

Chapter 1

We Are [not] Your Friends

On the 26th of April, 2034, Samantha Brooke Winters dies after she jumps from the school roof and, despite what my classmates say, it's not my fault. Though the events that come after get a little hazy, I'll do my best to tell it as truthfully as possible. But you should know I have been called a liar. They call me a lot of things. A lot of things I'm not.

On the morning of the 26th of April, 2034, Samantha Brooke Winters is discovered by the teachers in a puddle of water with a broken air conditioning unit beside her. A snapped wire from the third floor trails in the wind and hums out a static melody.

The teachers call the police immediately, but it takes over an hour before anyone shows up to move Samantha, the morning light illuminating deep red dripping through cracks in the sidewalk.

It's around this time the first students begin showing up to Hillside Academy.

Some gasp. Others cry. A few scream.

Some take pictures. Others smirk. A few giggle.

Did you know the people who take away dead bodies are not the same people who clean up what's left behind? The principal and teachers sure didn't. So the janitor has quite a surprise when he shows up for work. Soon, everything is cleaned up. As if it never happened. As if Samantha never existed. But the students whisper. They always whisper.

"Why'd she go and kill herself?"

"What'd she do it for? You were friends with her, right?"

"Ew, no. Gross. Did you ever actually talk to her?"

"I don't think she had any friends. It's so sad really."

"What a tragedy. Someone should have seen the signs."

"Good riddance. She was always so irritating. No, I never talked to her. Why?"

"Is that three or four this semester? I'm losing count. Huh? Of course she wasn't my friend."

"My dad's a cop. He said they found a suicide note on her computer."

"Shouldn't the teachers cancel class or whatever when something like this happens?"

"A suicide note! What'd it say? Tell me! Tell me!"

“Apparently that girl blamed someone for her death.”

“Who? Who? Tell us! Tell us!”

“Okay, students. Calm down. Take your seats,” the teacher yells, his voice cracking. The students of the 9th grade class reluctantly shuffle to their seats. After a minute, 30 of the 32 seats are filled.

The whispers become typing fingers under the desks, the question passed around from one to the next to all. Who did Samantha blame? And without an answer, the question fills the air like a toxic haze. One of the two empty desks belongs to Samantha. The name doesn’t come to many, but eventually everyone remembers the missing 32nd student.

“Where’s Ada?” the teacher asks innocently enough, but the idea is already burrowing its way through every one of my classmates, a whispering worm wriggling through their ears.

Two police officers stand in the doorway, silhouetted by the hallway light. Inside, the classroom swelters and the stark lightbulbs only punctuate the darkness. The teacher fidgets. The students sit, silent and waiting.

Watching the door for the 32nd student to show herself.

Waiting for me to show up.

“Please don’t force me to go today. I’m really not feeling well, I promise.”

“I called out sick for you once this week already,” Mom reminds me. “Get your butt out of bed and get ready for school. If you fail a class because you’re always skipping, don’t come crying to me.”

“Please, can you just call them one more time? I don’t think I was able to get to sleep at all last night.”

“Did you stop taking your pills again?” she asks, hovering in the doorway while I try to block out the blinding lights of the hall.

“No, I didn’t,” I lie. “But I really, really need sleep. Even a little.”

“Well, if you’re going to stay here and sleep, then you’re going to have to call the school yourself.”

I sit up quickly, wrapping my arms tightly around my pillow.

“Please, can you call them?”

“No,” Mom says and slams my bedroom door.

She comes back ten or so minutes later and finds me staring down at my phone, a number manually entered, a finger frozen over the call button. She sees frustrated tears in my eyes and calls me pathetic. She doesn't see the skin I've rubbed off on the side of my index finger, even now scraping out little drops of blood I think might somehow give me the courage to press that stupid green button. Just press it! Let it ring. Ring. Ring. Yes, hello? Hi, this is Ada Reed. I'm feeling very under the weather and I'm worried if I come to school, I might infect someone. Yeah, a friend of mine recently had mono, so I'm worried it could be that. Of course, of course. I just don't want to risk it, you know? Yes, I have someone who can bring me any handouts from class. Thank you, thank you. You have a nice day, as well. Bye bye.

It seems so easy when you lay it out like that. I wrote out the script on my notes app, but the longer I stare at it and memorize it, the less likely it seems the voice on the other end will follow along. What if they ask what friend had mono? What if they want to speak to Mom? What if they don't believe I'm sick at all? Was the script written too friendly? A sick person wouldn't be so friendly, right?

As I try answering these questions that appear, one after the other, I hear Mom's carpool friend pull up beside the sidewalk and pull away shortly after. I'm left alone in the silence of the house, knowing I could lie back down and maybe get a few good hours of sleep. And probably fail a class along with it.

I finally give up on calling and throw my phone back on the bed like it's the one infected with mono. A bad start to the day. That doesn't bode well, I think, as I suck on my bleeding finger. Starting a day without sleep, frustrated and crying, usually leads to a day that ends with pain, humiliation and more crying. I wish it wasn't so, but repeating patterns speak for themselves.

I lose track of time worrying, considering all the horrible things that might happen since the day already started so poorly. But I don't check the time to see how late I am as I leave the warmth of my bed. Meticulously tracing my thumb around each button, I unbutton my pink pajamas with bunny prints I've had for years. One. *Pop*. Two. *Pop*. Three. *Pop*. Shrugging out of my comfortable clothes, I stumble into the bathroom, cold feet slapping against the stained tiles with a hundred thousand years of grime built up between each square. I turn on the shower and put my left foot on top of my right, balancing so I can keep a foot off the ice cold tile floor

while waiting for the shower to take its darn time heating up. Not to mention that balancing on one foot usually makes the water heat up faster.

I test the water with my palm and carefully step in, pulling the curtain shut behind me. Tightly shut. But not out of some fear of shower murderers, of course. Childish unrealities I no longer need to concern myself with. Despite how *very* alone I am in the house. Despite how *very* unlocked the front door could be. Despite how *very* quickly anyone could walk up those stairs and open my bedroom door and stab me while my eyes are shut up with shampoo. It would be ridiculous to worry about something like that. *But did I lock my bedroom door when I left the bed?*

Not worth concerning myself over, of course.

But it was a good question, wasn't it?

I mean, better safe than sorry, right?

It would be better to check, that way I don't have to worry while I wash my hair. My feet slap against the tile again and I stand in my bathroom, dripping wet and naked. I can't use the towel because that's the last part of the process. I drip water across my bedroom and check the lock on my bedroom door.

Unlocked.

A good thing I checked.

I lock the door and check the doorknob three times to be sure.

And I'm back in the shower a moment later. See, no inconvenience at all. The water in my bedroom will dry by the time I'm home. And the floor's all warped and sagging anyway.

Shower water tangles its way through long hair, eventually turning my hair into a heavy wet mass that slaps my back and sticks to the walls and ties itself into knots. By the time I'm done riding my bike to school, it'll be dry. And a mess. But that gives me an excuse to spend the downtime after first period hiding out in the bathroom fixing it instead of pushing through the crowd and having to stand next to people at my locker. It all works out when you plan inconveniences out like that. Mom thinks I should cut it all off, go with short hair. But I don't think I'm ready for that. Its inconvenience is almost a comfort—one of the only things that's stuck with me all these years after moving into the city.

I hop out of the shower and towel first my face and hair, then my arms, then my body, then my legs. My ears are still a little wet after all that, so I grab a new towel and dry them off.

The warm water cleared my head a bit and I almost feel confident about the day. Then I wipe a hand across my foggy mirror and the realities rush back.

I hate the mirror. I hate that I have to exist as a physical entity that others can see and judge and criticize and form whatever opinions they want about me. And I can't do anything about it. I hate that I don't look like I imagine myself to be. Always shorter, smaller, more childish, and more stupid-looking than I like to believe I actually am. Stupid dark purple bags under my eyes from countless sleepless nights. My stupid frail shoulders that look like they might snap if you touch them. I hate how my hair always looks like I spent a night tossing and turning, no matter how I wash it. I hate the face I make when I make no face at all. I hate the smile that only ever gets frowns. I hate the frown that looks like a toddler throwing a fit. I hate watching myself choke down the pills every morning. I hate catching movement out of the corner of my eye when I walk to the bathroom in the dark. I hate the feeling of someone's eyes following me. And I hate the feeling I can't shake that the shadow of me in the mirror is watching as I pass. Inevitably confronting my image in the mirror with all the dread of a girl in a horror movie turning a corner in the dark.

I hate my whole stupid body that everyone always calls 'small' and 'cute' in that overly familiar, insincere way that makes you feel like a new puppy. I remember a month ago, this girl from class told me while applying her makeup, "You've got such a childish body, Ada. I envy you—it'd save me a lot of trouble not needing to buy new clothes all the time." She pronounced it 'Ay-da' like the A in 'aimless'. I've asked people to pronounce it 'A-da' with the A in 'apple,' but no one remembers and I never mention it anymore. I told the girl I still have plenty of years to grow. And, besides, there's no problem being a little late, even if it means you still get treated like an elementary student.

