

Interrupted

Hailey had planned the message for a year, but when she smacked into the middle of the brick wall of her old school, she was confused. She hit it twice more before the implications bloomed in her mind.

Time moved differently now, and Hailey's attention flickered even more than it used to. But when she realized it was *the* day, thoughts of Logan, on the other side of the wall asking Krissy out, vanished, and Hailey rushed to the parking lot to find anything she could use to communicate. A broken crayon, lost pen, or crumpled homework assignment. All she found was a sucker, still wrapped, but at least it was blue raspberry, her favorite. She knelt beside it, relishing the sensation of sharp, gritty asphalt digging into her knees. She pinched the stick between her fingers. The sucker wobbled as she brought it close and dropped it into her hoodie pocket.

She couldn't screw up this time. Watching Mom struggle after Hailey's last—poorly executed—message had been unbearable. She'd avoided the house for months. She must get this one right. And she needed more than a sucker.

Hailey found some pink chalk on the abandoned playground. Not ideal, but it could work. She went around the corner, searching for paper, and found herself face-to-face with Logan. She scooted backward behind the dumpster. Some instincts never died.

He was smoking and laughing with another senior, ditching his last class.

“No way, man. Not Krissy,” the other guy said.

“She's going to the clearing with me in an hour,” Logan said, and withdrew a knife from his pocket.

The same one he'd used on her.

Over the years, Hailey had found some peace. She could at least pass over a rock without wanting to bash Logan's head in. Last year, she gave up on revenge and decided to help Mom move on, even if doing so hurt Hailey a little. But now her friend was in danger.

Hailey took off and arrived at the clearing before them, passing an old fire pit before coming to a giant tree. Using the chalk, she drew the letter "B" on the trunk, sawing across the bark, pressing hard to make it stick. She made an "E" on the nearest tree. Next was a "W". Her entire arm shook with effort, but she completed the "A" and the "R" and had drawn a vertical line for another "E" before hearing a girl laugh.

Logan and Krissy crashed through the bushes, already tangled in a kiss.

"Be right back." Krissy ducked into a thick area of trees.

Hailey hurriedly made the long horizontal line at the top, the short middle line, but stopped when Logan's breath caressed her neck.

He stared right through her, eyes wide as he read the warning. Sweat trickled down his brow.

Hailey's focus wavered, and the chalk slipped through her fingers.

Logan ran over and furiously rubbed the "W" with his flannel shirt, breaking off chunks of colored bark. Then he moved through Hailey and worked the "E" lines away.

Crunching twigs announced Krissy's return, naked except for her underwear.

"Miss me?" she asked.

Logan spun around and began kissing her.

She pulled away. "Why does it say, 'Bear'?"

"That's what you should be. Bare." He slapped her butt.

“You spelled it wrong, dummy.” Krissy said, planting kisses on his lips.

Hailey wanted to scream. She had to get home, but couldn’t leave Krissy alone, knowing what would happen. She went to the fire circle and picked up a brick, straining her fingers around its girth. With all the force she had left, Hailey brought it down on Logan’s head.

His skull cracked. Blood flew.

Krissy screamed and ran off.

The brick landed with a thump, followed by Logan’s crumpled body.

Hailey’s grip on the physical world slipped away, along with this year’s chance to communicate. Still, she flew home and found Mom in front of the television, an uneaten dinner cooling on the table. Hailey ached to wrap Mom in her arms, to provide comfort that her dead daughter was okay.

Desperate to leave some kind of sign, Hailey’s hand went through her pocket. She grabbed the stick. The sucker's head swung like a pendulum. With the last of her dwindling strength, she balanced the sucker upside down on its head, white stick erect, at what used to be her place at the table.

Hailey backed away, smiling. That would do.

Next year, she’d get it right.