

Chapter 1 – Ali trying to cope with her recent emergence

Chicago, Illinois - April 1986

It's like drowning. Everyone's thoughts-- it's overwhelming...

[< God I'm so hungry — did you see what she's wearing — chapter 7 test is tomorrow, I'm so fucked — I think he's looking at me — taco meat smells like wet cat food — my mom's gonna kill me — oh fuck... please don't have bled through to my pants — Jessica's such a slut — where's my wallet? — he doesn't even know I exist — I'm so fat — I need a cigarette — I wish I was dead — she's so pretty, I hate her >]

Ali tries to lift herself out of the sea of human thoughts and concentrate on what Marci is saying, but the relentless pounding swallows her up. Spinning and tumbling in the current, she tries to orient herself and focus. *How did we get to this? How could I have been so wrong about Marci?*

[< left my homework in my locker — why is my milk warm — coach is gonna bench me — is that ketchup on his shirt — definitely should've studied for that — did Stacy really give him a blowjob? — don't make eye contact, he'll know you like him — I hate my hair — where's my inhaler — do we have practice tonight? — I'm gonna puke — my braces hurt — her laugh is so fake >]

A new wave crashes in. Ali sinks, trying to focus on Marci's words, but though the lips are moving, nothing intelligible seems to be coming out.

Is it worse when I'm stressed? It seems like it. We should not have tried to hash this out here.

[< I'm failing algebra — ask her about homecoming — I really don't want to sleep with him — say something normal — is this meat even meat — I smell like ass — my

pen exploded — I hate my voice — why is she so perfect? — need change for the payphone — just act normal for once >]

“ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME? WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!”, Marci attacks, snaps Ali into the moment.

The tide seems to recede as half the minds in the cafeteria snap into a common thought pattern that is some derivative of “*Whoa, Cat fight incoming*”.

“You know what’s wrong with me? You’re a bitch! That’s what’s wrong with me! You’re so jealous! You— you think I don’t know how you hope for me to fail? You’re so insecure you—”

“Jealous of you? Yeah right, Ali! You’re a goddamn freak!”

[< I hate you. >]

The words crack loudly through the air like lightning, but it’s the thought that lands, devastating and ruinous. Ali’s threshold for restraint reaches its apex, hangs there for a moment like a volcano on the verge of annihilating everything. Then slowly backs down from its threat.

“I hate you, too,” Ali quietly replies, her eyes dead to her once dearest friend. She stands up slowly, her hands trembling slightly with the rage she feels. She listens to the thoughts bouncing around inside Marci.

[< Not my fault. You were breaking up anyway. I’m sorry he didn’t tell you when he said he would. I am sorry. But why’s it always about you? Everything always works out for you. It ain’t all about you always! What makes you so special? >]

She’s so easy to hear now.

Ali half recognizes that nearly the entire cafeteria has stopped to see what happens next. Their own problems forgotten for a moment to savor someone else’s.

The two girls look at each other, unmoving, at the edge of a cliff. And then, Ali jumps off.

“I needed you.” The voice is quiet and tired. “I—”, for a moment it looks as if Ali will crack, but she forces it back. “When I really fucking needed you, you stabbed me in the back.”

Ali picks up her tray and begins to walk away, listening to the conflict in her ex best friend’s mind.

[< Say something. Say what? We’ve been friends since forever... say something! Fuck her. She’s become an asshole... >]

Marci startles as Ali slams her tray down on the garbage can discarding milk container and silverware alike. She flings the tray at the conveyor belt return where it crashes into other trays and begins its inevitable retreat to the kitchen.

The river of mental voices begins to flood its banks again, the students recognizing that the main event is fizzling out.

Why won’t they just mind their own business?

[< girls are so stupid — she’s even hotter when she’s angry — give it a rest you prima donnas — they should have fought; Marci’d kick her ass — never a boring day — I bet they’re gay >]

As Ali approaches the entrance to the cafeteria, the cacophony of voices has risen and diversified again. It doesn’t take long for people’s minds to return to their own petty concerns.

I’m going crazy. It’s definitely getting worse.

Turning down a lesser used side hallway the voices fade. It’s quiet here. Mostly quiet. Her breathing slows some and the tightness leaves her chest.

How did this happen?

Perhaps she should be asking that about hearing people’s thoughts, but at the moment her focus is more on the loss of Marci.

We’ve been best friends since 7th grade - how could we let it fall apart like this? How did SHE let it fall apart like this? And how could I have been so wrong about the type of person she really is.

Was it really just last Friday this started? It feels like a month ago!

Ali's perception of the here and now blurs, flattens, and melts away as she recalls the events of that evening.

* * *

Standing in the dirty clothes piles that make up her bedroom floor, Ali stares intently out the second story window like a puppy waiting for its family to come home. She watches for a few moments while the anxiety builds to the point that it requires movement to avoid nervous breakdown. Then spontaneously she paces away to the other side of the room only to forget why she made the journey, before beelining back to the window, checking again, and repeating the process.

