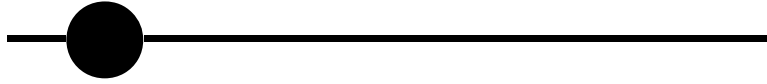




SHATTERED

Description



Jess had been hiding this for a year now. Even her mother has stopped talking to her because of this. But can she ever let her pain out? Does her mother really hate her?

Author



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Index

- **Chapter 1 - Mom**
- **Chapter 2 - MOM?**
- **Chapter 3 - Dinner**
- **Chapter 4 - You never came**
- **Chapter 5 - You're leaving**
- **Chapter 6 - Decorations**
- **Chapter 7 - The Box**
- **Chapter 8 Shattered**

Chapter 1: Mom

I was pacing the hallway outside my dorm room with my phone pressed against my ear. It rang over and over again as I held my breath, synchronously wishing that she would answer and that she wouldn't. This was how it was whenever I tried to call her now. I sighed as it turned me over to her voicemail. After the beep, indicating I should start my message, I had to take a few breaths before I could get my voice to work. "Hi Mom," I said. Those two simple words sent my heart racing.

"It's Jess, and I uhh..." My mouth went dry and I couldn't think of words. I took another breath and forced myself to keep going. "Well, I just wanted to say that I miss... them. And I miss you too. I wish you would answer this. It's okay if you don't want to talk to me, but... if you get this, please just let me know you're alright? I... can't lose anyone else." As soon as I said the last sentence, I regretted it. I was supposed to be calling just to check on her, but I always found myself spilling all my inner thoughts. I was bad at lying and I always had been, which was one of the things I found most annoying about myself.

I tucked my phone into the pocket of my jacket and headed back into my dorm room. I needed to be around Chloe and Levie who always managed to distract me, even though they didn't know about all my family drama. Levie was a year older than me, and Chloe was a year

older than her. We'd done track together for a few years when we were younger, and it was pure chance that we'd ended up in a dorm together. Traditionally roommates were all in the same year, but since Chloe and Levie were sisters, they'd been allowed to be together, and then I'd come mid-year and there'd been no other dorm available.

Our dorm room was really big, like the rest of the school. There were two different small bedrooms- each made for two people- that connected to a kitchen and common area, and we even had our own bathroom. Chloe and Levie shared one room, while I had the other. Our common space was decorated with colourful art on the walls and fluffy pillows on the couch, but all the decorations came from Chloe and Levie. Even my room was bare compared to theirs, with just a stack of books on a shelf, and plain grey sheets on my bed.

I grabbed my textbooks and sat at the table to work on my homework, desperate for a distraction from the latest call my mom had ignored. "Hey, you okay?" Chloe asked, shifting her body from her position on the couch to look at me.

I shook my head, trying to brush my disappointment away, and smiled. "Yeah, thanks."

"Do you want to come sit with us?" Levie asked, standing behind me and looking at the maths laid out in front of me. "We're about to watch Hamilton for the twentieth time. And I made popcorn!" She

held out the bowl filled with popcorn, offering me some.

“Tempting,” I laughed, taking a few pieces. “But this is due tomorrow.”

“Ah, okay. Well, the offer remains if you need a break.”

And I did end up joining them after an hour of frustrating maths. I didn’t even know how many times I’d already seen the movie, but the familiarity of it was comforting. And it got my mind off my mother for the night too, so I was able to sleep well.

Chapter 2 : MOM?

The rest of the week dragged on. I went to my classes, but couldn't pay attention. I forced down food even though I never felt hungry. And in the evenings I did homework, not really caring if I got the answers right. It wasn't like calling my mom had been any different this time. She hadn't answered any of my calls or texts for almost a year now, and yet every single time I tried again, I convinced myself that this time there'd be a different result. So whenever she didn't, my hope was crushed and I fell into a zombie-like state for a few days before I could convince myself it didn't matter and move on.

But then, even though I knew what would happen, next month I would try again. That was my rule; I would only try to call or text my mom once a month. I didn't want to seem desperate to her, even though I was. I missed my family, and although I'd made friends here, especially Chloe and Levie, it didn't fill the void of my family. Sometimes, when the loneliness hit me harder than usual, I would break my once-a-month policy and reach out to her again.

I didn't know if Chloe and Levie noticed my pattern of sadness each month, but the fact that I was terrible at pretending probably didn't help. I'd never told them about my family or what had happened between us, and they never asked. They were too kind to force me to share things that I obviously didn't want to.

But the next morning, as I headed down to the food court area for breakfast, I saw a familiar car parked outside. It was a shiny black sports car that belonged to my mother. My breath caught in my throat and I stood frozen where I was, unable to process it. I squinted to see the licence plate, worried my mind was playing tricks on me. But sure enough, the plate number belonged to my mom. As I ran through all the possible scenarios of why she might be here, I forgot that I was still standing right in front of the doors to the main building. “Jess?” said a voice from behind me. It was Levie.

I didn’t bother trying to compose my features as I turned to face her; it wouldn’t do me any good. Standing next to her was Chloe, as usual. They were the kind of sisters that liked to spend all their time together. “Oh, hi,” I told them, my voice sounding squeaky and uneven.

“Everything good?” Chloe questioned, cocking her head and giving me a confused look.