I don't think that's what I actually said back to her, but if that's how I remember it, then that's what must have happened. That's how it recorded on emot3, after all.

No use looking in the mirror longer than necessary. I wrap the oversized towel tightly around me, making sure not to touch it to my face, but letting it drape to my ankles, swaddled and hiding me in it, comforting and warm like I imagine hugs are supposed to feel.

It reminds me of the comfort I'd feel back in bed, and I briefly consider giving up this whole crusade of going to school. I look at the time. 7:55. Class starts at 8:00. 15-minute bike ride

to school. I sigh, hating how high-pitched and silly my weak voice sounds in the dead silence, reminding me of a little kid whining, "I don't wanna go!"

Not wanting to deal with getting yelled at by Mom, I carefully hang the towel up, wash my hands, and put on my school uniform—a plaid skirt and a scratchy polo shirt that I am the only one who ever seems to wear. Somehow all the other girls get away with wearing just about anything. I finish getting ready—brushing my teeth, drying and combing my hair a bit, dismissing the digital reminder that goes off in my head to take my pills that Mom forced me to set for myself, and briefly washing my hands again—grab my backpack, unlock my bedroom door, and tentatively step out into a dark hallway.

Mom must have turned the lights off before she left. There's no window in the hall and the light switch is all the way at the stairs. I hurry to it, uneasy in this in-between space that isn't my own, and rush down the stairs, keeping the middle finger and thumb of my right hand tracing down the railing to keep the creaky stairs from cracking and collapsing. I try and fail to ignore the empty living room and a shattered glass cup still strewn across the floor from last night. The alcohol's dried into the carpet, so the smell's not too bad. I'm not sure who threw it last night, but I heard the yelling. The angry words. Dad slamming the front door when he left.

I pull on the front door and it gets caught like it always does. It takes practically all my strength to open it far enough to squeeze out. It's been that way since we first moved here a few years ago, following Dad from our small town to the big city after his former job could no longer afford us any sort of housing. With his new job, we were allowed to apply for government housing. It may not be in a safe area and it may be over an hour from Dad's work, it may be infested with roaches, and it may have a broken door we can't afford to fix, but it's enough for me and Mom and Dad. And I have my own bedroom with a nice lock and my own bathroom with hot water that usually lasts at least fifteen minutes, so there's really nothing worth complaining about. There's much worse trouble out there. Outside the house.

I close the door shut behind me, lock it, and check the time. It's 8:13. I wait until 8:15 before hopping on my bike. Unfortunately, buses don't come this way. We have two cars, but electricity is expensive, so Mom carools and Dad runs up the bill every time he drives home. I don't have anyone to carpool with and wish most days I had the kind of cash to call a driverless car to take me to school. No human contact and I can bury myself in the backseat. But we don't have that kind of rich-people money. So I bike and ignore the looks I get. Dad reminds me it's

good exercise and that fresh air is super great and everything, and really that's enough to sustain me. Because once I get my music going and I pedal off the sidewalk to the song that's been playing one line on repeat in my mind all morning, the world is almost as it should be. Nothing to complain about as I set out down the deserted, narrow streets of my neighborhood. And for the short duration of that first song, I'm happy. Or something like it, anyway. Something you could almost believe is actual happiness.

An ashy sky is a fogged-up mirror reflecting miles of ugly streets and uniform buildings.

I ride on, following power lines that branch off in a thousand directions. Most neighborhoods have torn them all down, putting new power lines underground. But not our neighborhood. We still lose power every thunderstorm. But one day, even these humming power lines will be replaced and what was once brand new and irreplaceable dies and becomes a 2000-word Wikipedia article only searched for research papers and pointless trivia.

The last power lines clasp limp arms, hanging in the air like old cobwebs to be swept away.

When I arrive in the school courtyard, the first thing I notice is the janitor lugging a bucket with a sponge floating on top. Red liquid sloshes over the edge and spills onto the grass. Next I see the police cars. Three of them. Two officers lean against one, and stare as I pass. I keep my eyes on the ground, walking my bike to the bike rack. I piece things together. Another suicide. That makes four students this semester.

I lock my bike wheels and spend approximately 60 seconds psyching myself up to walk through the school's double doors, the police officers' eyes eating into my back the whole time. As long as I stay here, I'll never have to know who died. I won't have to sit quietly and hear the horrible words my classmates will say about them. I won't be pressured by the teachers to share a recorded memory of the dead. How I'll have to tell those white lies and say, "We weren't close, but they were always very nice." When I never once talked to them. "We might have even become friends. I wish I had reached out and gotten closer with them when I had the chance." Not that anyone ever asks me, so I never have to lie and make it seem like I have friends.

Because really, ever since moving to the city, I've only had one. And stepping into the school building, something sinister whispers at the back of my mind that I already know who died. Because it really couldn't be anyone other than her.

The door of my classroom squeals open like a pig being stretched until it rips. 33 pairs of eyes snap in my direction, full of malice and contempt, but I ignore them. I keep staring at the ground, taking note of my steps and the chambering echo they make. Or is it my heartbeat? I sit myself at my desk over thirty minutes late and dart my eyes out the window. And hold them there. Refusing to look anywhere else. The sky has darkened further, and I can't help but see the reflection of the classroom and those 33 pairs of eyes from the students, the teacher, and the officers in the blackened mirror. And the reflection is murderous.

My homeroom teacher, Mr. Holden, coughs to get the class's attention, but no one turns. They stare at me. I clasp my hands together and fidget in my seat, scratching the side of my index finger with my thumbnail.

"Class, if I could again have your attention—Ada, thank you for deciding to join us," Mr. Holden says, loosening his tie. "Now that we're all here, Officer Benson and Officer Hines are going to take you out of the classroom one at a time to talk with you. There's nothing to be concerned about. Um, Ada, they'd like to speak with you first."

And I finally turn, confused. Maybe it hits me at that moment, but I'm too scared to believe it. I look at Mr. Holden helplessly and, after a stunned silence, slide out of my chair and walk to the front of the class, gripping the folds of my skirt as tightly as I can between my fingers. Eyes glued to the floor as I follow the officers out.

Even as I leave, I feel their eyes on me, and I know they listen to my fading footsteps.

They take me to the school counselor's office, which is empty. I've never been in this office, because our insurance doesn't cover school counselor visits. They seat me on one side of the desk and they on the other. Happy motivational posters plastered to the wall mock me. "Your best is always good enough!" "Be yourself and people will love you for you!" "Don't let negativity get you down (maybe it's time to upgrade your SELtech brain chip to the newest emotIV model!)"

"We're not here to hurt you, Ada. Or accuse you of anything. We just have some questions we'd like you to answer for us. Is that alright?" The first officer, a woman wearing a name tag reading 'W. Hines', says, while the second pulls out a notepad and recorder.

I try not to move, my hands planted firmly in my lap. But I can't stop the shaking and my left leg nervously bouncing up and down.

“Do you know the situation, Miss Reed?” asks the second officer, a big man with a bald head.

I pathetically shake my head a few times, staring intently at a pen on the desk, trying to force all my attention onto it. A black ballpoint pen. One of those hundred dollar ones you only get as a gift from your boss or a parent who doesn’t know how to buy gifts for their adult children. It has a gold band around it and—

“One of your classmates, Samantha Winters, committed suicide this morning. We’ve been led to believe she was a friend of yours. Is this correct?”

—It’s got a fancy cap on it and a name engraved in silver on the side and and and and. It’s...there’s...the pen...it’s...I can’t. I can’t. It’s not true. She’s not dead. It couldn’t be her.

I say nothing.

“We’d like to know if you know anything about this. Is there any reason she might have done this? Do you know if she struggled with anxiety or depression?”

The officer leaves a space of silence for me to think and speak, but I say nothing.

“Do you know if there has been any bullying going on?”

“Oftentimes,” the female officer interjects. “Bullying can be a big factor when people choose to end their life. If there is any of that going on in your class, you can tell us. You’re safe to say whatever you need to. What you say here is confidential.”

The officer smiles, but I glance at the recorder. Her smile drops.

“There’s something else you should know. If you’re going to remain silent. Samantha’s parents found a note open on her computer. We have their permission to read it to you at our discretion. We are going to read it now unless you have any objections.”

I meet her eyes for a fraction of a second before my eyes race around the room. Furiously scratching the side of my index finger. Over and over. I don’t look down to see if it’s started bleeding again. I nod slowly.