God, I need my 'Marci time'. Could today have been any shittier? Fuckin' Anthony! I can't believe he dumped me. A 'head case'? Well, when you try to share your feelings with someone and all their brain can do is think about squeezing your boobs - I guess that makes ME the head case, huh? What a shithead! Oh god, hurry up Marci... why's the softball team practice so much?

She's back at the window doing the puppy dog scan again... Nothing.

On the next loop of the room, while kicking some clothes out of the way, Ali's reflection catches her eye in the dresser mirror. She's not sure which is a bigger mess - the dresser or her life. The mirror is framed in shirts meant to be hung in the closet. But they don't make it there because getting into the closet is no longer a trivial undertaking. It would be kind to call it a disaster. The white wood surface of the dresser is lost, perhaps never to be seen again. At this point it's layers of sediment: coins and combs, pendants and place cards, pens and papers, youth sport trophies and ribbons, notebooks and old birthday cards... it's a good analogy for life, Ali thinks -- one mess layered on top of another.

But Ali thinks the girl she sees in the mirror is potentially a bigger mess than the room she inhabits. She's fidgeted her favorite hoodie into something more

like a dress, never to return to form. Her flowing auburn hair, always a little on the wild side, has been twisted into perm levels of body. She's not sleeping well and it's starting to show around the eyes.

"You're a mess, Ali!" she declares to the empty room in that voice people use when they want to make light of saying something they know is all too serious, and all too true.

Another clue things ain't ok - referring to yourself in the 3rd person. Out loud. Alone. Nope, not a good look, Ali.

In her head she's practiced how she's going to tell Marci that she's hearing voices... *no, not voices — crazy people hear voices. I can hear people's thoughts.* Each time she rehearses it, it comes out a little different. The only certainty is a resolve to share the information. Because if there's one person on this planet that can help, it's Marci.

Back to the window on autopilot— *she's here!*

The familiar light blue Civic is pulling to the curb along the street and the door pops open.

Ali's excitement turns momentarily dark with quiet hesitation at the risk she's taking.

Please don't think I'm crazy. I need you to believe me. I need you to not think I'm crazy.

The puppy levels of energy quickly reassert control again as Ali bounds from her room, down the hall, taking the stairs two at a time. She flings wide the door as Marci reaches for the doorbell, and the two fly into an embrace the way only teenage girls can do.

Talking a mile a minute, saying nothing of consequence except the perfunctory introductory greetings of teen engagement, Marci enters the foyer of the home she's visited a thousand times.

From the other room Mom calls, "Is that Marci I hear?"

"Yeah Mom", Ali calls back across the house.

"Hi Mrs. Becker!", beams Marci across the house.

“Hi Marci,” echoes from rooms beyond, “you ladies need anything? A snack maybe?”

The two exchange quizzical glances, formulating their collective answer.

“Nah, we’re good, Mom. We’ll be downstairs.”

The two retreat into the basement, a layer they’ve spent what seems like half a lifetime in together. The brown shag carpet is aging and shows well-worn paths from years of being trampled. Still, it’s the most comfortable floor in the house on their bare feet. The pool table and dart board on the far side of the room await focus and laughs that won’t come today. The near side’s central focus is an oversized sectional couch; with a pull-out bed the girls have shared perhaps a hundred times. The walls of dark oak wood paneling give the room a darkened hue; never dreary, just comforting. It has been a special place where, as much as anywhere else, these young girls helped each other grow into young women.

Who could have foreseen it was the last time the two would ever be in this room together? But that’s the way with endings. One rarely knows the end is the end until they simply realize one day that what they had is gone.

Ali and Marci entrench on opposite sides of the sectional couch, feet tucked under butts, oversized comfy pillows hugged like lovable Teddy bears. The world of parents now sufficiently distanced, the duo drop into the ritual of a daily knowledge dump. At least, that’s what’s supposed to happen. That’s what happened when life was simple. When life was good. Today’s too heavy for the words to flow easily.

Ali reaches deep to compose herself, looking steadily into Marci’s eyes.

She’s going to be able to help me.

Marci sits patient but tensing up as the time passes. Something’s off, and an undistracted Ali would be able to put her finger on it quicker and cleaner.

She’s nervous.

[< She knows >]

Ali puzzles over the thought, her brain stumbling as she tries to figure out how to say what she needs to say.

How do I start? How do I just get started?

Marci's face pales with apprehension.

[<Here it comes - she's going to tell me Tony and her broke up. Oh god, I hope she doesn't know. He promised he wouldn't say anything >]

Ali's brain loses all focus on where it's going. The thoughts coming in are too incongruent. She feels a sinking dread that something is very, very wrong.

Wait. What? She knows? How does she know? Could have already heard, I guess. Why not say something right away though? And who promised? Anthony? Something's fucked.

Ali gives up on understanding and lets the dam break and the words flow.

"I um... Anthony and I broke up today. He was... it was right before English this morning and he just... he said it wasn't working out. I asked him why? Like, what wasn't working out, you know?"

Marci hangs on every word coming from Ali, but it's still not right. It's fear in Marci's expression, not empathy or compassion. Fear.