“Yeah, sorry,” I said. “Something... caught me off guard. I’ll umm...” I glanced back over to my mom’s car and realised what I would have to do. “I’ll catch up to you later.”

They glanced at each other quickly, but it was enough for me to tell they were concerned. After all, I’d been acting strangely for the past few days, stumbling through excuses and unable to concentrate on

anything. And then they find me one morning, standing outside and staring distantly at the half-filled parking lot in front of the school. I was almost shocked that one worried glance was all my strange behaviour had gotten. I watched my friends walk away, and then I took a deep breath before making my way over to the black car. As I was walking, the driver's door opened and my mom stepped out.

She was leaning against the car with her back to me, typing out a text. I almost expected my phone to buzz in my pocket with a message from her, saying something like, "Hi honey, I heard your message and decided to come visit. I'm standing outside now!" But when I pulled it out to check, there was no new text. My heart sank, but I forced myself to keep going.

I was just a few feet away from her now, and I still hadn't said anything. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know why she was here. None of my other messages had convinced her to come, why was this one different? But I didn't want her to turn around and see me standing there awkwardly, so I decided to speak first.

"Hi... Mom," I said tentatively.

She turned around and said, "Oh, hello dear," in a tone that didn't sound friendly at all. It was nothing like the reunion scenes I'd spend countless nights imagining. Where I would say hello and she would run over and hug me, something she hadn't done in many years. Or

she would see me and smile fondly, saying that I looked so grown up and beautiful. Maybe before I even had a chance to speak, she would apologise over and over again for what'd happened, and say that she wanted to make it up to me.

But instead of anything like that, she looked me up and down disdainfully, glanced at the big building behind me, and said, "Horrible looking school, is this really where you wanted to finish your education?"

I was taken aback by her question. "Umm, yes. I really like it here."

She sniffed dismissively. "Well, it certainly isn't a place I'd want to hang around at."

"Did you just come here to tell me that the college I picked isn't up to your standards?"

"No," she said, and I felt my face brighten in hope. This was it! This would finally be the time where she'd tell me she came to say sorry and fix our relationship. I smiled slightly, waiting for what she would say next. I was prepared to tell her that everything was okay now and that we could go back to how things were before. I could visit her, and she could visit me. I'd tell her about my studies, and my friends, and we'd fix things between us. I knew it would be slow, and I knew we'd have bumps along the way, but I wanted my mother to get to know me

again, after a year without contact. But instead, she said simply, “I came because it was less expensive than mailing a package.”

I was stunned. “Umm, what?”

She opened the backseat and showed me a large cardboard box. “I’m taking a vacation and I happened to change planes here. This box is filled with clutter that you left behind when you came here. It was taking up space in the house, and I was going to mail it, but that is so expensive. Figured I might as well drop it off since I’m here.” Then she shoved the box into my hands.

I couldn’t even come up with a good answer to that so I said, “Oh... I didn’t realise I had to take all my stuff when I left.”

“Well you won’t be coming back, will you?” she asked like this was something we’d already agreed on.

I swallowed, trying to force the emotion back down. “I won’t?”

Ignoring my question, she glanced at her watch and then said, “I need to get going, I have a spa appointment booked in an hour, and then I need to get checked into my hotel before I leave in the morning.”

She turned to go, but before she could leave, I blurted, “Wait!” I knew it was a bad idea. I should just let her disappear from my life- after all-

that seemed to be what she wanted. But I had so many unanswered questions, and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to finally get them answered. Like why had she never answered my desperate texts or phone calls? Was I really not ever going to be allowed back home? And how did she seem so... okay after everything that had happened?

"Can you meet me for dinner or something tonight?" I asked. "We haven't talked in so long and..." I trailed off to blink back the tears that were forming in my eyes. "Please don't disappear like Dad and Sam." The last sentence was almost impossible for me to say. I hadn't said my brother's name since I'd left for college. And tears were flowing down my face now, regardless of my attempts to stop them.

Somehow, despite how hard it was for me to say that, my mother was completely unaffected. In fact, she almost seemed annoyed by my request. Like I was wasting her time. "If you want to, I suppose."

I tried to brush it off and keep my cool, telling myself that I just had to get through this conversation, and then I could cry as much as I needed to. "Six then? I'll meet you here and we can go out somewhere?"

"Sure," she said with a sigh. "If that's all, I'll be on my way."

"Bye," I croaked, as she shut her door and sped away.

And all I could do was sit on my knees in the parking space that she'd just left, with my arms wrapped around my stomach, trying to hold myself together.

Chapter 3 : Dinner

I stayed like that for a while, trying to decide what to do. The shock of everything she'd said sank into my body, making me shiver even though it was warm and sunny outside. "Come on, Jess," I told myself out loud. "You have classes to go to. Besides, what she said doesn't matter. I don't need her support." But the truth was, I did. That conversation had stung more than I wanted to admit. And I couldn't even lie to myself, so convincing myself that everything was okay turned out to be a fruitless attempt.

"Alright," I tried again. "Maybe it does matter. But I still need to get up." So I stood up and walked slowly to my first class. The campus was empty, as everyone else was already inside. It was nice to be alone for the short walk, so I used the extra minutes to force the conversation with my mom into the back of my mind. I couldn't bear to think about it right now, so I did what I always did. I forced the painful memories somewhere where they wouldn't distract me. I could think about it later, but not right now.