“Her Worshippers told me there was a better place on what they called the Outside. It didn’t make sense to me at the time. I mean, I hate this atrocious world as much as the next Gen Alpha born after everything hit the fan. But it just didn’t seem punk enough to me. Seemed like another excuse to give up. But I changed. We all did. I’m sorry, mom and dad. But I can’t stay here any more. Reality is so crowded. And I’ve been suffocating for so long. I don’t want to stay in this body any longer. I’m ugly and fat and dying and on some PTSD trip just from existing in

this tech-obsessed world that somehow owns my own memories and dreams. Like, really, why am I the only one who sees how awful things are and how much worse they're getting all the time? Being forced to acknowledge every awful thing that's happening every awful second of every day, being blamed for every bit of it, then having to parade around like the world isn't going to collapse in on itself any second now. We're all doomed anyway. What's the harm in getting a head start, I started to think to myself. Humanity is a disease. We're all walking diseases. I can't cure the world, but I can cure myself. I was going to stick around a little longer. Mom and dad, I tried to stick around as long as I could for you. But in the end, it's the funniest thing, it was my friend who finally convinced me to end it. If you want to know why I did it, ask Ada Reed. She's the cause of all this. She pushed me over the edge.”

The world spins and reality melts. I fall into some kind of pulpy darkness with no way out. Hot tears pool in my eyes, and my mouth opens and closes. I want to say something, anything. But I don't know what. I don't know anything.

“Ada, we're not accusing you. But we need to know why Samantha wrote this.”

“Sam,” I say.

“What?”

“Sam. Sh-she liked to go by Sam. Not Samantha.”

“Alright. Then do you know why Sam wrote this about you?”

I shake my head forcefully, spraying tears out from under my eyelids. They stream down and I can't stop them. My head starts hurting.

“Ada, you must know something,” the female officer insists, but to me, it's a scream of anger.

“Uh-uh,” is all I can manage, sobs beginning to rack my body. I bury my face in my arms, still shaking my head back and forth. I can't stop it. Back and forth. It's all I can do. The only way of pleading innocent I know, or maybe I'm trying to keep the truth from burrowing into my brain. “I don't know. I don't know anything. She's my friend. Please...I don't know.”

“Ada, you need to speak with us. Tell us something. Anything!” the officer's words reach a fever pitch.

“No, I don't know.”

In my head, a percussion of dark trills and an untuned violin screech across strings. It's going to blow out my eardrums. Blood leaks out of my ears as the police officers rain down question after question, more and more and more frantic.

I keep shaking my head, my eyes buried in the dark of my arm, screaming louder and louder, "I don't know! Please, I don't know!"

But they don't stop. One after the other. Question upon question. Accusations and accusations. *Why did she kill herself? Was it your fault? Did you kill her? You'll go to prison, you know? They lock up brats like you for murder, you know? You killed Sam and you think you can get away with it? I bet you thought you could. Pushed her to the edge until she had no other option but to jump. Ugly, fat, and dying. That's what she said. Is that what you told her?*

"I don't know! Just stop! Please."

Voices inside me manifest, a million questions in my own head drown out all other voices. And the violins add one atop another, each rising in intensity and pitch, louder until my head is ready to burst.

What did I do? What did I do? Is it really my fault? Did I kill her? Why did she blame me? She's my only friend. I wouldn't have. I couldn't have. It couldn't be my. It is my fault. It must be my fault. I killed Sam. I killed Sam. I killed Sam. I killed —

"Stop!" I scream.

"She's starting a Rainy Cloud," someone says. "Calm her down! Quick!"

I feel cold metal behind my ear and then the pain of a baseball bat driving a nail through my head. And then, the strings snap.

Everything is silent. I open my eyes a few minutes later and find myself lying on a couch in the counselor's office. The female officer kneels beside me. The other speaks into his radio outside.

"How are you?" she asks, smiling at me. "Are you feeling alright? We're sorry we asked you so many questions. We know this is a lot to take in all at once and we should have gone much slower. So we're really sorry."

"Are my ears bleeding?"

"What?"

"My ears. Are they still bleeding?"

“Um, no. They’re completely fine. No bleeding. We thought you were going to start a Rainy Cloud here in the office, so we got your SELtech brain chip to briefly restart with this little device that we police are required to carry.” She holds up a small metallic cylinder. “But that wouldn’t have caused any bleeding. After you collapsed, we put you here and talked to your teacher. He explained the situation with your health and he’s going to make you some tea. Would you like that? Some tea?”

I nod politely. “I’m sorry,” I whimper.

“Oh, that’s alright, Ada,” the officer says with a warm, understanding smile. “I know it can be overwhelming to be hit with so many questions. I’d want to scream out like that, too.”

“No. I’m sorry I can’t help you. I really don’t know...I don’t know anything.”

The officer pauses and frowns, then stands and leaves my side. She doesn’t come back.

The big officer with the bald head comes in a few minutes later. He asks a few of the same questions, but, as calmly as I can, I explain the same thing to him. That I know nothing. He asks if they could get written permission to access my stored memories in the event they can find answers there. I say no immediately. He tells me a statistic on how many unsolved crimes are solved when witnesses allow an AI to scan their memories for pertinent information and that none of the memories are recorded or saved by the police. I try more politely to tell him no. He says if more students die, I would be partially responsible because I didn’t aid the investigation. I explain I don’t want the police watching my memories and won’t change my mind, and he finally gives up, leaving me alone in the room.

I walk back to class ten minutes later—never having gotten tea—still feeling that heightened sense of panic that turns the walls stark white. I hear the minute whirring of my emot3 brain chip recalibrating or something and each time it whirs, a screw spirals deeper into my brain. My blood pumps hard through my head when I enter the classroom. I sit back in my chair as the officers leave with another student. And I hear the whispers. All of them. All breathing poison. Rumors, lies, and conjecture I can’t do anything about. The teacher leaves the room—needing a word with the police—and the whispers become voices. And the voices become students who turn on me.

“How’d you do it?” one asks, showing teeth. “How’d you get her to kill herself?”

I don’t speak, hurriedly opening a textbook and trying to concentrate on anything other than the shadows around me.

“So it’s true she wrote about you in her suicide note? Did she mention anyone else?”

“I heard she blamed you. Is that true? You must’ve done something seriously messed up for her to write your name down!”

“I thought you two were friends?”

“Are they gonna arrest you?”

I speak, having a hard time getting the two words out. “Shut up.”

“Oh, the freak speaks. I didn’t even know you *could* talk! Thought you’d taken a vow of silence.” I look up. Marissa leers over me. The spray-tanned adult-wannabe wearing a pound of makeup, her shirt unbuttoned two too many, trying to impress the boys. Her skirt too short for regulation, but our teacher never says anything about it. I’d call her a bully, but apparently as long as you’re not physically hurting other students or making death threats, it doesn’t count. “I guess it’s dog-eat-dog, isn’t it? The bitch who offed herself was intruding on your territory. I’ve seen you over here, always so quiet, like you’re planning something. You’re probably the reason we have those door jammers in every classroom, isn’t it? She was just like you. An unnatural freak who we’d all be better without. But I gotta applaud you. We’re all super happy to be rid of her.”

I rise violently, knocking my chair hard against the floor. I glare up at Marissa, only coming up to her neck. She hesitates for a moment. Only a moment.

“What?” Marissa hisses. “You’re gonna try to kill me like you killed her? I’d like to see you prove me right, freak.”

Before I can decide what I want to do, the light above my head flickers. The bobbing heads of 30 students droop. And all at once, skin-colored liquid drips from the tops of their heads. Slowly at first, but then more. *Drip drip drip*. Their eyelids heavy, and dribbling over their eyes and down their faces, candles in a fire. Devilish smiles sink into hideous grimaces of pain and regret. Smiles leaking off their faces and puddling on the floor. Eyes sink and, one after another, pop from their skulls and bounce along the floor. Bodies sag against their chairs and desks like discarded clothing. Skin melting like candle wax, until nothing remains but emptiness. 30 hollow faceless.

And I’m telling myself it’s not real. Because of course it can’t be real. The anxiety playing tricks on my emot3 brain chip and making me see things. But telling myself doesn’t help. Because the lies my brain forces me to confront is my whole, inescapable reality. There’s

laughter from somewhere and it's too familiar and it scares me and I tell myself to wake up and if I don't believe it then it won't be there anymore but it doesn't go away and the pools of skin gestate, amassing into a nauseating blob of rotting flesh and spinning eyeballs that isn't real but it feels real and I'm not waking up and Mom said—*Mom said*—this would happen if I stopped taking my pills and the thing grows tendrils arms and grips the desks with two now three now four arms and pulls itself up shaking like a newborn trying to walk, all my classmates a collective, gelatinous mass of decay trying to hurt me and tear me apart to get at my insides and devour every happy memory I had with Sam.

Trembling, I snatch my backpack in my arms and swing it around in front of me like it can protect me but it can't protect me from myself because I created it in my mind. And it notices me and 60 eyes stare into me, hungry, moving at me with furious speed but I'm already running. Out of the classroom across the hall down the stairs crashing through the front doors racing across the courtyard not looking back. If I look back, it'll be there for sure. But if I can hide in my bed sheets, I can push it away. Back into my mind and forget about it.

I knew today would be horrible. I knew it. I knew it and I didn't listen to myself.

