

Chapter 1

Joy Hayes was really fucking tired.

She hadn't slept well the night before, but, in all honesty, she hadn't slept well in years. Sitting at her office desk, she ignored the way her cardigan brushed against her arms, the cotton material chafing her skin in a way that made her want to fling it across the room. Her fingers hovered over her keyboard, twitching as she fought the urge to take off her sweater, and she stared blankly at the blinking cursor of the email she had begun to type.

She winced at the throbbing in her head. Reaching her hand out for her pen, she cursed under her breath as she knocked over her pencil cup, sending her pens, pencils, and the odd unfolded paper clip scattering across the wooden surface. Her neck cracked as she rolled her head from side to side.

The smell of her discarded meal, a frozen plant-based lunch, wafted up and through the air. She wasn't a vegetarian, nor a vegan, but had decided after sobbing to a particularly cruel PETA Facebook ad to try and eat less meat. The brutal assault of soggy Brussels sprouts and beans on her nose and the way her stomach rolled in response made her regret ever opening Facebook.

Tick.

The clock sitting on the wall above her ticked loudly. She pulled a bottle of pain pills from her desk drawer and chased the white capsules with the small sip left in her lukewarm, flat Diet Coke. The phone on her desk rang, and she jumped. Swearing, she picked up the phone.

Tick.

She finished her conversation, a quick question from a manager of a different department that veered off into him bragging about his recent vacation and the car he was thinking of buying, and put her head in her hands. Every tick hammered into her, and she gritted her teeth.

Tick.

A coworker passed by her desk, and she smiled instinctively. The older woman didn't even glance at her, but Joy held the smile until after she passed. The moment she was out of sight, Joy's smile slipped back into a frown. She zoned out, eventually catching her reflection in the darkness of her computer screen as it dimmed into sleep mode. The bags under her eyes made her grimace.

Tick.

An award sat framed on her desk, an outstanding employee certificate given to her a few months into the job. She loved praise, needed it, but it all felt so superficial. The frame itself was similar, perhaps identical, to the one showcasing her accounting degree at home. Both papers were supposed to bring her happiness. Both made her feel trapped in a purgatory of beige walls and cubicles.

Tick. Tick.

She glanced at the clock, noticed it was only three, and wondered if this is all life could offer. If there was nothing more than watching the clock crawl to five, the mindless chatter

about vacation plans and wedding venues, the routines, the alarm clocks, the traffic, the bills.

Tick. Tick

Groaning, Joy rubbed her temples and puffed out a breath of air. Her temple pulsed under her touch, the pounding echoing throughout her body.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

“Just shut up,” Joy hissed at the clock, grinding her teeth and glaring at the object.

As you wish, a deep voice responded.

Joy’s lips parted in surprise. She looked around for the source of the voice, halfway expecting someone to be standing behind her. Something tickled her throat, and she coughed.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

A thin black mist floated out of her open mouth and toward the wall above her desk. It condensed, forming a solid dark plume, and hurled itself at the clock.

Tick. Tick—

The clock shattered as the black tendril smashed into it. It rocked back and forth for a second before slipping off the nail it sat on and colliding with the office carpet. Joy flinched as the fog shot up from the clock and twisted in her direction. She gagged as the cool mist launched up her nostrils and slid down the back of her throat. A phone rang in another office. Joy stared at the broken clock.

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The clock lay in pieces beside Joy's desk, finally quiet. Joy's eyes flicked between it and the ceiling, convinced she would find a hidden camera poised—to record her reaction. Her manager, Carmen, startled her by clearing her throat behind her. She stood beside Joy's desk, her eyebrows raised in question.

"You alright, Joy?" she asked.

Joy nodded slowly, eventually dragging her attention away from the clock. She took in the concerned look in Carmen's eyes and winced. Carmen was her favorite person at the company, a curvy woman with long black hair, deep brown skin, and a sunny personality that made it difficult to dislike her, either as a boss or a person.

A single mom to three kids, Carmen worked harder than anyone else in the office, consistently putting in overtime while juggling soccer games and early morning bus pickups. Joy had been excited and proud when Carmen told her she had been promoted to manager.

"Joy?" Carmen repeated.

"Yeah! I'm sorry," Joy replied. There was a lilt to her words: a slight southern accent that thickened when she was emotional or tired. "I think I might have eaten something bad. I'm not

feeling great.”

She bent down, scooping the broken glass into her hand and tossing it in the trash beside her desk. Shaking her head, she placed the base of the clock on the wood of her desk. She smiled up at Carmen, waving her hand and turning back to her computer in a poor attempt to look like she was busy. Carmen raised her eyebrows.

“If you’re sick, why don’t you head home early?” Carmen suggested, rapping her knuckles on Joy’s desk before walking back to her office. “Don’t need the rest of the office catching it.”

