

A  
Semi  
Definitive  
List of  
**WORST**  
Nightmares

ALSO BY KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

*Our Chemical Hearts*

A  
Semi  
Definitive  
List of  
**WORST**  
Nightmares

KRYSTAL SUTHERLAND

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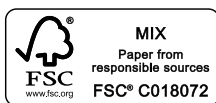
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*For Chelsea and Shanaye,  
and everyone who's ever been afraid:  
you are braver than you realize.*





## THE BOY

### AT THE BUS STOP

**ESTHER SOLAR** had been waiting outside Lilac Hill Nursing and Rehabilitation Center for half an hour when she received word that the curse had struck again.

Rosemary Solar, her mother, explained over the phone that she would no longer, under any circumstances, be able to pick her daughter up. A cat black as night with demon-yellow slits for eyes had been found sitting atop the hood of the family car—an omen dark enough to prevent her from driving.

Esther was unfazed. The spontaneous development of phobias was not a new phenomenon in the Solar family, and so she made her way to the bus stop four blocks from Lilac Hill, her red cape billowing in the evening breeze and drawing a few stares from strangers along the way.

On the walk, she thought about who normal people would call in a situation such as this. Her father was still interred in the basement he'd confined himself to six years ago, Eugene was AWOL (Esther suspected he'd slipped through another gap in

reality—it happened to Eugene from time to time), and her grandfather no longer possessed the fine motor skills required to operate a vehicle (not to mention that he couldn't remember that she was his granddaughter).

Basically, Esther had very few people who could bail her out of a crisis.

The bus stop was empty for a Friday night. Only one other person sat there, a tall black guy dressed like a character from a Wes Anderson movie, complete with lime-green corduroy pants, a suede jacket, and a beret pulled down over his hair. The boy was sobbing quietly, so Esther did what you're supposed to do when a complete stranger is showing too much emotion in your presence—she ignored him completely. She sat next to him and took out her tattered copy of *The Godfather* and tried very hard to concentrate on reading it.

The lights above them hummed like a wasp's nest, flickering on and off. If Esther had kept her eyes down, the next year of her life would've turned out quite differently, but she was a Solar, and Solars had a bad habit of sticking their noses where they didn't belong.

The boy sobbed dramatically. Esther looked up. A bruise was blooming across his cheekbone, plum-dark in the fluorescent light, and blood trickled from a split at his eyebrow. His patterned button up—clearly donated to a thrift store sometime in the mid-1970s—was torn at the collar.

The boy sobbed again, then peeked sideways at her.

Esther generally avoided talking to people if it wasn't completely



necessary; she sometimes avoided people even when it *was* completely necessary.

“Hey,” she said finally. “You okay?”

“Think I got mugged,” he said.

“You *think*?”

“Can’t remember.” He pointed to the wound at his forehead.

“Took my phone and wallet though, so think I got mugged.”

And that’s when she recognized him. “Jonah? Jonah Smallwood?”

The years had changed him, but he still had the same wide eyes, the same strong jaw, the same intense stare he had even when he was a kid. He had more hair now: a shadow of stubble and a full head of thick black hair that sat up in a kind of pompadour style. Esther thought he resembled Finn from *The Force Awakens*, which was, as far as she was concerned, a very good way to look. He glanced at her, at the Jackson Pollock painting of dark freckles smattered across her face and chest and arms, at the mane of peach red hair that fell past her hips. Trying to place her. “How do you know my name?”

“You don’t remember me?”

They’d only been friends for a year, and they’d only been eight at the time, but still. Esther felt a twinge of sadness that he’d apparently forgotten about her—she had certainly not forgotten about him.

“We went to elementary school together,” Esther explained.

“I was in Mrs. Price’s class with you. You asked me to be your valentine.”

Jonah had bought her a bag of Sweethearts and crafted a handmade card, on which was a drawing of two fruits and a line that read: *We make the perfect pear*. Inside, he had asked her to meet him at recess.

Esther had waited. Jonah hadn't showed. In fact, she'd never seen him again.

Until now.

"Oh yeah," Jonah said slowly, recognition finally dawning on his face. "I liked you because you protested Dumbledore's death outside the bookstore like a week after the movie came out."

How Esther remembered it: little Esther, seven years old with a bright red bowl cut, picketing the local bookstore with a sign that read, *SAVE THE WIZARDS*. And then a snippet from the six o'clock news, a reporter kneeling next to her, asking her the question: "You do realize the book was published years ago and the ending can't be changed?" and her blinking dumbly into the camera.

