say, forty minutes?’

‘I’ll be there!’ I hang up to the tune of Joey singing ‘Ella Bella is the bestest!’ to his own little melody.

Mom doesn’t hesitate. ‘Are you sure you’re up for this?’

The question grates me. ‘The pain is gone.’ Mostly. Yeah, there’s still pressure behind my right eye, but since I didn’t have any say in cancelling on Sierra, choosing to watch Joey feels like regaining my balance after a series of pirouettes. ‘Chris shouldn’t have to miss out on his plans to babysit his brother when I’m already missing out on mine. I want to do this.’

Aside from that, I want to help Julie after everything she’s done for me. She moved in with my family before Joey was born to help after my mom’s accident. Mom still feels guilty for the months she missed out on ‘being a mom’, as she puts it, while recovering.

Julie was never one for housework, but she knew what my older brother Sean and I needed: she let us have ice cream for breakfast while Dad drove Mom to physical therapy. She played The Floor Is Lava and built forts with us when Mom was resting in the afternoon. And late at night when I was feeling bad for being the reason Mom was on the road that terrible night, Julie hugged me and declared, ‘You’re stronger than you know.’

Mom shifts her weight. ‘It’s already dark out.’

‘I’ve driven to their house about a million times. I’ll call if I need anything.’

She wrings her hands like she's about to dial Dad for reinforcements.

'Don't I look better?' I shimmy so my sequins sparkle, and she can't help but laugh.

A crack in her defences.

'You're not actually going to let Joey stay up till midnight, are you?'

'It's whatever Aunt Julie says.' So there will be sparkling grape juice, confetti, noisemakers and no bedtime.

'Those country roads get so dark . . .'

I straighten my spine. 'I'll keep my brights on.'

'And call me when you get there.'

Is she saying what I think she's saying? No sudden movements.
'Of course.'

'And Ella?'

'Yes?'

She opens her arms for a hug. 'Have fun with him.'

I give her a squeeze. 'It'll be a night we never forget.'

2

December 31

I strain to see beyond the glow of my headlights. Mom was right: it is very, very dark.

Julie, Chris and Joey live out on a practically dirt road. The houses are spaced so far apart that all the mailboxes have to be on one side of the road, and there are no streetlights. Towering pine trees and dense woods hide most of the houses, so unless you know where to turn, you'd miss them completely.

My cousins' place was probably nice fifty years ago, with the sprawling yard that made us feel like we were in our own little world when Chris and I screamed down the Slip 'N Slide every summer. The house itself has been added to several times, so it's a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. The uneven floors and bedrooms aren't quite square and are definitely not equal in size, but somehow every time I'm there I . . . fit.

When I finally pull into their driveway, the front door is open but no lights are on. Weird. I expect to see Joey racing out to greet me, but no silhouette appears in the doorway. All is still, like a forgotten painting.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end as I put the car in park and hop out.

I'm sure everything's okay. They must be inside playing a game or Joey forgot to close the door.

But then why is it so dark?

I quicken my pace.

Aunt Julie wouldn't leave before I got here, right? Certainly not without closing the front door.

Unless someone broke in. And the intruder's inside.

No. That's ridiculous. Who would be all the way out here in the middle of nowhere? I'll walk inside, and Joey will jump out to scare me before he collapses in a fit of giggles, and all will be fine.

Except I'm almost to the door and there are no voices or music or any sound at all.

I run up the steps.

'Aunt Julie?' I call, crossing the threshold, the open door inviting me in. My hands fumble for the lights, but the switch isn't where I expect. Before I can check the other side of the door, I'm nearly knocked back by a noxious odour dripping through the air.

Something's wrong.

The sulfuric stench of rotten eggs presses against my throat, choking me. I don't want to inhale another breath. I know that smell.

Gas.

The house reeks of it.

Before I can retreat to the fresh air, the pale moonlight streams through the window, and across the room, I see them.

Two crumpled bodies are tangled in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. Still. Completely still.

‘Chris! Joey!’ I race to their sides.

They’re splayed out on the floor. Neither one of them is moving, their eyes closed.

‘Joey!’ I shout again, flipping him over. The little boy’s eyes don’t open. His wavy brown hair flops to the side just like his arm. ‘Joey, wake up!’ I shake him, but no response.

His head lolls to the side. My first cry escapes. We were supposed to play Connect Four tonight. I was supposed to let him win, and he was supposed to laugh until he slid off his chair.

‘Joey!’

I shake Chris and nothing. I thought he wasn’t going to be home tonight.

‘Chris! Wake up!’ No response.

Oh no, oh no. Oh, God, help them. I have to help them.