"I said, cause like, I didn't see this coming, you know? And so, I said, 'what the hell, Anthony?' And that's really all he said. It's just over. It was..."

[< Okay, that's good — she doesn't know. >]

"... Just so... surreal. Yeah, um...surreal. You know?"

"Oh Ali! That's terrible. I'm so sorry," Marci consoles. "What a jerk! So, what happened next? Did you get to talk to him any more later in the day?"

"No." Ali studies Marci. Her words are right, but still that look.

It's fear. Marci is worried. Why are you worried Marci?

"No, he refused to talk to me the rest of the day. Avoided me really. Like he didn't even want to be in the same wing of the building with me today. Before math, I asked him if we could talk after school. Maybe clear the air. He barely looked me in the eye to say no! I don't know what I did to make him so upset with me. I swear I have no id..."

[<He wasn't supposed to do it like that; he promised to handle it nice... to be cool about it. I swear I'm gonna crush his balls when I get over there!>]

“... ea... what I... did.”

Silence. There’s a stifling silence as the two young women look at each other, the girls they were withering as they face the onset of adult problems for the first time. Dread fills Ali’s mind as her brain struggles to find a way to put the information she’s gathering together so that it doesn’t lead to betrayal and heartbreak. She seeks the plausible lie that would let her off this sinking ship. But there’s no lifeboat to be found.

Marci sits as if on trial, her face turning ever paler, her eyes ceasing to blink, her throat going dry. The look of a deer in the headlights, somewhere knowing her failure to act in this moment is putting her in more danger, yet unable to act all the same.

“Marci, I need to ask you something. And I need you to tell me the truth. Don’t lie to me, cause I’ll know if you lie. Ok?”

The frozen deer doesn’t move. Doesn’t blink. Not even as it knows deep inside the truck is about to run it over.

“Was Anthony cheating on me with you behind my back?”

[< How does she know? Or suspect? How does she even suspect? Why does she sound so sure? >]

“Ali. That’s ridiculous! You’re concerning me. Why would you ask me tha...”

“Answer the question, Marci,” Ali’s voice is cold and flat— emotionally devoid. Her own thoughts turning dark.

“No. No! Why the fuck would you ask me that?”, Marci defends and then, sensing the tone is wrong, tries to back off. “Ali, I know it’s been a bad day, but you’re sounding a little crazy. No, I have no interest in Tony.”

[<Tony’s right— she is acting really weird lately! I wish I could just get out of here and go see him.>]

“Fuckin’ leave then,” Ali blurts out.

“Wha... what are you talking about? You’re throwing me out? What the hell, Ali?”, Marci deflects but with a bravado that feels and falls flat.

“I told you not to lie to me. I could have dealt with anything, Marci. ‘It was a mistake’. ‘It’s true love’,” Ali’s voice mocks the concept. “It was whatever the FUCK it was, Marci— I could have dealt with it!” Ali digs deep to reset her spiking tone to one of detachment and defiant sadness. “I could have handled anything except the one person who I thought would always have my back lying to me. Leave.”

“Ali, who told you there was anything going on between Tony and I? They’re liars! Tell me so we can sort it out.”

[< How’d she know? I didn’t tell anyone! Tony told his dipshit buddies, and they started talking I bet. Christ! So does everyone know we had s— >]

“So, you fucked him too?! Couldn’t even wait for us to break up before you hopped on his dick?”

“Ali! What are you saying? No! No, no, no! Why are you being like this? Ali, you’re scaring me.”

“I told you to leave. Get out of my home or I’ll give you a reason to be scared.”

“Fuck you! Fuck you, Ali! You know what? I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I can totally see why Tony dumped you! He’s right! You are a head case!”.

“And you’re a whore.”

Marci is standing now; the comfort pillow discarded at her feet. She looks down on Ali, still seated, curled up in her pillow like a rattlesnake. Eyes unblinking, malice-laden, and content to strike at any provocation.

One would like to think at this precipice there is some way for years of friendship to pull two people back from the edge. To admit mistakes. To mend fences. There isn’t. Sometimes that’s how things are. Sometimes the broken vase can’t be put back together and has to simply be thrown in the garbage.

Marci turns slowly and walks to the stairs. Hesitating a second at the basement threshold, Ali hears Marci’s mind reach for things to say that could fix the situation. Nothing comes. And so, she takes a deep breath and climbs out of

the basement, leaving Ali alone. Moments later Ali hears the house door shut, and a chapter of her life closes forever.

* * *

Ali snaps back into the present, feeling a headache forming. She's on the verge of tears but tells herself Marci isn't worth wasting them on. She never was. She begins trying to steel herself because the day must go on.

This is what life has become: a series of crisis moments followed by reliving the past crisis moments and trying to make sense of them.

A deep inhale helps Ali regain composure as the first bell of the afternoon rings. She sets her chin, accepting her situation. For the first time, she'll be facing the world alone.

I can get through this. Maybe this is just, you know, opportunity in disguise. First up— math class. Just get through math class.