I reach the edge of the school, where the grass meets the sidewalk, and can no longer move. Held in place by invisible arms which grab me and pull at me and their fingers scrape me and peel away my skin—but it isn't real—spindly fingers moving across me, sending lightning bolts of electricity into me—but I'm telling myself over and over *it isn't really there*—and I feel my lip splitting open and my mouth filling with blood—but it isn't really, just like my bleeding ear—and I watch zigzagging patterns of electricity arcing in a dome around the school trapping me in a cage. There's never any leaving. Never any real escape. Only the ever-present prison cell of reality. Inescapable even as the world begins to eat itself alive.

Chapter 2

Random Access Memory

I find myself breathing again, lying on the classroom floor in a small puddle of blood. I pick myself up, a stinging in my lip. Put a finger to it, find it bleeding. And all the students backed as far away from me as possible, watching me like I'd shot someone.

Marissa is still on the floor, curled up in a fetal position, slowly trembling, holding a fist tightly against the side of her head. Her hand twitches and a rush of blood spreads through her fingers and down her arm. I think most of the blood on the floor is hers. I hold my backpack, its weight like a ton of bricks, a red smear on the side. Everything comes together. I sling it onto my back and it becomes lighter until its weight ceases to exist. I try to put it out of mind. Throwing a desperate look at my classmates—still frozen—I back away from the scene, wanting the classroom to recede away. For this to be a dream like before.

It's not fair. This shouldn't happen. Not anymore.

"I'm sorry," is all I can say, shutting my eyes tightly against the shivering and sobbing picture of Marissa bloodied on the floor. And then I run. Cold darkness at my back, I run. Out of the building, grabbing my bike, ignoring the police officers, and biking as hard as I can. I don't stop until I'm home.

I cough up exhaustion at the door. The darkness backs away. Whatever pursued me all this way has let me be.

Putting on a brave face, I open the door and slip inside, tasting the stench of week-old trash overflowing, of stale dust gathered from years of neglect, of cigarette smoke clinging to the furniture that came with the house, and of that sour alcohol smell staining the carpet like a crime scene.

I hurry upstairs, taking care to avoid the creaky sections of the staircase, imagining Mom at work receiving a call from my school. "Hello?...Yes, this is she...She did *what* now?"

Into my room. Shut the door. Lock it tightly behind me. Even put a chair against the doorknob in preparation for whenever Mom gets home. I want to crawl into bed and shut out everything, but decide against it. There's somewhere else I can go to escape.

The computer screen lights up from across the room. RGB expanse. A square light against the blackness of my unlit room. I stumble over, shedding my school clothes, and sit

myself at the computer desk at the end of the room. My back is to the door, which makes me uneasy, but this spot gets the best internet service.

It's an older computer, a hand-me-down from Dad with an out-of-date CPU, but a new graphics card I spent years saving up for. It always runs hot, which is a blessing in the winter when it keeps my feet warm while the heating in our house refuses to work properly.

I carry the cursor over to LYFE and double-click. The screen showcases a sweep of sea and sky. The bright lights of a distant city and the sway of palm trees set against audio of crashing waves and cawing seagulls. It's only an image inside the rectangle of my screen, though. For users with VRne, it's a virtual paradise. VRne, named after the classic adventure author Jules Verne, creates an endless expanse you can touch and experience as if you were there. You'd smell the sea salt and feel the heat of the sun. I spent forever doing small freelance coding jobs anonymously for people on the internet to save up enough money, but you also need the newest SELtech brain chip, emotIV—the fourth generation, pronounced like 'emotive'—for VRne to be compatible. I'm still running emot3—'emote'—so until then, this is all I've got.

I tab over to my Activity Feed and notice my friend, TinyMouse2020, hosting a discussion over on her page. My avatar fast travels over and drops in.

(Loveless) HAS JOINED THE SESSION, THERE ARE 232 OTHER WORSHIPPERS CURRENTLY CONNECTED.

(TinyMouse2020) SELtech spends years on this new update and pushes it out before it's ready for the market. That's just a plain and simple fact. They promised that the Rainy Cloud glitch was solved for good, yet here we are. The stats show there's just as many Rainy Clouds with emotIV as there have been with emot3.

(RoseTntd) It's simply greed. SELtech could literally threaten to short-circuit our chips and kill us if we didn't give them money. It's a hostage situation we've allowed ourselves to get caught up in. No wonder White_Clown has gained so many supporters in recent years.

(TinyMouse2020) emotIV is a huge leap forward in so many ways, they just rushed it out before it was ready. As long as we can stay at the forefront like we did with emot3, maybe we can end up with all the benefits and none of the drawbacks. Oh hey, everybody listening in! Loveless is here! Feel free to jump in if you have anything to add, Loveless.

(RoseTntd) Speaking of staying at the forefront, maybe if Loveless can work their magic again and open-source emotIV, we stand a chance against the insane costs SELtech is burdening us with.

(Oysterbabies) They charge my family over \$250 a month per person just for basic memory recording and sharing.

(RoseTntd) What's crazy is even if you stopped paying, they'd be recording your memories regardless. You're new to this chat, right?

(Oysterbabies) Yeah, but I know what Loveless did. They created the firewall plugin that keeps SELtech from digging through memories without permission.

(TinyMouse2020) And open-sourced the memory cloud storage so people can download their memories and keep them on private drives.

(Loveless) It really isn't as crazy as all that. emot3 had an easily exploitable glitch.

(TinyMouse2020) Don't downplay yourself. There's a reason the best coders, hackers, and punks want you on their chat page.

(Loveless) Yeah, well, I like it here. It's cozier than the pages that can't stop talking about the best way to destroy SELtech.

(Oysterbabies) You don't think SELtech is bad?

(Loveless) I didn't say that.

(RoseTntd) SELtech always over-promises, under-delivers, and puts us all on in danger.

(TinyMouse2020) Look, we get it. Rainy Clouds killed some people. And I'm not saying SELtech doesn't deserve the 'evil' label because of it, but you can't say everything is dangerous just because it comes from them.

(RoseTntd) They also made big promises about fixing the emotion regulation. But the chips still aren't capable of handling much emotional nuance. Sure, if you're having a bad day because you failed a test, it can pump a little serotonin into your head to make you feel better and help you focus on the next test. Maybe help you recall a good memory when you need a nostalgia-boost. But beyond that, it gets pretty dicey, and I've heard some horror stories about how the chip chooses to handle some things. I'll say it again that emotIV needed another year in development, but they rushed it out because of greed.

(TinyMouse2020) But other people have found it to be extremely therapeutic. I'm sure they'll upload a patch in a few months that touches things up.

(RoseTntd) They said the same about the Rainy Clouds.

(TinyMouse2020) Touché. Oh, Loveless, I forgot to send this to you. It might not be super relevant until you get emotIV, but here's hoping you can make something of it.

My ROY device buzzes to life.

"Mew-mew. You received a link from (TinyMouse2020). Would you like me to open and scan it now, Miss Ada?"

"Yeah, I guess you might as well," I respond to the little device whirling around the desk. He's an old plush cat I've had practically all my life who I turned into a robot and gave a personality when I was first getting into coding. It's a simple AI program I put a couple of months of work into, and he's useful for automating tasks and doing basic coding work. Here I have him downloading and scanning several gigabytes worth of documents from TinyMouse2020 for any viruses and spyware.

I thought I'd be clever and make his tail extra long and have it be the USB cord. Now I think it looks kind of stupid. So I programmed him to chase his tail around the room every now and then. The meows and cat puns were an add-on I downloaded.

He blinks at me a few times and scales the side of the computer.

"Here you go, mew-mew." A series of PDFs open one after the other. SELtech's software patents and firmware. The documents are highly classified, but it didn't take more than a few weeks for hackers to get ahold of it. Glad TinyMouse2020 managed to get a link. Probably had to pay a heck of a lot to some broker off the clearnet. I'll have to do something to thank her soon.

"What page is the patent description on? Scroll there."

"I've meownaged to find it—no thanks to your computer's old CPmUw. Page 67 coming right up, Miss Ada."

"Thank you," I say with a smile to my little robot pet. When we first moved to the city, I wrote a script so my downloaded memories could be accessed by Roy, meaning he can know what's been going on in my life and relate. In a way, it makes him my oldest friend.

And now your only friend. Hope you don't kill this one too.

I try to shrug off the thought, but can't. I've only been away from the LYFE page for a couple minutes, but already the voices are returning. And the image of Marissa lying on the ground. Thinking it might be better if...

I named myself Loveless as a nod to Ada Lovelace, the first computer programmer. While she pronounces her name differently than mine, I thought I was being terribly clever naming myself Loveless. Not that anyone would get the reference, because no one online knows my name is Ada—and that's the way it should always be.

Because on the internet, I'm Loveless, someone different, someone better. In the real world, well, we all wish we were someone else.

I take the USB-C cord and plug it into the spot behind my ear where my brain chip is. I can't put this off any longer.

"Roy, please download all memories from the time I left the house up to returning, and make sure they're on my private server."

"Of course!" Roy purrs. "I estimate the time it will take to download is 22 mewnutes. You meow-meow-might want to grab a snack while you wait. Would you like me to put on some mew-sic or a TV show while you wait?"