Back to reality: "I hate that there's video evidence of that."

Jonah nodded at her outfit, at the bloodred cape held at her throat by a ribbon and the wicker basket resting at her feet. "Looks like you're still strange. Why are you dressed like Red Riding Hood?"

Esther hadn't had to answer questions about her predisposition for costumes for several years. Strangers on the street always assumed she was on her way to or from a costume party. Her teachers—much to their vexation—could find no fault with her outfits as far as the school's dress code was concerned, and her

classmates were used to her coming in dressed as Alice in Wonderland or Bellatrix Lestrange or whatever, and didn't really care what she wore so long as she kept smuggling them cake. (More on this in a moment.)

"I was visiting a grandparent. It seemed appropriate," she said in reply, which appeared to satisfy Jonah, because he nodded like he understood.

"Look, you got any cash on you?"

Esther did have cash on her, in her Little Red Riding Hood picnic basket. She had \$55, all of it earmarked for her Get the Hell Out of This Podunk Town fund, which now stood at \$2,235 in total.

Back to the previously mentioned cake. You see, in Esther's junior year, East River High had instituted sweeping changes in the cafeteria until only healthy food was available. Gone were the pizzas and chicken nuggets and tots and fries and sloppy joes and nachos that made high school semibearable. The words "Michelle Obama" were now muttered in exasperation every time a new item was added to the menu, like leek and cauliflower soup or steamed broccoli pie. Esther had seen a budding business opportunity and made a box mix of double chocolate fudge brownies. She brought them into school the next day, where she sold each one for five dollars and made a cool profit of fifty bucks. Since then, she'd become the Walter White of junk food; such was the extent of her empire that her customers at school had dubbed her "Cakenberg."

She'd recently expanded her territory to Lilac Hill Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, where the most exciting things on the

menu were overcooked hot dog and bland mashed potato. Business was booming.

“*Why?*” she said slowly.

“I need money for a bus fare. You give me cash, and I can use your phone to transfer funds from my bank account directly into yours.”

It sounded slippery as all hell, but Jonah was bruised and bleeding and crying, and she still halfway saw him as the sweet young boy who’d once liked her enough to draw her a picture of two pears.

So Esther said: “How much do you need?”

“How much you got? I’ll take it all and transfer you that.”

“I have fifty-five dollars.”

“I’ll take fifty-five dollars.”

Jonah stood up and came to sit next to her. He was much taller than she thought, and thinner too, like a stalk of corn. She watched as he opened the banking app on her phone, logged in, filled in her account details as she gave them to him, and authorized the transfer.

*Funds transfer successful*, the app read.

So she leaned down and opened her basket and gave him the fifty-five dollars she’d made at Lilac Hill today.

“Thank you,” Jonah said as he shook her hand. “You’re all right, Esther.” Then he stood, and winked, and was gone. Again.

And that’s how, on a warm, damp evening at the end of summer, Jonah Smallwood swindled her out of fifty-five dollars

and pickpocketed, in the space of approximately four minutes:

- her grandmother’s bracelet, right off her wrist
- her iPhone
- a Fruit Roll-Up from her basket that she’d been saving for the ride home
- her library card (which he later used to rack up \$19.99 in replacement fees for defacing a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* with lobster graffiti)
- her copy of *The Godfather*
- her semi-definitive list of worst nightmares
- and her dignity

Esther kept replaying the cringeworthy memory of her Dumbledore protest in her head, and didn’t realize she’d been robbed until her bus arrived six minutes and nineteen seconds later, at which point she exclaimed to the driver, “I’ve been robbed!” To which the driver said, “No rifferaff!” and closed the doors in her face.

(Perhaps Jonah didn’t steal all of her dignity—the bus driver took what shreds he hadn’t managed to scrape away from her bones.)

So you see, the story of how Esther Solar was robbed by Jonah Smallwood is quite straightforward. The story of how she came to love Jonah Smallwood is a little bit more complicated.

# 2

## THE HOUSE OF LIGHT AND GHOSTS

**IT TOOK** Esther a total of three hours, thirteen minutes, and thirty-seven seconds to walk to her house, which was on the outskirts of the outskirts of town. The town had expanded in the opposite direction than the developers expected, thus stranding the neighborhood in the middle of nowhere.