“But—“

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Carmen tossed over her shoulder.

Joy scanned her open inbox. Deciding nothing couldn’t be pushed back a day or two, she pulled on her coat and threw her keys into her pocket. As she rode down the elevator, Joy thought back to the clock falling, the cold sensation in her throat, and the pounding in her head. She walked through the parking lot toward her car, her cheeks stinging and her lungs burning as she breathed in the frigid October air.

The nip of inhaling the winter chill reminded Joy of the cold she had felt in her throat earlier. She reluctantly pulled her hands out from the warmth of her coat pockets and pushed the button to unlock her car. The pounding in her head had subsided, probably thanks to the medicine she had taken earlier, and she laughed as she thought of how ridiculous she had been. It was nothing more than a silly, perfectly timed coincidence.

It was not a coincidence.

The voice startled Joy, and she fumbled her keys. They fell from her fingers, slipping between the bars of the grate under her feet and landing in what Joy prayed was a pile of mud. She whipped around, a scowl on her face, but she was completely

alone in the parking lot.

“Uh...Hello?” Joy called out.

Hello.

Joy blinked. The voice sounded as if it was right next to her, speaking into her ear. She pinched herself harshly and hissed at the stinging sensation.

It is not a dream.

She scanned the area, searching for a TV crew or friend recording on a cellphone.

It is not a prank, either.

“Is this all in my head?”

Yes.

Joy sighed, decided to deal with her mental break within the confines of her own home—after a cup of coffee and a snack—and dropped to her knees beside the grate. Her hand squeezed through the slots, her fingertips brushing against the metal of her keys. Pressing her face against the cold bars, she cursed her short, stubby fingers, willing them to lengthen slightly.

“That’s a good look for you, bent over like that,” a voice called to Joy.

She jerked backward and rolled onto her knees. A man leaned against the office building, a smug smirk on his lips and a lit cigarette in his fingers. He ran his other hand over his balding head, touching more skin than thin brown hair. He winked at Joy from behind his glasses.

Joy glared back at him. “Something I can help you with, Keith?”

Keith took a drag from his cigarette, puffing the smoke out slowly.

“Nope. Just enjoying the view. God sure took His time when

He made you, didn't He?"

Joy curled her lip, the need for a shower washing over her as she watched Keith's eyes trail from her legs to her chest. It wasn't the first time he had used this line. He had said the same to an intern a week ago as she helped him make a coffee run. The intern had filed a complaint with HR and resigned shortly after the HR manager blew it off. Joy heard the manager tell the girl, only in her freshman year of college, that she needed to "grow up" and that she should be "flattered Keith had complimented her."

"And He must have been punishing your mom when He made you," Joy spit back. "Screw off, Keith, I'm busy."

Keith raised his hand in surrender. He put his cigarette out on the side of the building before tossing it at the nearest bush.

"But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Keith took off his glasses and began cleaning them with his shirt. "You really should think about cursing less; it's not good for the soul."

Joy rolled her eyes. She had nothing against Christians; she even considered herself one. After her aunt and uncle adopted her, she attended a Baptist church, going to a youth group after school on Wednesdays and a service on Sunday mornings. She was pretty sure she still believed in God, and she prayed nightly, but had long since rejected most of the things she had been taught.

Joy smiled kindly at Keith. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple." Joy blinked innocently. "Oh!

Or how about ‘Don’t you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living.’ One of my favorite verses, really.”

Rolling his shoulders back, Keith sneered and waited for Joy to continue. She was more than happy to.

Glancing to the side, Joy tossed out a final remark. “Smoking kills. You are slowly murdering God’s temple, and, at least according to Corinthians, it sounds like God might not be happy with you.”

Keith’s eye twitched. He made a move to step forward, shook his head, and stalked back into the office building, slamming the door open without bothering to look backward. Joy turned her attention back to the grate, using her phone flashlight to light up the dark space. The keys glinted below, and Joy lowered herself back down, nostrils flaring as she failed to reach them.

Would you like help?

“Yes, voice in my head, I would like help. If you could float my keys up to me or something, that would be swell.”

Joy rolled her eyes. Giving up, she rocked back into a squatting position.

Okay.

Joy coughed as the cold sensation returned to her throat. Snapping her mouth shut, she breathed out slowly through her nose, bewildered as a black mist floated from her nostrils. The mist drifted below through the grate and down to her keys. It wrapped around them, obscuring them from Joy’s view. Her mouth gaped as flashes of gold floated up along with the dark cloud. She held out a hand, and they fell into her open palm. The mist swirled around her neck for a few seconds before shooting into her open mouth. She stared at the keys. Then

stumbled to her feet and sprinted to her car.