After a long day of boring lectures, I was ready to collapse in bed. I had hauled the big box from my mom around to each of my classes, which earned me strange looks from teachers and peers. But I didn't dare look inside it, afraid of the memories that would resurface. Once I probably didn't want to revisit. So when I got back to my dorm room, I shoved the box under my bed where hopefully I would forget

about it. Then I sat on my bed, trying to decide what to do next. I could crawl under the blankets and pretend nothing existed outside of my bed. I could tackle my stack of homework for the week. Or I could make a bowl of ramen and watch an episode of my favourite show while I ate it.

But when I heard two pairs of footsteps heading to the door of our room, I jumped out of bed quickly and ran to the bathroom, knowing that I wasn't ready to face Chloe and Levie's concerned looks and questions yet. I locked the door and turned the faucet to the warmest setting. I always liked my showers extremely hot, but today I needed water so scalding that it wouldn't let me think about anything else. I washed and brushed through my tangled hair. I took my time shaving my legs, making sure each hair was cut down. And I scrubbed my face, to be sure there would be no reason for my roommates to suspect I'd just been crying.

When I got out, the mirror was so steamy I couldn't see anything in it. I used my hand to wipe away the tiny water droplets and inspected my face. It was still red- although maybe that was from the heat of the water- but it didn't look like I'd been crying. I practised the smile I would show Chloe and Levie when they asked what had happened earlier and then I practised the one I would show to my mom when I met her for dinner tonight. Neither of them looked convincing.

With a sigh, I got dressed and exited the bathroom. I found Levie in

the kitchen and saw Chloe in her room. “There you are, Jess!” Levie said. “I was about to make tea, do you want any?”

“Sure,” I said, sitting down at the table while Levie started boiling water in the kettle. She and Chloe joined me a minute later and I knew what they were about to ask. I fidgeted nervously with my wet hair, and sure enough, Chloe said, “You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to, but we’re worried, Jess. What happened this morning?” I was almost too embarrassed to make eye contact, but when I looked up, her brown eyes were genuine and concerned. Levie offered me a slight smile, her expression similar to her sister’s.

“It was- umm...” I had practised what I was going to say in my head, but now I wasn’t sure I could pull off that lie. So I decided to go with as much of the truth as I could muster. It probably didn’t shake the worries that they had, but it was enough. “My mom came to visit me. And... we haven’t talked in a while. We’re going to meet for dinner tonight, and I’m just worried.” I picked each of my words carefully. If I didn’t tell the truth, they’d know, due to my inability to lie about anything.

“Awww, I’m sorry,” Levie said.

I shook my head and bit my bottom lip, determined not to cry again. “No, it’s okay. Dinner will be good. And I’m sure we’ll get everything sorted out.” I was proud of how steady my voice was.

“I’m sure you will,” Chloe told me reassuringly and I hoped she was right.

Chapter 4 : You never came

But ten minutes before six, I changed my clothes, brushed my hair again, and went outside. My mom wasn't there yet, but I told myself it didn't mean anything. I was early; it made sense that she wouldn't be here yet.

But the seconds turned into minutes.

And the minutes turned into hours.

And I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

But she never came.

It started raining, so I sat on the top stair that was covered by the eaves of the building. I checked my watch for the hundredth time that evening and another minute ticked by. The hope I had left slowly faded away. It was now 8:03 pm and I knew she wouldn't be coming now, but still, I stayed another half an hour. The rain picked up and the sky darkened, but her car never pulled up.

I checked my phone for a text or missed call, but there was nothing. So I sighed and walked slowly back up to my room. I hadn't even noticed the tears falling down my cheeks until Levie saw me and asked, "Oh no, have you been crying?"

I wiped the tears away and shook my head. "Must be rain," I mumbled. I pushed past the sisters and went into my room, shutting the door behind me. I knew they were worried, and that this would only elevate that concern, but it was the only thing I could do. I climbed into bed, still fully dressed, and folded my arms across my torso, just like I'd done when my mom had left me alone in the parking lot. It felt like my world was crumbling- like I was crumbling, and all I could do was sob and hug myself to keep from falling apart.

For the past year, I'd been living a fragile life. Every day my goal was to make it until nighttime without having memories of my past reemerge. Then I had to survive a night filled with my bad dreams and restlessness. Each day I fought back the urge to try yet again to contact my mom, only allowing myself to once a month. I distracted myself with classes and friends, and that helped, but it didn't fix it. No one here knew about how my life had changed a year ago. Chloe and Levie were the closest I had to family, and I hadn't even told them about it. It wasn't that I was afraid of how they'd react. In fact, I was sure that whoever I told would be kind and supportive about it, I was just afraid that saying it out loud- something I hadn't been able to do yet- would make it real.

And I really didn't want it to be real.

But after I'd cried every tear I seemed to have in me, I lay in bed listening to whatever sounds happened to be in the building. I always needed something to distract me. Distractions were probably the only reason I'd been able to function lately. So I listened for the faint tapping of rain hitting the roof and the hum of the air conditioning. But the most interesting thing to listen to was the voices of Chloe and Levie.

"What do you think happened?" Chloe asked.