On the long walk there, the sky cracked open and heaved water, so that by the time Esther got to her front steps, she was sopping, muddy, and shivering.

The Solar house was glowing, as always, a fluorescent jewel in an otherwise darkened street. A soft breeze licked through the trees that had taken root in the front yard, a forest in the middle of suburbia. Some neighbors had complained about the constant lights a few years back. Rosemary Solar had responded by planting eight oak trees in the lawn, which had grown from saplings to giants that enshrouded the property in the space of about six months. As they grew, she hung their branches with nazars, hundreds of them, the blue, black, and white glass tinkling an eerie

song whenever the wind moved. The nazars were to ward off evil, Rosemary said. So far, the only people they had managed to scare away were Girl Scouts, Jehovah's Witnesses, and trick-or-treaters.

Eugene was sitting on the front steps that lead up to the brightly lit porch, looking like he'd time travelled from a Beatles concert, complete with Ringo's haircut and John's fashion sense.

Esther and Eugene were the twins who no one could ever believe were twins. Where his hair was dark, hers was light. Where he was tall, she was short. Where he was lithe, she was buxom. Where her skin was pocked with freckles, his was clear.

"Hey," Esther said.

Eugene looked up. "I *told* Mom you were still alive, but she's already looking up caskets online. Your funeral color scheme is going to be pink and silver, or so I'm told."

"Ugh. I have specifically requested a tasteful black and ivory funeral, like, *a hundred* times."

"She's been watching the emergency death slideshow she made last year, adding new pictures. It still finishes with 'Time of Your Life.'"

"God, so basic. I can't decide what would be more tragic—dying at seventeen, or having the most cliché funeral ever."

"Come on. A pink and silver funeral isn't cliché, just tacky as hell." Eugene had genuine worry in his eyes. "You okay?"

Esther wrung out her long hair; it grew red as blood when wet. "Yeah. I got mugged. Well, not really mugged exactly. Conned. By Jonah Smallwood. Remember the kid who left me hanging on Valentine's Day in elementary school?"

“The one you were desperately in love with?”

“The very same. Turns out he’s a rather talented pickpocket. He just stole fifty-five dollars *and* my Fruit Roll-Up.”

“Twice scorned. I hope you’re planning vengeance.”

“Naturally, brother.”

Eugene stood and swung his arm over her shoulder and they walked inside together, under the horseshoe nailed above the lintel, the sprigs of dried pennyroyal dangling from the doorframe and the remains of the previous night’s salt lines.

The Solar home was a cavernous old Victorian, the kind where even the light had a hazy, faded quality. It was all dark wood paneling and red Persian carpets and walls the distinct pale green color of rot. It was the kind of house where ghosts moved in the walls and neighbors believed the inhabitants might be cursed; for the Solars, both were true.

These are the things people would notice, if strangers were ever allowed inside:

- All of the light switches were kept in the *on* position with electrical tape. The Solars loved light, but Eugene loved it most of all. For his benefit, the halls were decked in string lights, and lamps and candles covered every spare surface of furniture and, quite often, much of the floor.
- Scorch marks from the Great Panic Fire of 2013 when the power went out and Eugene bolted out of his bedroom into the hall, knocking over



approximately two dozen of the aforementioned candles in the process and setting the drywall alight.

- The steps to the second floor were sealed off by a jumble of discarded furniture, mostly because Peter Solar had been midway through completing upstairs renovations when he had his first stroke and all work had quickly stopped, but partly because Rosemary believed the second floor was genuinely haunted. (Like a ghost was only going to haunt half a house and politely let the residents chill downstairs without any *Paranormal Activity* action. C'mon.)
- There was nothing on the walls, apart from the taped-up light switches and blinds to cover the windows at night. No pictures. No posters. Definitely, definitely no mirrors. *Ever*.
- The rabbits in the kitchen.
- The evil rooster named Fred that followed Rosemary Solar everywhere and was, according to Rosemary anyway, a goblin straight out of Lithuanian folklore.

Green Day was *indeed* playing softly in the living room. Rosemary Solar, in her early forties, sat on the couch in front of the TV, watching the emergency funeral slideshow she'd made several years ago in case either of her children died unexpectedly. Brown hair fell to her shoulders and she tinkled when she moved, her bird-boned wrists and fingers dripping with silver rings and good-luck charms. The coins sewn into her clothing—at the hem,

at the sleeves, stitched to the inside of every pocket with metallic thread—chimed like raindrops.