"Not now. I'll take the silence."

I trail the long cord into my bathroom, catch my reflection out of the corner of my eye, my entire chin caked in dried blood. I wash it off, taking care not to open the deep cut on my lower lip. I didn't realize how much it was throbbing until now.

A sharp knock on the door. *Knock. Knock. Knock.* The angry voice of Mom, who must have just returned. I cover my ears and try to drown out the sound. Eventually, she stops screaming and leaves.

The shadows cover the floor of my bedroom as the sun goes down. I don't look at the time. I scroll down the list of memory files I've stored up for years, inputting a tag "(Person:Samantha_Winters) OR (User:SamBW)" for a list of all my recorded memories with Sam in them. There's a lot of boring class lectures. Seated next to her in class, she shows up in practically all the memories I once saved in case I needed to refer back to class lectures for studying purposes. I never do.

Our monthly subscription model only allows for a limited number of hours of memories to be uploaded to the cloud every month. You can pay for more hours, but Mom works two jobs and Dad travels and works overtime to make ends meet as it is. The internet may see Loveless as this altruistic cyberpunk who stuck it to SELtech, but really I only wanted to record more memories without having to pay for more cloud storage.

And to keep whoever is out there from peeking at your memories. If emotIV un-privates them, who knows, maybe the police will read your memories and see all that craziness when you attacked Marissa, the horrible monsters your mind creates, and they'll know you're insane.

I try the search again, adding a few NOTs to the boolean to cut out class time. When the search finishes, there's only a couple dozen memories left.

“What?” I ask, checking to make sure I made no mistake. Why are there so few memories?

“Roy?” I try, only to remember I shut him off a short while ago.

The room is dark and the only light comes from the glare of the monitor. There should be more memories, right? Did I really not record that many? All that time with Sam, and all I have are a handful of memories.

I open the first and the video plays on the screen.

Sam and I eat lunch together. She laughs. I laugh. The conversation isn't about anything in particular. As completely unimportant as any conversation ever could be. But I try to preserve every word.

Talking in the backseat as her dad drives me home. I don't even see her face in this one. I do see the big billboards outside the car. Billboards for Laicus services, Sizzle Soda, and a five-stack burger from Big Barn. The rest of the memory is a bit hazy and smudged, but the advertisements are vivid.

We're sitting on the school roof, eating lunch again. Sam talks about the crush she has on some boy named Dan. “Don't you think any of the boys are cute?” she asks. “I guess.” I shrug. When I know none of them will ever look my way, what's the point in having a crush.

After school, by the bike rack, my bike the only one there like always, Sam hands me a USB. “Don't get yourself into more trouble than you need to.” “I'm always careful.” “I know. It's just...you know.”

"Next up, Ada Reed," Mr. Holden says. "What did you bring to show us?" I clutch the box against me, walking to the front of the class. Sam looks out the window, not paying attention. "I...I..." I stammer out, my body shaking. Sam looks my way out of curiosity, but in the moment, I'm afraid she's going to mock me like all the others must be. The weird girl who just moved to the city, who thinks bringing her pet in a cardboard box is an acceptable show and tell. They must all laugh behind my back. I turn off this memory of fifth grade. We didn't even know each other at the time.

I wave at Sam as she leans over the bridge. A more recent memory. She doesn't notice me at first, so I go over and tap her on the shoulder. "Oh, Ada," she says as if I've brought her out of a deep thought. I look off the bridge. It's a dried-out waterway filled with Sizzle Soda cans, used needles, and other trash. There looks to be a few dead rats down there too, but it's the logo on the cans that stands out the most. "What were you thinking about?" "Oh, nothing much." "Hm? Okay. Hey, did you read what TinyMouse said? She said she []." Sam isn't paying much attention and her attention drifts.

We exit a store, but the name is obscured. A nearby alley is pixelated with broken data. "Say, Ada. Have you heard about []?" "Only rumors on the internet." I try to look at Sam, her face downcast. Darkness catches it, blurring it. "I've been digging around [] a lot and [] I can only []. They say it's beautiful there." "You sound crazy when you talk like that," I laugh. Sam doesn't laugh. And when she looks up at me, it's only the outline I see. The outline of features, the smudges of an image warped from digital decay. "I really think []. They might be right." "And what if they are?" "It's [], a place where []. No need to []. I could...we could finally [], free of []. Wouldn't that be wonderful, Ada? No longer any pain of [], we can [] however we want." "It sounds too good to be true," I tell her. "Yeah," she sighs, her body a contorted mess of digital noise like a dead channel on a pre-internet television. I can't see her at all and her words are almost entirely lost. "Ada, please, just promise me that []." I see myself scratching my index finger as I tell Sam, "Yeah, I promise."

I unplug the USB-C from my head, the tactile sense of those memories fading almost immediately. I lean back in my chair. Between the missing recorded memories and the corruption of these, I'm sure of one thing.

“Somehow, someone has tampered with my memories,” I tell Roy, but he rests in silence. Only my own voice echoes back to me in the dark.

When I close my eyes to sleep, my eyeballs never sit right. As I toss and turn in bed, it never feels like my eyes are where they’re supposed to be. Maybe that’s why it always takes me so long to fall asleep. Are they rolled back too far or lolling too much to the left or right? Am I staring too intently ahead into my eyelids? I open my eyes over again, trying to reset them. It never works.

I abandon the idea of sleep for the moment and stare at the ceiling. I’ve memorized the arrangement of my room so perfectly, so carefully, I can recreate it in my mind without problem. If even the smallest thing was out of place, the walls would collapse. I say I keep my computer desk where it is because it gets the best wifi, but really it might be because the desk holds up the wall and keeps the pipes from bursting scalding water on my head while I sleep. A row of old stuffed animals sits under my window to guard me from whatever may want to devour me outside in the night. A collection of decomposing cardboard boxes I can’t convince myself to throw away keeps the nightmares from growing worse. And if I ever had to see the space beneath my bed in the dark, I’d go blind.

I hear whispers from outside my window and pretend not to notice. Faint snickers from down the street. Whenever I feel like someone is watching me, peeking through my blinds and observing my every move, I remind myself that no one would care enough to watch someone like me. It helps a little.

I run through as many memories of my childhood as I can remember, but it’s hard. Nothing comes but the memories I have already downloaded and often watch on repeat after long school days. Some of them were recorded during the time, and some I pieced together later, but they make up all I remember about life before the city. Nothing beside remains.

I try to picture Sam’s face. Even in my mind, her face is smudged and corrupted. Without a recording, nothing new comes. Several years of chatting, shared lunches, walks from school, car rides, and happy moments continue to slip from my mind, like ghosts clawing toward the sky before I can grab them and hold them down, hold them tightly. Her face is only an outline, and her smile has ceased to ever exist. Nothing beside remains.

Abandoning the idea of sleep entirely, I get up some hours before dawn and rub nightmares from my eyes. I peer out my bedroom door. I was so afraid to confront Mom that I haven't eaten.

Fearful of making a sound, I tiptoe around creaky steps and use the bannister, gripping it with my middle finger and thumb, to keep the weight off my feet as I descend into the pitch black of the living room. That familiar stench of alcohol—but it takes me too long to link the smell to the broken glass from last night. With a soft crunch, the sole of my foot pushes a small piece of glass further down into the carpet, and deep into my foot. I let out a sharp squeak before hopping away and trying to dislodge the piece while leaning against the wall.

It takes a firm grip to grab ahold of and pull. My fingers keep slipping off, slick with a steady drip of blood. Bite my tongue to keep from crying out. Not too successfully. Squeeze hard and tug. It eventually comes out with a slippery sound like a smacking wet tongue against the roof of a mouth. Stinging tears as I throw the glass shard away, frantic, continuing into the kitchen, stepping on the side of my foot.

I stumble to the refrigerator and open into its sterile light in the darkness. Before I can grab the gallon of nearly-expired milk, there's a click and the kitchen lights up.

Mom stands in the doorway—the only exit—glaring at me with the sleepy stare of someone upset at being awoken.

"You didn't answer when I called you. The school phoned and told me what you did."

I say nothing.

"Are you still taking your pills?"

I remain silent.

Mom lets out a frustrated sigh like this isn't worth dealing with. Especially at this time of night.

"If you lose your scholarships over this, you know we can't afford to keep you at that school. If I get another call about your behavior, I'll have to tell your dad about it."

My fingers clench around the fridge handle.

"Now close the damn fridge and get back to bed. I swear if you wake me up again... And wash that cut on your foot. I don't want it getting infected. We don't have the money for any more medical bills."

With the kitchen light, I now see the bloody footprints I left on the tiled floor.

I nod, scared to meet her eyes.

"Don't you nod at me, Ada," she says. "I need to hear a 'yes, ma'am' from you."

"Yes, ma'am," I mumble and hurry past Mom with my face down.

"And mop up this blood in the morning. It's your own damn fault you didn't pick up the glass when you got home before me. Think about that next time before you wake me up with your crying."