"I don't know..." Levie said. "But I feel so bad."

"I do too," Chloe agreed. "But what should we do?"

There was silence as she thought about the question. "I'm gonna go check on her. Not that she has to tell us anything, but just to see if she's okay."

"I'll heat up leftovers from our dinner tonight, in case she's hungry." I smiled. Knowing that they cared about me seemed to make some of the sorrow fade. But then Levie's footsteps came towards my door and I realised that I must look like a disaster. I swiped more tears away and pushed the blanket off me as she knocked on the door.

“Jess, can I please come in?” she begged.

“Okay,” I squeaked, my voice heavy with the sadness I wished would go away.

The doorknob turned and I looked away, not ready to see her sympathetic expression. I stared at my blank walls that were painted a rosy tan colour. They’d been like that ever since I came, and although Chloe had offered to help me repaint them, I’d kept the colour. Levie sat down on my bed beside me, silent for a minute before gently asking, “Do you want to tell me what happened?” She emphasised the ‘want’ to make it clear that it was my choice.

“No,” I said. “It’s not a big deal.” I knew she didn’t believe it, but she let it go.

“Are you hungry?” Chloe asked, peeking her head in through the door. “We have leftover spaghetti.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, following her to the kitchen. “Thanks.” They sat at the table with me as I ate, but didn’t ask more questions which I appreciated. It was nice to have someone there with me, even if they didn’t know what was going on. It felt less like I was falling into a void of sadness when my friends were sitting right across from me. And although I still didn’t sleep well that night, it would have been so

much worse without the comfort from Levie and Chloe.

So in the morning, I knew what I was going to do. It was a Saturday, so there would be no classes. I woke up early, got dressed, and headed to the quad. I found Chloe and Levie already there, each sitting with a different group of friends. I went over to Chloe.

“Good morning, Chloe!” I said with a slight smile.

“Morning, Jess!” she replied. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I was just wondering, can I borrow your car?” The sisters shared Chloe’s car, but I didn’t have my own, so I had to call Uber or borrow a friend’s when I needed to leave campus. “I need to go... somewhere. I should be back in an hour or two, but it’s cool if you were planning to go somewhere.”

“No, no, it’s all yours!” she told me, digging around in her bag for keys.

“Thank you so much,” I said gratefully when she handed them to me. She smiled and turned back to her friends as I walked away. I found her white Toyota parked a few rows back and climbed into the driver’s seat. I was terrified of what I was about to do, and I wondered if I was even making the right choice, but I knew that if I didn’t go through

with this, I'd regret it. So I revved the engine and drove to the airport, hoping I'd make it before my mom left.

Chapter 5 : You're leaving?

But when I got there I realised just how hard it was going to be to find her. Airports were huge and I didn't even know what flight she would be on, or where she was going. So after 20 minutes of wandering around aimlessly, I was beginning to think my whole plan was stupid. But then I spotted a stack of three suitcases, a duffel bag, and a large designer purse, which I quickly recognized as being my mother's stuff. My family wasn't exactly rich, but we had enough money for higher-end purchases, which delighted my mother.

She was a very materialistic person, and her stuff was far more valuable to her than other things- even her own daughter it seemed. She overpacked for every single trip we'd ever gone on and loved to buy from luxury or expensive brands. And she was the kind of person who paid thousands of dollars to have her car flown across the country with her, which explained why she'd had it here in the first place.

My mom was sitting across from her large pile of luggage, waiting to board the plane and I watched her for a moment, waiting to see if she'd notice me. She didn't. So before I could change my mind, I screwed up my courage and walked over to her. "Mom," I said, trying to make my voice sound assertive.

"Hello, dear," she told me distractedly, not bothering to bring her gaze away from the screen of her phone. "I didn't think I'd see you

again.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well, after I missed dinner I figured you wouldn’t want to talk to me again.” After that, I thought I heard her mumble something else under her breath, which sounded like, “Which would be a relief.”

I hadn’t been expecting her to say anything like that so it took a moment for me to think of a reply. “You missed dinner on purpose?”

“Not exactly on purpose, no...” she said slowly, finally looking up from her phone. “I just didn’t feel up to it after all.”

“You didn’t feel up to talking to your daughter?” I questioned.

“Mm, yes, I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“And why didn’t you tell me you wouldn’t be coming?” I demanded, angry now. She sighed as if annoyed with me, but I continued before she could answer. “I waited for you, Mom! I was sitting outside in the rain for hours! And you didn’t care enough to inform me that it was for nothing? I had to track you down at the airport?”

“It’s not my fault if you were ignorant enough to go through all that trouble.”

I didn't know what to say now. I'd spent the last year thinking that my mom was just too wounded from what had happened to answer my calls or texts, but I was beginning to realise that she'd done it on purpose. Everything she'd done that had hurt me had been on purpose. And the shock of that made me dizzy. "I can't believe you," I scoffed.

"Me?" she asked, feigning confusion. "You're the one who left your grieving mother alone in the house."

"I didn't leave you!" I shouted. "You kicked me out!" I felt tears on my cheeks now. "You told me that you couldn't bear to have me around the house, so you sent me away to college without so much as a goodbye! Didn't it ever occur to you that I was grieving too? That maybe I needed my mom?" I was sobbing hard now, but still shouting at my mom, who hardly seemed bothered.