Joy, what are you doing?

“Nope. Nope. Nope,” mumbled Joy as she flung herself into her vehicle and locked the door. “This isn’t real. I’m stressed and overworked, and this is all in my head.”

Yes, you are overworked.

“Not helpful.” Joy stared at herself in the rearview mirror, halfway expecting something else to be looking back at her and breathing a sigh of relief when she met with only her own reflection.

Joy grabbed her purse from where she had flung it in the backseat. She whipped out her phone and opened her camera app. “Can you prove this isn’t just my imagination?”

What would you like us to do?

Joy looked around her car.

“There’s a book in my backseat. I want you to pick it up and put it in the front while I record.”

As you wish.

Palms sweaty, Joy clutched onto the phone and waited. The cold of the smoke drifted through her nostrils.

“Okay...go.” She lifted her phone up, hitting the record button as she fought back a gag.

The mist floated lazily from Joy toward the back seat. She stared intently at her phone screen. The dark mass did not appear on camera, but Joy could see it as she peeked around her device. The book lifted from the back cushion, hovered in the air for a few seconds, then dropped onto her passenger seat. Joy paused her recording and wheezed as the smoke slid back down her throat. Pressing play on the video, Joy watched as the book lifted seemingly of its own accord and floated to the front. She set the phone on the console and stared off into space.

“Huh.”

The book still lay in the passenger seat. Joy checked every few seconds for the five minutes she sat in the car, processing.

She slumped in her seat. “The video could be in my head, too, though.”

She rubbed at her temple, slouching further and further into the upholstery as she contemplated. Her phone dinged beside her, drawing her attention.

“Ah!” Joy shot up, grabbing the device and pressing the most recent contact in her call log.

“Ethan!” Joy practically shouted as the call connected.

“My Joy!” Ethan replied, easily matching her energy. “Need any help slaying dragons today?”

Joy could hear music from what she assumed was a new video game playing somewhere in the background. Joy and Ethan had met in a class three years ago, having been paired up for a project by their professor, and had spent the entire assignment bickering over everything humanly possible. Joy preferred the Switch; Ethan loved his Xbox. Ethan’s favorite franchise was Lord of the Rings, and while Joy tolerated the books, she couldn’t stand the movies. They disagreed on starter Pokemon, with Joy always choosing a fire type, and Ethan favoring water.

The two even looked like they wouldn’t get along.

Ethan towered over Joy’s 5’8 frame at 6’4. Joy’s hair was usually pulled into a bun, her blue eyes hidden behind a pair of glasses. Ethan’s brown hair hung freely to his shoulders, his brown eyes squinting due to his refusal to wear contacts.

Joy’s wardrobe consisted of black and gray, an assortment of cardigans, trousers, and blouses she wore in almost precise rotation. Ethan could typically be found in a brightly colored game or movie-themed t-shirt and cargo pants or jeans faded

from wear.

Joy had always been too afraid of needles to get a tattoo. Ethan had two: one on his shoulder with text reading “Los tiempos van cambiando” and one extending down his forearm that looked like his skin had been ripped off to reveal machinery underneath.

Ethan was a year younger than Joy, an engineering major, while Joy had debated getting a degree in English, with reading and writing being her first love, but ultimately stuck with the safety of her accounting program.

Although they were seeming opposites, Joy soon found herself looking forward to what had once been her least favorite class. When the class ended, the two kept in touch, and Joy now considered Ethan her best friend. Every now and then, she would get a flicker, an intrusive thought, that she might want to be more than his friend, but if he felt the same, Ethan had never shown it, and so she let the flicker die.

“I’m sending you a video. I need you to watch it and tell me what you see.” Joy tapped her phone.

“Uh... yeah, okay,” Ethan said.

Joy waited a few seconds, holding her breath and trying to release the tension in her shoulders. Ethan laughed over her speaker.

“Well, that’s super random. Is film editing your newest thing? It looks good, though. I couldn’t tell where it was edited or see any strings or anything.”

“So you see it then? You see the book flying on its own?” Joy asked excitedly.

“Yes?” Ethan hesitated. “Was I not supposed to? What’s going on?”

“I promise I’ll explain later. Thanks, Ethan!”

“Wait, Joy—” Ethan cut out as she hung up the phone and tossed it aside.

Joy’s heart pounded in her chest.

“What if Ethan is also in my head?” she whispered.

There was a pause in her mind. Silence stretched until it was too awkward for Joy to stand.

“Still there?”

Yes, we were simply contemplating the stupidity that was your previous question.. Joy rolled her eyes. *Ethan is real, and we are always with you.*

Joy frowned as a shiver rolled down her spine.

“First of all, that’s freaky. Please never say that again. Second, what are you?”