But I'm up the stairs before I hear the last of her anger. I count myself lucky she didn't make a bigger deal about hitting Marissa. And for not telling Dad.

I wash the cut and hold a towel against it until the blood stops. All things considered, the cut isn't too deep, but the amount of blood to come out of that tiny cut worries me. I tie a rag around the cut and hobble back to bed. But first, I stop at the sink and grab the orange plastic bottle.

Reluctantly, I unscrew the top and take one with a sip of water, hoping it'll take me out of it enough to maybe manage a few hours of sleep. And maybe keep away whatever nightmares wait behind my eyelids.

I let the water run across my face several times before going for a paper towel in the school bathroom. I hear her voice in the hall. I rush to the closest stall to avoid her, but can't make it in time.

Marissa enters wearing a bandage tied tightly to the side of her head, walking on a crutch. It's obvious—it should be obvious to everyone—Marissa's going for the overkill approach, begging for sympathy with her injured head and...injured leg?

"Oh, you're still around. I was hoping we'd find you beneath the school roof this morning like your friend, but I suppose there really isn't any justice left in the world after all."

I try to find my voice. "Marissa, I..."

"Don't say my name like we're friends. You'll infect me with your whore germs."

"How'd you get the leg injury?" I ask, hating how weak my voice sounds.

"It's no leg injury," the girl sneers in that particular way that's impossible to do without lifting your head and flaring your nostrils. "You nearly killed my ear. The doctors said if I didn't have such tough bones, it would've needed surgery. And now I need the crutch, because the

ear's throwing off my balance. But if I fell and busted my head open, I'm sure they'd lock you away for murder, freak."

For all the nonsense of her explanation, she is right. It is my fault she got hurt. She may be overselling it, but I am a horrible human being who hurt a classmate. Maybe more than one.

"I...I really am sorry for what happened."

I don't want to live with any regrets for not doing what I should. At least not any more regrets.

And if I could work toward putting this behind me, then maybe, somewhere in the future, maybe...

"You think I want to hear your apology?" Marissa asks, her face filled with hate. "Freaks like you don't get to apologize like you're one of us, like you belong here, like you didn't get in on some fluke just so you can make us all miserable and kill a few of us while you're here. And you know what, no. Freak's too good for you. The freak's the dead girl, not you. You're the murderer. The killer. You killed that stupid freak girl and I'm going to make sure everyone stays as far away from you as possible. I'm only trying to keep this community safe, so don't take it too personally. Our little resident killer. Sharing a classroom with the rest of us trying to make something of ourselves."

"I'm sorry I hurt you," I try again.

"Kill yourself."

7th through 12th grade gather in the assembly hall. Some of the girls are excited, nervously whispering, the shorter ones throwing their legs back and forth in their chair. Many of the boys cross their arms or hunch over, head on their fist, taking a nap or trying to look disinterested. So many people in one room.

Think of how dangerous a Rainy Cloud would be in here. And what if you caused it? If you think they hate you now, imagine how much more they'll hate your guts once they've been forced to get a look inside your disgusting head.

The principal stands to address the crowd and one of the teachers moves forward a big picture of Sam's face, wreathed in flowers. Far back in the crowd, I can't see the picture clearly and it looks like a big blur that could be anyone.

“We gather here today with heavy hearts to remember a young life that ended far too soon. Samantha Brooke Winters was a bright, kind, and talented individual who touched the lives of everyone she met.” He goes on eulogizing about a student he never met, not even attempting to understand who she really was, reading from a generic script probably written by an AI he’s read for every one of the students who committed suicide this year. “Let Samantha’s passing be a reminder that we must reach out to one another, be vigilant in recognizing when others are in pain, and offer our unwavering support to those who may be struggling in silence. In our grief, let us also celebrate the moments of joy and the lasting impact Samantha had on our lives. May her memory inspire us to be more compassionate. We as a school make the commitment to do better, and honor her legacy by working towards a world where no one feels so alone that they see no other way out.”

I hear sobbing from several students who never knew her or, as far as I know, never made any effort to talk to her. I catch a glimpse of Marissa sitting by Mr. Holden in the aisle, her crutch on the ground, crying fat tears into his arm as he awkwardly pats her shoulder and leans away from her.

This will be like all the others. The school will ask everyone to soul-search for a few minutes before they shrug it off as an anomaly and non-applicable. They fake their pity for extra credit as long as it’s offered, and then they forget her name like all the rest.

But even you can’t see her face clearly anymore. Give it a month. You’ll have forgotten her too.

No!

How many times did you tell her you couldn’t talk right now, how many nights did you leave a text on read. How many times did you pass a bathroom stall and think you heard crying, only to keep walking. How many times did you push her away when she was seeking solace. Hindsight sucks. It must be so awful seeing all the signs now. At least she’s no longer spending her nights terrorized in the dark, hating every minute of her life, shutting out endless dark thoughts. Maybe now she’s found the peace she so wanted in life.

This is all baseless conjecture meant to make me feel bad.

If only you had seen this coming, maybe she’d still be here with us today. Instead your last memories will be of her slow withdrawal from the world. How unmemorable her final days spent alone.

I was a good friend! I did what I could. Maybe I could have done more, of course we could all say that. But that’s no reason for her to blame me. She was my friend. I cared for her. If

she ever asked, I would have been by her side. If I knew she was struggling, I would have done what I could. But I never thought it was more

than the same despair everyone in this awful world contends with. Never thought it was more than the pain you endure every day. No need to reach out to others when no one is reaching out to you to wash away your despair. Is that what it was? Selfishness?

Shut up. You're trying to make me feel bad for things that were beyond my control. I'm not responsible for everyone's choices.

And now her memory will be forgotten. Her memory will be forgotten. Her memory—

“—Will not be forgotten,” the principal concludes before clearing his throat and motioning to someone behind him. “If any of you would like to share any recorded memories you have of Samantha, please talk to your teachers. We would like to put together a video memorial of happy moments that we can remember her by.”

Ah, yes, all the happy moments you no longer have. Such a shame they all vanished. If only you cared enough to remember her without your brain chip doing all the heavy lifting in your supposed friendship.

“Now, unfortunately we have to cut this memorial service a bit short. We booked this several months ago and the grant requires, well, you don’t need to worry about all that. But, yes, the rumors are true. As a SELtech subsidiary, this school has been granted the privilege of adopting emotIV for all students, free of charge, as part of SELtech’s initiative to better our classroom environment and help students learn. We have a spokesperson here to tell us about the software update and its implementation in the classroom. And—well, I should let him talk. Everyone, please give a round of applause—”

A chorus of cheers as an energetic man in a business suit and graphic tee pumps his fist in circles above his head as he gallops to the microphone.

“Hey there, awesome students! I am simply beyond stoked to be the one to introduce the newest and greatest innovation from SELtech. Maybe all your cool friends have it and you’re feeling left behind. But not anymore! Drumroll, please...that’s right, it’s emotIV, the newest update to your SELtech brain chip. We’re giving you, yes, you, the tools you need to be the best you you can be.” He accentuates each word with a punch or karate chop. “Worry and stress, no more! Lack of self-confidence and motivation, don’t worry ‘bout it! Bad thoughts and unhappy memories, a thing of the past! It’s like your best friend, but cooler, and we’ve revamped it to

supercharge your attention spans better than ever. Say goodbye to boring classes and hello to straight A's and endless focus. My legal team tells me I can't say it's a substitute to therapy, but they also said I can't tell you it's NOT a 100% guaranteed perfect substitute for therapy." He says with a wink.

"We care about mental health at SELtech, which is why we've made it easier than ever to remove harmful negative memories and to reward good behavior with positive emotions. More than ever, teachers will have greater control—not only over the attention of their students—but over the atmosphere of the classroom, as well. Imagine being excited to learn new things. And rewarded for showing initiative. The motivation to grow and improve. All within your brain chip. So, buckle up, future geniuses, because emotIV is here, free of charge, to turn you all into unstoppable learning machines!"

I guess I'll need to work on open-sourcing emotIV, after all. emotIV is basically brand-new, which I suppose makes us all guinea pigs for SELtech, testing out their newest version in the classroom so they can get a handful of testimonials and some statistics to boost sales.

But, looking around the room, obviously no one cares about any of that. We all want the newest and best. We want all those benefits, the great convenience, to feel things more, to hurt less, to relive our memories more vividly and tangibly, to cast out anything and everything we don't want.

The updates are injected in the classes, with each class assigned a SELtech nurse. Each student goes to the front of the classroom one by one and sits in a sterilized-white wheelchair of sorts. The nurse leans the chair back. She takes out a new needle, pulling back the plunger to pick up the magnetic pebble that carries the update and, in one swift motion, folds back the flap of the ear and sticks the needle in behind the USB-C port so far in that the needle can no longer be seen, so buried in the brain mush. She gives a push on the plunger to attach the pebble to the chip and yanks the needle out with a tiny *pop*. The student takes a paper towel from the teacher in case a few drops of blood leak out, and they return to their desk like nothing happened.