A security guard even came over to me with a worried look on his face. "Everything okay over here, Ma'am?" he asked, looking back and forth between my mom and me.

"Fine," I mumbled, taking a step closer to my mother and waiting for him to leave again.

"Do you care at all?" I asked her, forcing myself to lower my voice.

“Do you care that I’ve tried to contact you for over a year and you haven’t answered me once? Not even to let me know you’re alright? I was worried about you, Mom. And now you’re telling me you never thought about me at all.”

“Well I brought you a whole box of your stuff and you didn’t even thank me.”

“Oh, right,” I said sarcastically. “You brought me a box that was apparently cluttering up your house- the house that I guess I’m never allowed back into- and you told me that it was less expensive for you to give it to me in person than to mail it. Mother of the year.” Although when I said it out loud, her whole story didn’t even make sense to me. She wasn’t the type of person who cared much about expenses, as long as it was easier for her, and driving all the way to my college didn’t seem easier, even if she did happen to have a flight here.

My mom hardly responded to what I’d said, instead telling me, “If you’re done bothering me, I have a plane to board.”

There wasn’t even a line to board the plane yet, but I knew she was trying to dismiss me, and I was done talking to her anyway. So I began walking away, but then stopped and said over my shoulder, “Bye, Mom. I don’t know if I’ll see you again, but just so you know, I love you.” She didn’t answer as I turned away again and walked slowly back through the airport.

Maybe it was because I finally realised it didn't help. Maybe it was because I'd already worn myself out last night. Maybe it was because I wanted to be composed when I saw Chloe and Levie soon. But for whatever reason, I didn't cry. I wasn't okay by any means, but instead of being a sad or angry mess, I was more of an emotionless zombie. I drove calmly, going exactly the speed limit. I parked and locked the car, then took steady and deliberate steps as I went to return the keys to Chloe.

It was around 12:30 now, and I hadn't had breakfast. So I went to my favourite on-campus restaurant. It was a Japanese place, and I got the same noodle dish that I always did. I ate it alone at a table while I let my mind process everything that had happened. My mom had come to my college to give me a box filled with stuff- that I realised was still tucked under my bed unopened- but she said it had been because it had saved her money. I'd asked her to meet me for dinner, and she'd agreed, but then never showed. I'd managed to find her at the airport and she'd said that she hadn't come to dinner on purpose. She also hadn't shown much emotion no matter what I said to her.

I was still upset, but more than that, I was confused now. My mom had never been the nicest person to me, but she'd never been outright mean. My dad had told Sam and I that her occasional coldness to us had been because she'd never really wanted kids. But these past few days she had been more than cold. She'd been icy and cruel. I didn't

know my mom very well, even after living with her for 18 years, but it almost seemed like she'd had a different reason for coming here. And it was something that was making her upset. Because while her anger had been directed at me, I couldn't think of anything she could actually be angry at me for, despite her accusations.

I was still sitting at the table long after I had finished my lunch, just trying to figure it out. But each time I replayed the conversations in my head, it felt like a slap to my face, and soon I was crying again. I cursed under my breath; I had preferred being emotionless. But once the tears came, they wouldn't stop, so I decided to go back to my dorm room and find a distraction instead of continuing to think about it.

Chapter 6 : Decorations

Later, when Chloe came through the door to our shared dorm room, I was on my 5th episode of The Office. I'd never loved that show, but it was a comedy and I desperately needed to laugh. The humorous show didn't fix my problems, but at least it helped cheer me up temporarily, which was all I needed. I paused it to say hi to Chloe.

"Hey," she said in return. "How was your day?"

"Not the best," I said truthfully since I knew I couldn't lie. "But it's okay." Then I quickly flipped the subject. "How was yours?"

"Good!" she answered. "I did some shopping and got some new decorations for the dorm and stuff!"

"Ooh really?" I asked. "I feel bad, I'm making you do all the decorating."

"Nah, I don't mind," she laughed. "But here, look what I got for you!" She walked over to the kitchen table and I followed her.

"You didn't have to-" I began, but she cut me off.

"Shh, just look!" Then she pulled a clear, square-shaped plastic bag from her shopping basket. Inside it was a folded quilt that was

decorated with little ferns and flowers with leaves. It was made up of pastel colours, and the flowers were a light, dusted rose colour that was almost exactly like...

“This matches the paint on my walls,” I said.

She smiled. “I figured you needed something warmer for Winter. Do you like it?”

“It’s perfect,” I said appreciatively. “Thank you.” It was just a blanket, but for some reason, it made my heart soar. It had been so long since my drab dorm room had gotten any decorations, and even just the floral quilt made me smile. I took it to my room and replaced the faded grey blanket that had been on my bed since I’d moved in. Chloe was right that it was getting colder, and my thin blanket hadn’t been doing a good job of keeping me warm at night.

Somehow, just the one simple change in my room made a big difference. It still didn’t look very lived in. The walls were bare except for the paint colour and my bookshelf had only textbooks- even though I kept telling myself I would go to the bookstore soon, I never did. My desk had a few pencils and notebooks stacked up, but I had neglected to even find a desk light to put on it. This wasn’t a big deal though, as I preferred to do my homework at our kitchen table, or in the college library. But now that the blanket wasn’t just a dull grey, the room seemed more like a place I’d want to spend time in.