‘Aunt Julie!’ I screech, her name scratching at my throat on its way out.

Where is she? Is she home?

But then another smell reaches my nostrils. Rancid. Vomit. There’s a mess next to Chris on the wooden floor.

Oh no.

I have to get them out of here.

‘Aunt Julie!’ I scream again, my voice hoarse, and I almost gag on the smell. ‘Help!’

I spin, as if she'll jump out from her bedroom down the hall, as if she hadn't noticed the smell or heard them fall and will appear to make it better like she always does.

Instead, I see her by her bedroom. Most of her body remains hidden behind the doorframe, but her hand is extended, delicate fingers curled up from the worn carpet, as if she's reaching out for help.

'Oh, God. Help me. Help me.' I call it into the silence, a prayer for any kind of miracle to appear.

But there's only me. Me and the three of them, quiet and still.

'Hello? Are you still there?' A muffled voice breaks through the hush. Chris's phone sits a few feet away, like he dropped it on his fall to the floor. 'Hello?' a voice calls through the phone again. 'This is an emergency operator. Is everyone all right?'

I snatch the phone off the floor. 'Help, please send help. My cousins. They're unconscious.'

'There was a young man who called, and said he smelled gas in the house—'

'He's here. I think there's a gas leak and—'

'Miss, I need you to stay calm and exit the house. Get out of there.'

'Yes, yes. Okay, get out.'

But not without my cousins.

I scoop Joey off the floor with ease, his too-short Spider-Man pyjama pants clinging to his limp legs. I sway on my feet, nearly losing my balance. My head is light, from panic or lack

of oxygen or a rush of adrenaline, I don't know. I tug on Chris's wrist, hoping to pull him along the floor. 'Come on,' I cry.

'Are you out of the house, miss?'

'Almost,' I grunt, straining against Chris's weight, pressing the soles of my feet into the floor while I try not to drop Joey.

Chris is too heavy. *I'll be back*, I silently promise, Joey slipping in my arms. He has to be okay. He has to.

'Miss? What's your location? We're sending help.'

By the time I recite the street address, I've reached the threshold, cradling Joey. Outside, I swallow great gulps of fresh oxygen. My chest feels tight and my head hurts. Is it a regular pain or from the gas?

'Joey,' I yell again, laying him on the partially frozen grass. 'Joey!' As still as a corpse. 'He's not breathing.'

'Help is on the way,' the woman on the phone says. 'Stay where you are.'

But Chris is still inside. I can see him. And Julie. I know she's down the hall. I can get them out. I won't let them die.

I race back inside and reach Chris first, wedging the phone between my ear and shoulder, trying and failing to drag Chris by the wrists. 'My cousin,' I grunt, heaving him backwards, but he barely moves. 'I have to get him out.'

He's too heavy. I can't move him on my own.

'Miss, you need to exit the house immediately. Do not turn on any lights or appliances. A single spark could ignite the house.'

'I can get him.' I shift to pull from under his armpits.

I stumble. The phone clatters to the ground.

‘Miss?’ the distanced responder calls.

My shoulder hits the wall. I’m dizzy. Lightheaded.

‘I’m here.’ I snatch the phone and give Chris a mighty heave, dragging him as far as I can. I’m almost to the door. Almost outside. A breeze from the cold winter night wafts in, bringing fresh oxygen into the space.

‘Miss, you need to leave the house immediately. Paramedics are on their way.’

‘No. Time,’ I huff.

I step down, careful not to trip, dragging Chris to the grass, next to Joey’s still body.

Please let them be okay. Let Julie be okay. Let Chris be okay. Let Joey be okay. The lump in my throat makes it hard to breathe even with the clean air pouring into my lungs. I vomit on the grass between Chris and Joey.

‘First responders are on their way. Are you safe?’

‘I – yes, but my aunt.’ The last word comes out as a screech. I step away from Chris, wiping my mouth on my sleeve and facing the door.

Julie.

I need to save her.

She needs me.

‘My aunt—’ I repeat, stumbling towards the door, picturing her still lying on the carpet, angelic hand extended, ready for me to drag her to safety too.

‘Do not enter the home again.’

‘I can get her. I can.’ The smell hits me before I reach the doorframe.

‘Miss. Gas leaks are extremely dangerous. Wait for help. Do not enter that house. Get away from the area.’

Sirens wail in the distance. Someone’s standing across the road, a dark figure. I want to call out for help, but the world shifts. The figure flees. I fall to my knees, stomach rolling, head pounding. The rescue team is coming. They’ll get here in time.

Chris and Joey have to wake up. The phone drops from my hands.

Julie will be rescued. My vision blurs.

I did everything I could.

Help is on the way.