These are the things Esther considered the defining aspects of her mother:

- In her younger years, Rosemary had been a champion Roller Derby player called “The She Beast.” In Esther’s favorite photograph of her, she was in costume on the track and she looked almost identical to Eugene: the same dark hair; the same brown eyes; the same pale skin, unblemished by the freckles that covered Esther. It was uncanny.
- Rosemary had been married once before, when she was eighteen, to a man who left a thin “C” shaped scar hooked through her left eyebrow. The man’s name and fate were never mentioned. Esther liked to imagine he had suffered a long and painful demise shortly after Rosemary left him; perhaps he had been eaten by wild dogs or slow boiled in a large vat of oil.
- A horticulturist by trade, Rosemary had the ability to make plants grow with just a touch. Flowers seemed to bloom in her presence and bend toward her as she passed them by. The oak trees in the front lawn had listened to her when she whispered to them and told them to grow. There had always been a hint of magic about her.

This last point was what Esther loved most about Rosemary. She'd felt it ever since she was a child—even as the belief in fairies and Santa and letters from Hogwarts fell away, she still sensed some thrumming croon of power that emanated from her mother.

Esther thought of the magic as a tether. An invisible silver cord that bound their hearts together no matter the distance. It was what brought Rosemary into her bedroom after Esther had nightmares. It was what made the pain of a headache or a toothache or an upset stomach fade away with a palm pressed to her forehead.

Then the curse had come, like it always did. Peter had a stroke and retreated into the basement. Money got tight. Rosemary started gambling and, desperate not to lose, had slowly been consumed by fear of bad luck. The tether that bound mother and daughter had begun to wither and grow brittle and die. Esther didn't love her mother any less, but the magic had started to degrade, and Rosemary had slowly but surely become thoroughly, gruesomely *human*.

And there were few things worse in this world than humans.

Rosemary sprung from the couch and pulled Esther into a strangled embrace, an unimpressed Fred tucked under her arm. The air around her smelled of sage and cedar. Her clothes carried the scent of mugwort and clove. Her breath held a faint hint of pennyroyal. All of these herbs were meant to ward off bad luck. Rosemary Solar smelled like a witch, which was what most people in the neighborhood thought she was, and perhaps how she liked to think of herself too, but Esther knew better.

"I was *so* worried," Rosemary said, pushing her daughter's

damp hair off her face. “Where have you been? Why weren’t you answering your phone?”

Esther savored the touch, and the worry, and felt the desire to melt into her mother’s arms and let Rosemary comfort her, like she had when she was a kid. But the threadbare analgesic properties of her hands weren’t enough to make up for leaving her stranded, *again*, and so she pushed her away.

“Maybe if you’d picked me up like you were supposed to, I wouldn’t have been *brutally mugged* on my way home.” Jonah’s pickpocketing hardly counted as a mugging, but Rosemary didn’t need to know that. Sometimes, Esther liked to make her feel guilty.

“You were mugged?”

“*Brutally mugged*. You should have picked me up.”

Rosemary looked pained. “I saw a *black cat*.”

Not for the first time, Esther felt the sting of the strange push-pull sensation that had defined their relationship for the past few years. The pull that drew her in, made her want to cradle Rosemary’s cheek in her hand and assure her that everything would be okay. And at the same time, the push, this dark thing that leaked acid into her gut, because it wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that this is what her mother had become. It wasn’t fair that all the Solars were cursed to live in such ridiculous fear.

“Go tell your father that you’re safe,” Rosemary said eventually.

Esther went to the dumbwaiter in the kitchen and found the pen and pad that lived there and wrote a note that read: *I’m safe—please disregard any previous correspondence*

to the contrary. I miss you. Love, Esther. Then she rolled the note up and put it in the dumbwaiter and tugged the pulleys that would take the tiny elevator into the basement. Once upon a time, it might've been used to transport wood bound for the boiler; now it was used only for communication.

"Hello Esther," echoed Peter Solar's voice up the shaft a minute later. "I'm glad to hear you're no longer missing."

"Hi Dad," she called back. "What are you watching this week?"

"I'm on to *Mork & Mindy*. Never saw it when it was first on air. Funny stuff."

"That's nice."

"Love you, dear."