After I folded up my old blanket and stored it in a box in my closet, I went back out to the kitchen. Chloe was in there now, adding new pots and utensils to our kitchenware collection. “Can I give you some money to help pay for all that?” I asked her, wondering how much everything had cost.

“Don’t you dare,” she told me. “I’ve got it covered.”

I sighed. “Okay. But at least let me help you put it away.” I opened a package of new glasses and then carefully arranged them in the cupboard while Chloe took a few things to the room she shared with Levie.

When we were done we sat together at the kitchen table. “Levie should be here soon,” Chloe told me. “She went to pick up a pizza for dinner.” I glanced at the clock, not realising that it had gotten so late.

“That sounds good!” I said in reply. I was grateful that I shared a dorm with Chloe and Levie for many reasons. Most importantly, they were sweet and kind, and they felt like family to me. But they also shared with me when they didn’t have to, such as getting dinner for all of us or refusing to let me help pay for things we’d all use. They also acknowledged that something was going on with me and that I was frequently too upset to even speak to anyone- especially recently- but they never pushed me to tell them. They were the kind of people who

were silently there for you. Who would never judge you for crying and not ever telling them why. Who would lend you their car without knowing where you were going and who would sit at the table with you just so you wouldn't be alone. And I was the kind of person who couldn't even hold myself together enough to repay them for any of it.

So I made that a priority for the next few weeks. I knew there was no point in thinking about my family, because my mom had already made it clear she wanted nothing to do with me. I told myself that was fine. That it would actually be easier if I didn't have to think about her anymore. So whenever I found my mind straying to her, or my dad or my brother, I shoved the thoughts to the back of my mind so I could focus on other things.

I studied and did my homework- putting more thought and effort into it than usual. And I especially worked harder at being a better friend and roommate. Levie and Chloe were my closest friends, but I'd met others since I came to college too. So I made sure I hung out with them. I went to a bookstore and bought plenty of novels to fill my shelves, but I also got a cookbook and started cooking dinners occasionally. They were never that good, but I hoped I'd get better with practice. When I wasn't doing homework or attending classes, I forced myself to spend time with people, instead of sitting alone in the dorm. And while this was hard at first, it got easier. For a short time anyway.

Chapter 7 - The Box

The day started off well. I made pancakes for breakfast and Levie and Chloe seemed to like them, even though they flattened out more than they were supposed to. I had English class first, which was my favourite, and it was followed by some other classes I also enjoyed. As a bonus, none of the professors assigned any homework.

I was walking away from the building of my last class and pulled out my phone to text a friend and ask if he wanted to meet up later. But before I could, I noticed today's date. I felt my breath catch in my throat and I froze mid-step. Over the past year, I've gotten really good at keeping a schedule. Without having set an alarm, I always knew that it had been exactly a month since I'd tried contacting my mom. And today was a month from my most recent call to her.

I walked back to my dorm quickly as I thought about this. I didn't want to be caught standing in the middle of the path gazing at my phone with a faraway look on my face. When I got back I paced around the kitchen and living room space, trying to convince myself not to do anything. "You ended things with Mom," I reminded myself out loud. "There's no need to keep calling her every month. That will only make things worse." I sounded sure of it when I said it aloud, but in truth, my emotions were convicted. I knew it wouldn't do any good; it would probably do the opposite, but the routine had been going on for a whole year. I didn't know how to stop myself from

continuing it.

“Maybe I could just send a text...” I said slowly. “That’s not the same thing as calling. Maybe it’s not so desperate.” But then I shook my head again. “No, no, no. I should just delete her number.” I even got out my phone and went to our message history. But this turned out to be a very bad idea, as seeing it just made my steps quicker and the tears heavier. There was message after message, all with dates that were spaced apart by at least four weeks. None of them had gotten an answer.

Mom, I miss you. Are you okay?

I’m sorry about everything, can we please just go back to the way things were before?

It’s Jess again. I know you’re busy, but I want to talk to you.

I just want you to know I’m thinking about you. And Dad and Sam.

I have Fall break soon. Could I please come visit you?

“Ugh,” I said, tearing a hand through my long, messy hair. “This is a very very bad idea.” I put my phone down on the counter and continued pacing, talking to myself as I walked back and forth. “You can’t text her again. She’s done with you, so you’re done with her.

Mom doesn't want you!" I almost screamed the last sentence as my rage and sadness bubbled over. My knees wobbled and I had to put a hand on the wall to steady myself as silent tears streamed down my face.

I hadn't even noticed my roommates come in until Levie asked quietly, "Jess?"

I spun around to look at them, my lips pressed tightly together. When I saw their anxious looks, the tears fell faster and I pressed a hand over my mouth. I saw Levie glance at the screen of my phone, looking at the string of unanswered texts to my mother. "I-" My head spun, desperately trying to think of an explanation. But my legs shook and my lips quivered and the world blurred out of focus until I felt a hand on my back, dragging me back to reality.

"Jess," Chloe's voice said. "It's okay." I shook my head as a sob escaped through my lips.

"Hey, it's okay, you're alright," Levie told me, taking my hand and leading me towards the couch. I collapsed into the soft cushions and my hands toyed with a loose strand of the stitching as I tried to come up with something to say that would make sense.