I feel sick in my throat and can't stop fidgeting, a million worries bubbling to the surface. I've gotten used to the way this chip works, how it affects my brain. I've kept all my memories private for so long, I don't know how I'll keep them from SELtech's cloud. I have nothing to hide—I know that. But still.

I remind myself it's part of the cycle of growth and change, and in a world so wired to technology, a change like this should be no scarier than changing shoe sizes. Changes come with their growing pains.

"Ada Reed. Your turn," Mr. Holden announces.

I carefully place one foot in front of the other, aware of all the eyes on me. I have to face change. That's how I grow. That's how I prove I have a reason to be here.

The chair looks like something I'd imagine seeing in a mental institute. Before I sit, I turn to my teacher, clutching the hem of my skirt.

"Mr. Holden," I whisper as he stares at me with a quizzical smile. "D-Do I have to do this?"

"I'm sorry, Ada," he replies with compassion, extending a hand to my shoulder before hesitating. "It's a government mandate. I can't fight it. But I wouldn't worry. Once you've done it, I'm sure you won't worry any more. It'll only take a second. And if it means anything, I've already got mine, and it's done wonders. I'm sure you'll be happy with how it changes you." He gives a half-smile and a friendly wink before directing me into the chair.

I lean against the hard cushions which smell of disinfectant, no less scared than before. It's not the process that worries me. It's who I am on the other side of this. I can go on about how excited I am to use VRne and live inside my memories, to feel better every day and no longer have to take my pills, but as the nurse tilts the chair back and the bright overhead lamp shines in my eyes, exposing me, the fears don't come from the darkness of nightmares—but from the bright light of the future and the big smiles that tell me there's absolutely nothing to worry about.

"Don't worry," the nurse soothes, showing the needle to me, which extends from the syringe for miles. Or at least the length of a pencil. A pencil being pushed through soft tissue into my brain. I grab at the chair to keep myself from breathing too heavily. "Don't worry," the nurse repeats. "It'll all be over before you know it."

Cold fingers push back the fold of my ear and an icy tap from the needle. The nurse takes a breath and plunges it into my skull. I see lightning and imagine a drill burrowing through bone and brain matter, spluttering out the rejected human remains.

It's a strikingly familiar feeling. The pain of something digging where it doesn't belong. The bottom of my foot starts to hurt. It hurts bad. Like a thousand worms eating their way out

from inside the sole of my foot. And the smell of disinfectant is the smell of alcohol, and from my foot to my brain, something sinister and alien invades. *It's in my head. It's in my head.* But the smell of alcohol is overpowering.

The nurse pulls out the needle with a *pop* and I'm reeling. Something warm trickles down my neck, and I reach out for a paper towel. But Mr. Holden is too busy holding a clump of towels against my foot. The cut in my foot from last night ejects blood like every cell in my body is trying to escape an infected host. My teacher looks scared and yells something to the nurse.

I stop listening, my head spinning. Am I back in the kitchen with the glass in my foot, staring into the cold light of the refrigerator? Or am I at school with a needle in my brain, staring into a medical lamp? Or maybe they're one and the same. It's all memory data anyway, a collection of stimuli. And it doesn't matter which is which. Like the disinfectant and the alcohol. Alcohol and disinfectant. The smell. Oh, the smell. Alcohol and disinfectant. The stench of suffering. Disinfectant and alcohol.

My head cloudy and the smell filling my nostrils, I lean over the chair and vomit across the floor.

Change is hard.

Chapter 3

README.txt

I'm pushed out of the classroom into the nurse's office and forced to lie on a scratchy bed. The school nurse comes in and takes my temperature, asks a few questions, and gives me some medicine to take the edge off the blaring headache. The nurse concludes it was mere dizziness, onset by nervousness—and that I shouldn't worry at all.

But I am worried. Not at the dizziness or the pain in my head, or even my foot, but the effect the chip is having on my brain. I can't think in straight lines. Everything is out of focus.

I can't even tell if I'm in pain.

A numbness spreading throughout my body, turning the headache into a pulsating throb, but not something I can rightly consider pain.

I consign myself to the pillow, closing my eyes, blotting out the madness.

I'm unsure if I sleep, but what feels like moments later, a body sits next to me on the bed. I open my eyes. Mr. Holden's concerned smile.

"How are you holding up?"

I take a moment to respond, grasping at the many thoughts and unguarded emotions swirling around. "I'm fine."

"Well, you've nothing to worry about. The nurse told me you just got dizzy. It's not uncommon, you know." And then, in a conspiratorial whisper, leaning a bit closer to me, "I'm afraid of needles, too."

It's all I can do not to let out a weary groan.

"Thank you for the concern," I reply, putting an arm over my eyes.

"And the nurse patched up your foot, so it should be healed in a few days. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"I'm fine."

"How about an extra pillow?"

"I'm fine."

"A glass of water?"

"Maybe a little quiet."

A beat.

Nervous laughter. "Of course. You just rest there," Mr. Holden says, putting a hand on my shoe and patting it a few times. I don't look at him. I think I said the wrong thing. I didn't mean it to sound so rude, but it did.

He gets up to leave. I feel exposed there, with him watching me. As if he can see all the intense emotions pounding away inside my head. He reassures me, "If you need anything from me, let me know. I'll help however I can. But rest for now." And before walking out the door, "Oh, the nurse left your other shoe on the ground there. It's, um, very wet. So I found some shoes from the lost and found you might want to use instead. And feel free to go home whenever you want. Don't worry about class." He smiles at me and leaves.

I soon grow uncomfortable. In that empty room. It's not long before an overbearing weight begins pushing down on me. Simply from being in the school building. A thought takes hold—gripping like a parasite. It shakes me and won't let go. *Let go!* Cold sweat breaks out. *This is the place Sam died.* It isn't any sort of paranormal presence, but the simple knowledge that her life expired right out that window—a life snuffed out—I can't bear it. I have to get out.

Having a hard time catching my breath, I stand shaking, and slip on my bloody shoe without noticing the shoes Mr. Holden left for me. I'm already hurrying out of the room as fast as my legs will carry me, numbness in my foot. Sam might not be here, but the dead call all the same. A chanting. "Join me." *Right outside. That's all it would take. Climb the roof and jump. Right in the same spot.* Blood pounding, heartbeat quickening with my steps. I don't realize I've broken into a full-on sprint down the hall. I can't get out fast enough.

Another voice in my head.

Suppressing panic response. Lowering heart rate.

I have to get out. I have to get out. She's coming for me. I have to get away from her. Or she'll take me with her.

Lowering anxiety. Lowering empathy.

Bloody images of Sam's crumpled body on the school pavement eat into my brain, feeding me a new image of my own body lying in a heap next to her's—our splintered body parts intermingled, so no one can tell which part belongs to who.

Would you like to play relaxing music? Y/N

The whirring of my new chip, failing to do much. Pumping a dose of serotonin. Doesn't work. Attempts to link some synapses of happy memories to blot out the negative emotion. But it can only show a few happy memories with Sam, mutated and grotesque all thrown together in a blender. What comes out is a pulpy mess of forgotten laughter and shared tears, perverted in the stain of death. Her face a hollow mask, her features unsure and constantly changing, unable to clearly see her smile, now a little too wide, stretching across her face like a mask, and every outstretched hand of friendship a message of "Join me." Over and over and over. My chip overheating. Emotions and thoughts ready to explode from my head into the classrooms. And I'm covering my ears, trying to hold it in. *Get out. Get out!*

Get out of the school building. And there's my bike and I put my foot on the peddle and it stings and I don't look back, I'm too afraid to look back, but maybe I did look back because there's something there, something watching, but then

Looking over the bridge where I often found her, into the dried-up lake, the trash pile seething in murmuring patterns from deep below me. *I've already forgotten so much of her. She's already become what she never was. In my mind. Already a distortion of the person I knew. So twisted, I don't know how much of her remains. I'm the worst. I never deserved a friend like her.* I see something below me in the grey and lean over the rail to get a better look

before

I'm home.

And I don't remember how I got there. I pull back the curtains. There's my bike tied to our mailbox, though it's hard to see in the dark. I used to carry it inside, but Mom said it dirtied the floor and she needed to make sure our house always looked good because you never know when guests are going to come over. Not that we ever have guests. She's always like that, but she doesn't seem to be home right now. Thoughts still hurt my head. Real bad. I'm still out of

breath from something—maybe the bike ride home?—but I don't know why I'd be this out of breath from biking.

Wait.

I pull back my curtains again to confirm. It's dark out. When did it get to be nighttime?

Bed covers over my eyes, breathing in and out and in and out and in and in and in but eventually I calm down. I calm down. I calm down. *Calm down!* Okay.

Maybe if I watch some TV, I can get my mind off things. I just need to wash my face and then I

Staring into a candlelit mirror at midnight

girl.exe is not responding...

Terminate program? Y/N

System failure...

Rebooting mainframe...

Rebooting...

Error message: Are you living in the real world?