"Love you too." Esther closed the dumbwaiter door and headed to her bedroom, the hundreds of candles in the hall hissing as drops of water flicked from her hair and clothes. The room looked somewhat like those fallout shelters in postapocalyptic movies where they store all the art from the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum and the Smithsonian, trying to save what they can of humanity. Most of the furniture once belonged to her grandparents: the black metal bed frame, the teak writing desk, the carved chest her grandfather brought from somewhere in Asia, the Persian carpets that covered most of the wooden floor. Everything she could salvage from their quaint little home. Unlike the rest of the house, which was bare and sparse apart from the taped-on light switches and lamps and candles, the walls of her room were covered in framed paintings and Indian tapestries

and hammered-in bookshelves, the red wallpaper beneath barely visible anymore.

And costumes. Costumes everywhere. Costumes bursting from the armoire. Costumes in various stages of development hanging from the ceiling. Costumes pinned to three vintage dress forms; giant hoopskirts and shimmering black dresses and river-green strips of leather so soft they felt like melted chocolate in your hands. Peacock feathers and strands of pearls and brass pocket watches all showing different times. A Singer sewing machine—her late grandmother’s—draped with swaths of velvet and silk ready to be cut into patterns. A dozen masks slung over every bedpost. A whole chest of drawers devoted to makeup—pots of gold glitter and turquoise eye shadow and bone white face paint and liquid latex and lipstick so red it burned to look at.

Eugene usually refused to go in there because all the clutter made the room look darker than it really was, but also because the light switch wasn’t taped permanently on and could theoretically be switched off by a vengeful spirit at any time, if they were so inclined. (Vengeful spirits were of great concern to Eugene. They were something he thought about often. Very often.)

Esther put down her basket and started taking off her wet cape before she noticed a wraith standing by a heavily laden coat-rack in the far corner of the room. Hephzibah Hadid was half hidden by a cluster of scarves, wide-eyed, looking like a ghost who’d been seen by accident.

“Christ, Heph,” Esther said, clutching at her chest. “We talked about this. You can’t just silently lurk in here.”

Hephzibah gave her an apologetic look and stepped out of the corner.

For the first three years of their friendship, Esther had been legitimately convinced that Hephzibah was her imaginary friend. To be fair, she didn't speak to anyone, and the teachers never called on her *because* she didn't speak to anyone, and she just kind of floated around Esther and followed her everywhere, which Esther didn't mind because she was a deeply unattractive child with few other friends.

Everything about Hephzibah was lanky and thin—lanky, thin hair; lanky, thin limbs; and she had that whole ashy-haired, pale-eyed Bar Refaeli thing going on.

Before Esther even got her cape off, Hephzibah grabbed her and hugged her roughly—a rare sign of affection—before going back to stand in the corner and giving her a “What happened?” look. In the decade that they'd known each other, they'd gotten pretty good at nonverbal communication. Esther knew that Heph *could* speak—she'd overheard her talking to her parents once—but Hephzibah had busted her eavesdropping and hadn't talked to her for a month afterward. Or hadn't *not* talked to her, rather. Whatever.

“I got robbed by Jonah Smallwood. Remember that kid from Mrs. Price's class who bamboozled me into having a crush on him and then disappeared?”

Hephzibah gave her a filthy look that she interpreted as, “Yes I remember.” Then she signed, “Did he bamboozle you again?”

“Yes, he did. Swindled me out of fifty-five dollars and stole my grandmother’s bracelet and my phone and a Fruit Roll-Up.” Hephzibah looked incensed. “Yes, I know, the Fruit Roll-Up was a real low blow. I, too, am incensed.”

“We’re still going to the party, right?” she signed. As good as they were at communicating as children, it became clear, as teenagers, that they might need a slightly more complex system than miming things out, so Hephzibah’s parents had paid for the three of them—Heph, Eugene, and Esther—to learn ASL.

Esther didn’t still want to go to the party. She hadn’t wanted to attend in the first place. Parties meant people, and people meant eyes, and eyes meant scrutiny, boring into her skin like judgmental little weevils, and being judged meant hyperventilating in public, which only lead to *more* judgment. But Heph crossed her arms and jerked her head in the direction of the front door, a gesture Esther interpreted as, “This is a nonnegotiable friendship request.”

“Ugh, fine. Let me get ready.”

Hephzibah smiled. “We should probably take Eugene,” she signed.