"I- umm..." I began. "How much did you hear?"

“How much did you say?” Levie countered, her voice gentle but serious.

“Well... I... don’t know.”

Chloe was sitting next to me on the sofa and Levie was on the floor, looking up at my tear-streaked face, trying to determine if I was alright. I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to meet her gaze.

“Please tell us what’s going on,” Chloe begged. “I know it’s hard for you, but we want to help.”

“I know,” I said, taking a deep breath and forcing my voice to be steady. “It’s not that.” I opened my eyes again. “It’s umm... It’s a long story.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Levie told me, giving me a quick, tentative smile.

“I’m really okay.” I made one last sad attempt to dispel their doubts.

“You don’t have to be,” Levie said.

I leaned forward and put my face in my hands. “I haven’t told anyone this in a year.”

“A year?” Chloe asked. I noticed the shock in her voice and I couldn’t answer. So I just nodded. “Why not?”

“It was just too hard,” I croaked.

“What was it?” Levie pressed.

“My real name is not even Jess. It’s Jessica; Jess was just a nickname given by my elder brother. My dad and elder brother died last year,” I blurted before I could stop myself.

They both let out a quiet gasp and then we sat in silence for a minute. “I’m so sorry,” Chloe said.

“I can’t even imagine,” Levie agreed. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

I sighed. “Because that’s not the whole story. My mom was never the greatest mother to Samuel-my brother- and me. Dad said it was because she hadn’t wanted to have kids in the first place. But Sam and I were close. He was the best brother ever and we did everything together.” I was crying again, but I also smiled thinking about my memories with my brother.

Now that I was talking it was hard to stop. “Dad and Sam got into a car accident. My mom and I were at home, and when we got the call we rushed to the hospital, but when we got there Dad was already...” I

swallowed hard, pushing the sadness down. “Already gone.” Chloe put a comforting hand on my leg, which helped me continue. “And Sam was badly injured. The doctors didn’t know if he would make it. And we thought he was getting better, but then he died too one night. I mean, at least I got to say goodbye but...” I choked back another sob, struggling to breathe.

“Anyway... My mom was devastated, especially from losing Dad. She told me it was too painful to have me around, so she sent me to college. Most of my stuff reminded me of my family, so that’s why I don’t have much. I gave most of it away and tried to stop thinking about them. But I missed my mom, so I kept trying to contact her and she never answered. Eventually, I stopped reaching out so much and forced myself to only call or text her once a month. But then she came here out of nowhere. I saw her car in the parking lot; that’s what I was staring at when you saw me there. We talked and... she said she only came to give me a box of stuff I’d left behind and that she pretty much didn’t want to see me again.”

I had stopped talking, so Levie asked, “What was in the box?”

“Oh... I don’t know. It’s under my bed, I never looked inside. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise,” she said. “I wouldn’t have either if I were you.”

Her words made me feel better, so I kept going. “But before she left I

asked if we could meet for dinner, and she agreed, but then never came. That's why I was so upset that night, and why I borrowed your car the next morning. I went to the airport to ask her why she didn't show. But... Well, that's probably the last time I'll ever see her again." I shuddered at the memory of my last conversation with her.

"Jess..." Chloe murmured sadly. "I'm so so sorry."

"That's horrible," Levie sympathized.

"I do have one last question though," Chloe said. "But I understand if you're done with this conversation. It must be a lot for you."

I nodded but said, "It's okay. What is it?"

"What were you doing when we came in just now?"

I frowned, realising my answer would sound stupid. "I was trying to convince myself not to text my mom again. It's been a month since last time, and I haven't missed a month yet..."

"I understand," she said, and I wondered if she actually did.

"Thank you both," I told them, after a moment of silence.

"We didn't do anything," Levie responded.

I shook my head. “No. You’ve done more for me than you know.” They both smiled at me, but it was a smile filled with sympathy and sadness. I did my best to smile back and then I stood up.

“Where are you going?” Levie said.

“It’s time to see what’s in that box,” I said determinedly. I had put it off for a month, hoping that I would just forget about it. But it had been hard to sleep knowing that it was still tucked away under my bed. It wasn’t that I was curious about what was in it. It just felt like the memories tucked away inside it were trying to escape.

“Are you sure?” Chloe asked. “We don’t want to force you to do anything.”

“I’m sure,” I promised. “I want to.” Then I dragged the box out from its hiding spot and took it back to the couch where my roommates were waiting for me.

“We can go if you want us to...” Levie offered.

“No!” I said abruptly, then forced my voice to soften. “I want you here- if that’s okay.”

“We’re right here,” Chloe assured me. So I opened the box.

Chapter 8 : Shattered

Each item I found made me feel like I was ten again and playing around with my brother. It wasn't filled with stuff I'd left behind like my mom had told me. Instead, it seemed to contain every special memory I'd shared with Sam.

There was my favourite stuffed animal, a dolphin named Kelpie, and his, a Walrus named Splash. Tears welled in my eyes as I remembered all the nights when I couldn't sleep and Sam had made up stories with them, giving each of them a cute squeaky voice, until I finally ended up dozing off. Or there was the iPod filled with all of our favourite songs. The playlists that we'd danced around the house to and crashed into things. One time we'd even broken Mom's favourite vase and she'd forbidden music in the house for a month, so we'd had to sneak outside.

