

RECOVERY JOURNAL

ENTRY 1

There's no question things could have gone differently out there in those woods. One zipper more tightly zipped, one foot more carefully placed on a rotting wood plank, and I might not be here today. I might be roaming free instead of sitting locked up in this hole, sucking my every meal through a straw, staring at a padded wall.

There might not have been so much bloodshed. Or there might have been even more death. There's no telling how everything might have turned on a chance.

What could never have been different was the why. That is the only nonvariable. And yet, that is Doctor Pea Brain's favorite ask Every. Single. Time he walks into my tiny square cell.

"Have you thought about why?"

"Any more insights as to why?"

"I can't help you unless you tell me why."

Well, here's the thing, Doc. If you're so entirely brain-dead that you can't figure it out for yourself, then I can't help you. Because the why is obvious, you potato-headed, Afrin-snorting idiot. The why is all there is.

What I can tell you is this: They deserved to die. Every last one of them. And if you can't see that . . . well, then no one can help you.

ONE

Callie Valasquez wasn't ready to die.

Not here. Not now. Not like this. Not standing in the middle of the pitch-black forest clutching a roll of toilet paper. No. That just seemed wrong. She was only sixteen.

But it was going to happen. Especially if that thing—that snorting, breathing, hulking thing—managed to pick up her scent.

Callie stood perfectly still. She tried as hard as she could to keep her breath shallow, but the terror gripping her heart kept making her want to suck in air, to cough. Her knees quaked and her stomach twisted itself into horrible, ever-tightening knots.

Why had she used that strawberry shampoo this morning? The sugary scent wafted from her thick, dark, meticulously straightened hair. Or could the thing out there smell her coconut body wash? Or maybe the chemical odor of the olive-green nail polish she'd applied to her toes in the kitchen after breakfast, thinking it was oh so hiking-appropriate? Callie looked down at her bare, throbbing toes in her new Teva flip-flops.

Maybe it was her feet. They'd been pretty rank when she'd peeled off her sweaty socks and carefully applied first aid cream and Band-Aids to her lovely new blisters. Oh, God. Could it smell her feet?

Another snort. This one even closer than the last. She could feel the thing's presence just behind her like a pulsating warmth. It

was so large it radiated heat. She imagined a huge brown bear with a snout as wide as her father's hand. A wild boar, awful fangs glinting in the moonlight. A mountain lion, crouched low and taut, primed for the kill. Her instincts told her to run, but her fear kept her frozen. That and some vague notion from a movie she'd once seen as a kid that the best policy in this situation was not to draw attention. Bears couldn't see you unless you moved. Or was that dinosaurs?

What was she even doing here? Was being part of the popular crowd in the tiny upstate town of Mission Hills, New York, really so important to her that she had to risk her life? Just because she had some insane need to prove that she was no longer the nerd she'd been back in Chicago, now she was going to die?

The moment Lissa Barton and Penelope Grange had noticed her in the cafeteria that second week of school, when Callie had been the shy new girl, she'd latched on to them like a life raft in a storm. And that moment had led directly to this one.

Callie had never been camping in her life. Had never felt the *need* to go camping. But this was apparently what people did for fun in upstate New York—at least, what her new friends did for fun—so here she was, having loads and loads of fun.

When her boyfriend, Jeremy Higgins—yes, Callie had a boyfriend now, another upside to being newly popular—had picked her up this morning, she'd been so nervous she started up a kind of mantra—*four nights, four nights, four nights*. That was all she had to get through.

Yet here she was, evening one, about to get eaten alive.

She vaguely wondered if the thing would maul her friends after it was done with her.

“Hey, Callie!” Jeremy shouted from their campsite, which was

probably forty yards from where she was standing. “Are you okay out there?”

There was a surprised snort and, suddenly, the thing took off into the woods. Callie whipped around in the direction of snapping twigs and crunching leaves, but saw nothing. Just some low, weak branches crushed in the underbrush nearby. She heaved a breath, bent at the waist, and pressed her hand to her heart.

“You’re okay,” she whispered to herself, tears squeezing from her eyes. “You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay.”

She was going to live. *Four nights*. By Sunday, she’d be back in her dad’s car and they’d be driving to the airport to pick up her mom after her summer in São Paulo. Then, next week, she and her mom would go to New York City for a back-to-school shopping trip. Callie was going to live to see her mother again. To finish writing at least one of the ten short stories she’d started since June. To read the rest of the *Black Inferno* series and finish painting her new bedroom now that she’d finally settled on that pretty aqua after three misguided attempts in the purple family. Everything was going to be fine.

Except.

Callie stood up straight and turned around. She had no clue which direction she was facing. She’d lost her bearings when she’d whirled to spot whatever it was that had crept up on her. Was the camp in front of her, behind her? Where was the skinny, muddy trail she’d taken to get here?

A low mewl escaped her lips. Callie brought her hands to her head, the soft triple ply of Penelope’s toilet paper soaking up her sweat. She thought about shouting out for help, but she didn’t want to look like an idiot. Lissa and Penelope had already spent half the day teasing her for not breaking in her hiking boots, for

packing her makeup bag and a change of earrings, and for forgetting to bring her water bottle, which she knew for a fact was sitting on the kitchen counter where she'd thought she wouldn't miss it on her way out the door.

She didn't want them to think they needed to babysit her every time she had to use the bathroom, too. If that was what you could even call what she'd just done—squatting next to a tree. Ew.

If only she'd had her phone. She could text Jeremy and he would come find her without alerting Lissa and Pen to her total lameness. But she'd left it in the pocket of her hoodie, which was tossed uselessly on a blanket by the fire.

"Callie," she muttered to herself. "Think. You're a straight-A student. You survived getting lost on the Chicago L by yourself when you were ten years old. You can figure out which direction to walk to get back to camp."

It was funny, really. Until now, she'd always thought of herself as a survivor. Her parents had been letting her walk home from school with her friends in Chicago since she was eight. At twelve, she'd flown to Brazil, alone, to visit her grandmother, and hadn't freaked out or cried once.

With her friends back in Chicago, she was the leader—the one who could navigate the map at Six Flags, order the exact right number of pizzas for a party of fifteen people, *and* figure out the tip. She hadn't even crumbled when her parents had told her that her dad had gotten the job at Cornell Law and they were moving to New York, leaving behind the friends she'd had her entire life and the only neighborhood she'd ever called home.

But it seemed upstate New York survival skills were entirely different from Outer Loop Chicago survival skills.

Callie looked up. It was past eight o'clock on an August night. The sky was deep ink blue beyond the tangled canopy of branches and leaves, and every last tree trunk looked black in the darkness. Black and exactly the same.

Okay. Forget pride. Pride was stupid. It was time to shout for her friends.

She opened her mouth just as a hand came down on her shoulder.