“True. If Mom goes out . . . There’s no way we can leave him here on his own.”

Not only could Eugene not stand to be in the dark, he also couldn’t stand to be alone in the house at nighttime. Things came for you, when you were alone—or so he said.

So Esther went to fetch her brother.

Eugene’s bedroom was the antithesis of hers: bare walls and



no furniture apart from his single bed situated in the center of the room, right underneath the ceiling light. Eugene lay on his thin mattress, reading, surrounded by a dozen lamps and thrice as many candles, like he was at his own funeral. Which, in a way, he was. Eugene faded every night when the sun went down and was replaced by a hollow creature who moved quietly through the house, trying to soak up every particle of illumination so that his very skin burned bright enough to ward off the dark.

“Eugene,” she said, “do you want to go to a party?”

He looked up from his book. “Where?”

“Out at the old nickel refinery. There’ll be bonfires.”

Fire, as far as Eugene was concerned, was the only trustworthy source of illumination, and he worshiped it more than any caveman. He never left the house without his flashlight, spare batteries, a lighter, matches, kindling, an oil-soaked rag, rubbing sticks, a bow drill, flint, and several flame starters. He’d been able to build a small fire from scratch since he was eight, courtesy of the Boy Scouts. Eugene would be a great addition to any apocalypse survival team, if it weren’t for the pesky fact he couldn’t be outside without a light from dusk until dawn.

Eugene nodded and closed his book. “I’ll go with you to the party.”

Esther changed into a costume of Wednesday Addams, and then they went, the three strangest teenagers in town: a ghost who couldn’t speak, a boy who hated the dark, and a girl who dressed as someone else everywhere she went.

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THE NICKEL REFINERY came into view an hour later, a castle of metal and rust, its insides coal-bright from the bonfire burning in its belly, shadows flickering across its glassless windows as teenagers danced around the flames like moths.

“Well, let’s go weird the place up,” Esther said as they walked toward the warehouse.

Artists held exhibitions out at the refinery sometimes, and avant-garde film screenings, and hipster couples went there for their wedding photo shoots, but mostly it was used by Banksy wannabes and high schoolers getting drunk on the weekends. A temporary chain-link fence had been set up across the entrance to the warehouse, like that would be enough to keep out a horde of rabid teenagers looking to party on the last weekend of summer break. Already the corner had been clipped with fence cutters and pried open. They were foxes sneaking into the chicken coop: they would always find a way.

Music spilled out from portable speakers. Laughter and chatter were amplified by the echoing vastness of the warehouse. About fifteen feet from the fence, Esther hit the force field. Heph and Eugene took five steps apiece before they realized she was no longer walking next to them. The two paused and looked back at her.

“You guys go ahead,” Esther said. “I’m gonna get some air here for a few minutes.”

Heph and Eugene looked at each other but didn’t say anything. Hephzibah didn’t talk so that wasn’t such a big surprise, but

Eugene didn't say anything either, because that would make him a gigantic goddamn hypocrite.

"Down your liquid courage and come find us," he said eventually. Then he hooked his arm through Heph's and they went inside.

"Okay, social anxiety," Esther said to herself, opening one of the warm bottles of red wine she'd commandeered from her mother's collection. "Time to drown."

She took three gulps. The aftertaste was of something exotic and rotten, but she didn't care, because alcohol was not consumed by teenagers because of its palatable qualities. It was consumed because it was a useful tool to make you cooler and funnier and less of a socially awkward mess.

The worst part was that anxiety didn't just affect the way you thought, or the way you talked, or the way you were around others. It affected the way your heart beat. The way you breathed. What you ate. How you slept. Anxiety felt like a grapnel anchor had been pickaxed into your back, one prong in each lung, one through the heart, one through the spine, the weight curving your posture forward, dragging you down to the murky depths of the sea floor. The good news was that you kind of got used to it after a while. Got used to the gasping, brink-of-heart-attack feeling that followed you everywhere. All you had to do was grab one of the prongs that stuck out from the bottom of your sternum, give it a little shake, and say, "Listen, asshole. We're not dying. We have shit to do."

Esther tried that. She took a few deep breaths, tried to expand her lungs against the crushing tightness of her rib cage, which didn't help much because anxiety was a bitch. So she drank some more wine and waited for the alcohol to go to battle with her demons, because she was a totally sane and healthy seventeen-year-old girl.