The box had our favourite book that we'd read too many times to count. There was the jar of seashells we'd collected over years of beach trips. I turned the jar over in my hands, studying each shell and sand dollar, and remembering the times when we'd found them. Me holding one in my hand and running over to my brother, shouting "Sam, Sam, look what I found!!" with a huge grin on my face.

"It's beautiful, Jess," he'd say, getting down on one knee so we'd be at the same level. "Why don't you add it to our jar?"

The box had a red frisbee that was beat up and scratched, and so old that the logo had faded away, but we'd loved it. We took it camping with Dad, and tossed it back and forth at the park, or even just in our backyard. We kept a record of how many passes we could do in a row without dropping it, and had almost gotten up to 600. Tears ran down my face as I realised we'd never get past our new record.

The next thing I pulled out of the box was a small cloth bag filled with rocks. I was confused for a moment before I remembered that when we were really young and our parents hadn't let us get any real pets, we'd drawn little animals on rocks and pretended they were real. I dumped the contents of the bag onto my lap and looked over each rock. There was Nellie the hamster, Kevin the turtle, Whiskers the cat, and Rufus the dog, among others. I held each one for a minute, before dropping them one by one back into the bag. Then I picked up the photo book that was at the bottom of the box.

I flipped through the pages slowly, lingering on each picture. The one of us at the beach, me burying Sam with sand. The one of all of us on a boat that a friendly fisherman had taken. Our fishing pole had fallen in the water and Dad and Sam were leaning over the edge, trying to get it back while I cried about how they were going to fall in and drown. My mom was sitting off the side of the boat, looking like simply being outside was making her sick. The one of me riding on Sam's shoulders as he ran around the yard, pretending he was an

aeroplane.

I cried even harder when I saw the last photo in the book. I was wearing my high school graduation uniform and hat. Sam was standing next to me, with his arm wrapped around my shoulders. I was grinning and he looked so proud. Like it was him who had just graduated, not his little sister. I remembered that it had been taken only a few weeks before the accident. After I closed the photo book I had to pause for a minute to wipe the tears away from my face with the back of my hand. Then I reached into the bottom of the box and took out the last thing in it. A letter with an envelope so crisp and white it looked like it had been written in the last year. Which, it turned out, it had been. I unfolded it slowly and glanced at my roommates who were sitting silently on the couch with me.

January 14

Dear Jess,

I'm so sorry this all had to happen. If I could go back in time I never would have gotten into that car. I would do anything to bring Dad back. And I would do anything to have more time with you. But I know I won't make it much longer. I can feel the weakness taking over me each day and I can't go on like this.

I'm so incredibly grateful to have had you as a sister. Every day that I

spent with you was a day well spent. All of the late nights and early mornings. All of the mid-mornings and afternoons and evenings. Every second was worth it and every second meant something. I could never have asked for a better sister than you. Even when you annoyed me with your TV show obsessions and depressing music, I would never change any of it. I would never want to change you. Because you are talented and kind and amazing. And you are worth it.

I know I wasn't always the best brother. My greatest regrets in life won't be the tests I bombed or the friends I yelled at. They will be the times I wasn't there for you when you needed it. And I know there will be so many more of those moments when I'm gone. I'm sorry.

Please remember that I love you. I will always be with you in spirit. No matter how long it's been. No matter where you are. No matter what's happened. And my only hope for you now is that you'll find people who care about you just as much as I did. Mom doesn't always show it, but I know she loves you too. Everyone you've ever met has loved you because that's just the kind of person you are. You spread kindness wherever you go, and you make people happy just by being there. I know this because you did it for me.

I'm giving this letter to Mom and telling her to take it to you when you need it most. I have no idea how long that will be and what will have changed for you by then. But whenever you get this, I hope you're okay. The letter will be with a box filled with all of our special

memories. These are all things that fill me with joy. Remember you don't always have to be happy, because life doesn't work like that. But you should seek things out that make you smile. So wherever you are right now, please promise me that you'll never forget to smile.

Love,

Sam

"I promise," I whispered, looking up from the letter. The tears glistening in my eyes weren't sad tears now. They weren't happy either, but I knew I was crying because of gratitude. It felt like no emotion could properly explain why I was crying. I knew that Chloe and Levie were still sitting with me, probably wondering what the letter had said, and what I was thinking about right now. But I was done trying to hide my emotions from them. Sam had told me to find people who cared about me, and I had. The sisters felt more like family to me than even my mom did right now. "I promise," I said again, making sure each syllable sounded like how I was feeling. Grateful, heartbroken, and hopeful.

My mind slowly put the pieces together. My mom hadn't brought this box to me because my stuff had been taking up space in the house. She hadn't just happened to change planes here. She had actually come here for me. She had come here to give me this box because it was my brother's last wish. And this revelation filled me with so much emotion I couldn't do anything but sit on the couch

with my roommates and cry. I knew one day I would be okay, just like Sam had hoped. I knew one day I would put each of the things from the box onto my shelves and smile fondly whenever I looked at them. But right now I wasn't okay. Right now I couldn't do that. Right now I was struggling to put words to my feelings and identify my complicated emotions.

Because right now I was **shattered**.

