

## Night 14

There is a darkness that is alive. Not empty, not forgiving, but something that hums low inside your skull and presses against your eyes until the room itself begins to distort. I have tried everything to make it stop. Tea that tastes like dried dirt, pills in pastel bottles, and breathing exercises. I even called my mother to ask how she used to put me to sleep when I was a child. I'm nineteen, almost twenty. The call lasted eleven seconds. "I'm fine," I said, though my voice was hollow. I wasn't. The ceiling fan slowly rotates above me, each shadow slicing across the wall in a motion that feels deliberate, like a predator pacing its cage. I stare at it until it seems to stretch claws toward the bed. I blink. It is just a fan. The empty side of the mattress is cold, untouched. Five weeks. Five weeks since Emma died. Five weeks since the world fractured at a red light, and I watched her body move in ways bodies are not meant to move. The officer used the word instant. Merciful. Unfortunate. He avoided my eyes when he spoke. He never used blood. I did. I remember the impact. The headlights that should have stopped but didn't. The sound of metal giving way. The windshield was cracking like a fragile spider web. The car crumpled, and Emma was there, then she wasn't. I found it hard to breathe. I can still see the world through the veil of tears. I remember standing there, but silence was the law of the night. Each day has bled into the next, twisted and indistinct. Morning breaks with tentative light, but it seems more like a punishment than a new beginning. Sleep eludes me still, haunted by memories. When I close my eyes, all I see is the flash, crumpled metal, the crimson stains. Her laughter once filled my life, wrapped in every haunting memory I didn't want to turn away from. We were invincible, or at least we thought we were. Plans floated lightly between us, silly

dreams that now seem impossibly fragile. I used to believe I could protect her from the world. But in that moment, the world shattered us both. A week after the accident, her mother had called. I could hardly understand her words, muddled by my own grief. “She loved you,” was all I could muster in response, knowing that love would never bring Emma back. “She was so happy.” It was all I knew. It felt as though I was squeezing my heart in a vice. Something surged inside me, a need to keep her spirit alive, to remember her as she was—a bright, wild whirlwind of joy and light. But shadows lingered, creeping beneath the surface. At times, I felt her next to me, reminding me that we were supposed to have our whole lives ahead of us. Yet, I found myself drowning in the memories rather than swimming through them. In week two, I decided to write her a letter. I gathered my heart and carefully positioned it, pen poised. “Dear Emma,” it began. I could hardly write a single sentence without breaking down in tears. The paper absorbed my sorrow, and by the end, it held more than words. It was drenched in the weight of my loss. “I miss you.” I crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the corner, where it would never breathe another word. The days passed as I sat in silence, a muted film where the world spun around me without care. The summer sun poured through the windows, casting long shadows that felt like fingers reaching for me. My phone buzzed with messages and calls from friends who cared. “I’m here if you need to talk.” But I knew that nothing could fill the chasm left by her absence. I cared for my friends, but grief felt like a shroud, isolating me from their well-meaning words. Sometimes, on evenings when the shadows grew long, I would drive her route—just to feel the pulse of life beneath the tires, to understand, to relive that moment. It felt wrong, but it also felt necessary, as though I could not escape until I bore witness to the place where everything changed. I parked at the intersection, my heart heavy. The streetlights flickered in the twilight, bathing the area in an orange glow as I sat at the same red light, breath shallow, fingers gripping

the steering wheel. The world buzzed with life, oblivious to my grief. Cars passed, people laughed, and the familiar scents of asphalt and summer lingered, reminding me of the carefree days we shared. Memories flooded in—her laughter echoing, our plans colliding into a beautiful chaos of dreams. Then, just as quickly, they faded into the cold grip of reality. I couldn't escape the truth. I started to avoid places we used to go. It felt like wearing a shroud of pain everywhere I ventured. The coffee shop where we spent lazy afternoons slid past me without a glance. The park where we shared stolen kisses became a barricade, something I feared would swallow me whole. It felt as if the universe conspired against me when I stumbled upon our favorite songs on the radio—each note a jagged reminder of what I lost. Five weeks. It didn't feel like enough time to heal, but also too long to remain trapped in these memories. I became overwhelmed by this darkness, this weight pressing at the corners of my mind. I felt as if I was being consumed, and yet I clung to it because it kept her alive. Then came the infomercial. Calm. Soft. Almost quiet enough to feel safe. A sleep study facility was recruiting volunteers to test a new medication for severe insomnia. Qualified participants would be paid—a lot. I knew I couldn't sleep anyway. I applied. Five days later, they accepted me. Five hundred dollars per night. Enough to pay rent, groceries, and even insurance I couldn't afford. The facility wasn't large. Just white. White walls. No windows. The kind of place where sound doesn't echo—it disappears. The woman at the desk didn't ask how I was feeling. She handed me papers and a pen. "Initial here," she said. I skimmed phrases without meaning. Cognitive separation. REM destabilization. Temporary perceptual overlap. My name looked unfamiliar when I signed it. "You may experience heightened dream realism," she added. "I already do," I said. She smiled. The room they gave me was narrow. The bed was fixed to the floor—sheets tucked too tightly, like they didn't expect anyone to leave in a hurry. A camera blinked red in the corner. Or maybe it didn't blink. Night

One, they gave me the pill. Sleep didn't come slowly. It cut the lights out. No dreams. No Emma. No crash. Just nothing. A blank so complete it felt artificial. When I woke up, I almost felt grateful. By night three, she was there. Not close. Not far. Just standing. Watching. She didn't blink. By night five, she tilted her head slightly—the way she used to when I lied about something small. By night seven, she spoke. "You look different," she said. Her voice is normal. That was worse. "I miss you," I told her. She didn't answer. The sky behind her flickered. I woke with my jaw clenched, teeth aching. They said the drug was "working." By night nine, reality lagged. Walls stretched. Hallucinations mingled with memory. Once, I saw her standing beside the monitor. Not a reflection. Beside it. When I turned, she was gone. I stopped telling the staff. On night eleven, I asked how many made it to fourteen nights. The nurse adjusted a wire on my chest. "Try to relax," she said. That wasn't an answer. At night twelve, I was at the intersection—red light. Engine running. Emma is in front. "Don't," she said. My foot was pressing down. I woke gasping. Machines screamed. No one came—night thirteen, the hallway bent. The camera light in the corner hummed low. Not cameras. Something else. Tonight, night fourteen. The pill in my palm. The air is thick. Harder to breathe. The bed shifted behind me. Slow. Careful. "You're so tired," Emma whispered, right beside my ear. Monitor climbs. Shadow shapes—one breathing, one not. Red light stops blinking—screaming tone inside my head, stretching like metal. The door flies open. White coats. Stretched faces. "Stay with us." Hands on my chest. Detached. Heavy. Too late to lift. The room tilts. Lights smear. "He's crashing." Word loops. Crashing. Metal folding. Glass breaking. Emma is near the door. Watching. Alarms flatten into one tone—fingers peel wires. Machines click off. The red light was gone. Silence is heavier than noise. Emma kneels, hand above face. "You look tired," she whispers. Footsteps fade. Heat

leaves my hands. Fluorescent buzz above. White room. No alarms. No voices. Just a body on a bed that no longer belongs to anyone.