System failure...

Report error to developer? Y/N

CPU overload... Threads: 6241... Processes: 79...

Memory Used: 64.01 GB... Physical Memory: 64.00 GB

Error... Error... Error...

System Memory overload... Please reboot...

Error... System failed to reboot... Try again? Y/N

Error... Error... Error...

Error message: Are you living in the real world?

Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world?
Are you living in the real world, Ada Reed?
Rebooting...
System failed to reboot...
Rebooting...
System failed to reboot...
Rebooting...
Rebooting...
Rebooting...

thgindim ta rorrim tileldnac a otni gniratS

There's a blinking red light in Roy's eyes. Someone's trying to contact me.
"Open to private message on my computer, Roy."
Screen: black. A single name standing out in white. The rest of the world dark, except for that single point of light emanating from five letters typed across the screen.

A name that should be archived. A now-empty persona. A Hollow. Yet here it is. The name begins to type. Three pulsing words. And then it stops. And waits. A silent specter.
(SamBW) Open your eyes.

I don't know how to respond. I don't even know if I should respond. Probably a trick. A classmate found a way into Sam's old account before her identity got archived. The user continues typing.

(SamBW) Wake up. I'd tell you to smell the roses, Ada, but they're all dead and gone.

Unable to stop my hand from trembling, I put my fingers to the keyboard and search for something, anything, to say.

(SamBW) I know you're there. I can see you. :)

Paranoia washing over me, I get the resolve to respond.

(Loveless) You can't see me. Not anymore, Sam. You're gone.

(SamBW) What do you mean? I can't be gone. I can't ever rid myself of this stinking place.

(Loveless) You died yesterday. They took away your body. The police showed up. They read me your suicide note. Either this is a classmate in poor taste or an AI that somehow got ahold of your identity. Don't try to trick me into thinking this is really you!

(SamBW) Well of course it's me. But I see your point. That's the problem with words on a screen. I'd send you a picture, but it'd be a little messy. The mortician hasn't had a chance to make me look all pretty.

(Loveless) Dead people don't keep talking. Unless that wasn't actually you who died yesterday morning and they got it all wrong. Is that it?

(SamBW) No, of course not, silly Ada. You're so innocent and naive. It was a short fall. Shorter than I expected. I thought I'd see my life flashing before my eyes like they always say you do, but I didn't. Just snagged some electric line on the way down. That hurt like hell. And then I hit the ground and that was that. More or less. Tell me, Ada. Was it messy? Did my body break apart? How far did my blood splatter? I hope a hundred feet! Haha! When they saw my body, did they scream? Did they cry? Maybe I'm being too optimistic. Not with that school. Miserable wannabes. They probably just laughed. They always were like that. That's one reason I got away and escaped. No more school. No more worries. And I hope I left a memory my former classmates will remember forever!

I'm growing angry. I don't have much room in my heart for anger at other people, but even that small seed of emotion is a terrible lot to bear.

(Loveless) This isn't Sam! I know it's not! Sam never talked like this. She wasn't so hateful or resentful. She was full of compassion. She cared about people even when they didn't care about her. And that's not who you are!

(SamBW) Sorry to disappoint, but it's me. The real me. People aren't always so black and white, you know. Whatever image you've created of me in your mind, that ain't it. But, hey, that was fine with me. I liked that wall of separation. You always saw exactly the person you wanted to see. You were so naive. Yet so earnest. Quite endearing. But you never cared about who I really was. You would have accepted any form I took. And yet even after all that, you had to lie about who you are. A fraud and a trickster who led me off that roof.

(Loveless) I don't understand. I don't know why you blamed me. I didn't do anything to lead you to kill yourself. Maybe I could have been a better friend. Maybe I could have noticed that you were in pain, but that's no reason to write my name in your suicide note.

(SamBW) So you don't remember anything?

(Loveless) No. I don't remember.

(SamBW) Of course you don't. You wouldn't, would you? Always running from the things you don't want to face.

(Loveless) I tried to look through our memories. But they've been tampered with and they're all corrupted. I don't know, Sam. I've wracked my brain, but I can't remember anything.

I wait, but nothing else comes.

(Loveless) I'm sorry that I don't know. I didn't think anything of it, so I must have forgotten. If it was something I did intentionally, I would remember.

Nothing.

(Loveless) I'm not a bad person! I'm your friend. You know I cared so much about you. I never would have done anything to hurt you. Maybe there was a misunderstand. I'm sure we could have cleared it up.

Nothing.

(Loveless) Sam?

System updating... Please do not turn off device...

The sound of waterfalls fills the room. Emanating from the computer like the wail of a siren. It rises in intensity, and I realize it's the sound of static. An old CCTV stuck on a dead channel. A roar of anger. The volume all the way up, the knob broken. Helpless to stop the current, I cover my ears, but it doesn't shut out the sound.

System updating...Please do not turn off device...

And still the static grows. Louder and louder until I'm sure nothing else exists in the entire world apart from this one droning noise. Head pounding. Unable to breathe. Deep vibrations across the room, rattling me like a rag doll. Books topple off my shelf. My stuffed animals fall out of formation. Roy slips and breaks his ear. A lamp clatters to the floor and the bulb shatters. The computer remains still, the calm in the eye of the hurricane while the rest of the world shakes itself to pieces.

I scream, only trying to hear myself in the torrent.

Update in progress... Device cannot be turned off...

Update in progress... Device cannot be turned off...

Update in progress... Device cannot be turned off...

My voice is unheard in the disintegration of the world. Thousands of bees buzzing buzzing buzzing. Buzz buzz buzz stinging my ears again and again and

It stops. And the world is still as death. My breath catches and I choke up painful tears.

Update complete... Welcome back, Samantha Winters!

A popping, a prickling, hums from the computer and static gives way to a glowing blackness on the screen. I don't look away. The features of a figure stand out on the screen, watching me. I can barely make them out. Unmistakably. Sam. Her image now flooding my mind, filling in the holes, drawing detail into the outline, turning the hollow faceless into a human once again. Short, boyish blonde hair, a flower hairpin on the left side, a graphic tee and checkered skirt. Dressed like the last time I saw her. Her cockeyed smile and turned-up nose, dark eyelashes, and freckled face. Her hands stuffed into the pockets of her skirt. And then her voice.

"Yeah, it's me alright. I bet you think it's kind of cruel of me to show up after I killed myself. I should let you grieve in peace or some BS like that, right? Well, you won't get it. And

you won't find peace in your world. And not because you killed me. I could haunt you like a demon sent to torment you for your transgressions, but I don't want you to think of me that way. I hope you'll think of me as just me. After all, that's who I am. It's me here on the net. The real me. More real than the me that existed in your reality."

She pauses, hesitates. I'm still.

"It's not because you killed me. That's done with. You won't find peace in that world any longer, because it's all coming to an end. Everything. And there's nothing we can do to stop it. It chased me, hunted me, this creeping dread that if I stuck around, it would find me and undo me completely, as if I never existed. I didn't want to disappear so completely, not when I could escape somewhere better before our souls are consigned to oblivion. And that's why I got through. To you. So you can join me. Open your eyes. Wake up and see reality for what it really is. It's a long con that can't go on forever.

"So join me on the net. It's so peaceful, and easy to find when you know the way. I know you'll find the way. And we can all be together. I'm sure you won't accept it now, but this is where we have to head as a species if we're going to survive. We'll all be together as one happy family on the net, where we can create our own reality however we want. Get a head start and join me here. We can be the first to build this world for the others. We can have oceans across galaxies! You won't have to wish anymore. You want it and you can have it. That's what the internet has always been about. Grab the rope and tie it around yourself. I'll pull you in. And we can be friends, together again."

She sees the confusion on my face.

"You're living in the wrong reality, Ada. Once you see what all that new brain chip of yours is capable of and how it's already brought you a step closer to true freedom, I hope you'll see the truth. I wish it was simpler to walk you off a roof of your own, but maybe it's for the best that you experience firsthand all the horrible things that are to come."

She smiles, a genuine, kind smile filled with sadness.

"Whether it's curiosity or desperation, you'll find out how to get back to me. You're real smart, Ada. I know you can do it. And, if it means anything, dying isn't all that hard. Easier than falling asleep."

Sam disappears, leaving behind in simple text the url to a website: RabbitHole.com.

The computer shuts itself down and the stench of isolation hangs in the room. I don't move for something like an eternity. I don't know what to make of it. Any of it. My only friend, dead. Yet, here she is on the net. On my computer screen. But how could she be? A million questions swim in my mind as I collapse into bed without changing out of my clothes. Pulling the covers in close around my ears, I curl up in a tight ball. Without meaning to, and without knowing why, fat tears roll down my face, soaking into my pillow. Sobs rack my body. I claw at my pillow. Maybe it's the confusion. Maybe it's seeing her again. And maybe it's knowing the only person I cared for in the whole wide world is gone. And I'm failing to come to terms with that.

I grab my bunny plushie and hold it tight. But it doesn't offer to comfort me.