We don’t know.

Worried she would look crazy talking in the car by herself, she grabbed her headphones from her purse and popped the buds into her ears.

“Do you have a name?”

No.

“Do you want a name?”

The voice remained silent.

“I’m going to give you a name.”

Oh, goody.

Joy laughed nervously.

“Of course, the demon in my brain would be sarcastic. Couldn’t get someone friendly or helpful.”

Silence. The heater in the car finally kicked in, and Joy placed her hands over the vents.

“Joey?”

Are you naming us after your fish that killed itself?

Joy’s mouth pinched.

“He did not kill himself. His head got stuck in his rock statue and his gills couldn’t open.”

So he drowned himself.

“I’m not gonna name you Joey. You don’t deserve the honor of being named after him.” Joy huffed. “I’m assuming you can see my memories, then?”

Yes.

“So you’re me? I’m imagining it after all?”

Joy crossed her arms and looked down at her feet. Although she still didn’t completely believe what had happened, a part of her wanted to believe it was real, that she had some power that made her special. The rest of her was terrified by what that would mean for her.

We are a part of you.

Joy sighed.

“Are you trying to confuse me on purpose?”

Silence.

Joy bounced her leg. “Cool. How ‘bout Buttercup?”

Buttercup?

“Well. I have a creepy ass voice in my head. I figured a cute name would help lighten my anxiety about it.”

We are not creepy.

“Agree to disagree.” Joy shifted the car out of park, pulled out of the office parking lot and headed home. She took her earbuds out and tossed them into her cup holder.

You do not have to speak aloud to converse with us.

Joy rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I got that after the whole clock thing. Talking out loud makes me feel slightly less crazy.”

You think speaking out loud in an empty car makes you seem less crazy?

This time Joy remained silent.

THINGS WE INHERIT

Joy?

“Yes, Buttercup?”

We can hear the curse words.

Chapter 3

Birth

“It’s a girl,” the doctor cooed, cradling the baby in his arms before passing her to her mother.

Most mothers would be excited to hear the words, relieved the labor was over and eager to meet their child. Instead of the tears of joy new mothers on tv always seemed to shed, sixteen-year-old Joanne cried out of bitterness, sadness, even a bit of fear. She was tired, sore throughout her body, and terrified by the lack of connection she felt toward the baby.

They say some women were born to be mothers. Joanne was not. When Joanne found out she was pregnant at fifteen, she already had a history of behavioral problems, a wannabe rockstar mother with a drug addiction, a father she had never met, and a younger half-sister who was terrified of her.

Joanne gave the baby the name Joy in an attempt to make up for her absence of emotion as she peered at its pale blonde hair and blue eyes. Joanne’s eyes were brown, her hair dark and curly. The child looked very little like her, outside of the upturned, button-like nose. She decided on the middle name Aurora, after the lights in the sky. Joy’s last name did not come from

her biological father, but rather the man Joanne was with at the time of her birth. Joanne had married the man in a ceremony that was not even close to legal, but they separated a few weeks after. Joy never saw him again—as was the pattern with her mother’s love interests—but she was left with his name as a permanent reminder of how fleeting affection could be.

Joy’s biological father stuck around for a bit, but ultimately left shortly after she turned two. Although it hurt to think about as she got older, she didn’t hold it against him. She was too young to understand the man leaving should have played a bigger role, and, as she had been too young to remember her time with him, she ignored his absence in her life.

The two reconnected when Joy was an adult, long after an indifference to abandonment had become ingrained into her personality. But still, she didn’t blame him, not entirely. She couldn’t find it in herself to condemn a man who fled from the tumultuous mess that was her family.

“It’s a girl!” Like an echo, the words were spouted by another doctor as Joanne gave birth to Joy’s half-sister, Clara, a little less than two years later.

Joy and Clara had different fathers, different last names, and different expectations thrust upon them by their mother. Clara was born with her mother’s brown hair, brown eyes, and more of her affection than Joy had been. But as with Joy, Clara’s father and Joanne were already broken up by the time Clara was born. Clara was also given a different last name than her biological father, the last name of their future, slightly more long-term stepfather.

“It’s a boy!” A slight twist on the words heard before.

Joanne gave birth to Joy and Clara’s half-brother, Sammy, a year and a half after Clara was born. Joy and Sammy shared

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blue eyes, but Clara and Sammy shared a last name and brown hair. Sammy's father was a military man serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. He moved Joy, her mother, and her siblings up to a base in North Carolina, only an hour or so from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Joy didn't remember anything from before North Carolina. That was for the best. She realized as she got older the majority of the things that stuck out to her were unhappy, dark memories living in the depths of her mind. Joy's first memory wasn't one of the dark ones. Her first memory was of seagulls.