

## *Inside Here*

DIANA SPECHLER

This is the first summer of my life that I've gotten through without a single mosquito bite. School starts in two weeks. I'm supposed to move out of this apartment. Just three streets away into another one-bedroom, but it's a smaller one, a little less expensive, and I'm going to be the only person on the lease.

My parents have been financially supporting me all summer. Out in San Francisco, right after the funeral, they said, "It's all right, Haley. Quit your job. Take it easy this summer. Then you'll feel ready for school in the fall." They also said that I should move back home at the end of the summer. "You don't need to live alone. You can come back home and we'll take care of you. You'll have people around who love you."

"No," I said. "That's not what I need."

I flew back to Rhode Island and returned to work three days later. I've been checking out books for people at the library since the beginning of my freshman year. Usually, it's best during vacations because it's so slow, which gives me time to read almost as much as I want to. When I went in that day, everyone looked at me funny, silently noting, *Her boyfriend hasn't even been dead a week and she's back at work?* It didn't matter anyway because I didn't even make it half-way through the shift before I started sweating and shaking and holding my chest because I was afraid that my heart might pop out, it was

beating so hard.

*Enough of this*, I finally said that day. So I quit my job. I quit exercising. I quit going to the beach, going to parties, going to the movies. I even quit going home to see my parents.

Fall is here. I'm supposed to feel ready for school.

At the funeral, Chase's sister kept saying, "This hasn't hit me yet. It can't be real. I don't feel anything."

Not me. I think I felt it even before it happened. When Chase's dad called me crying, I knew before he even got the words out. I don't know how, but I knew. And I knew at the funeral and I know it now. It doesn't go away. I feel his death so critically.

In the dorms, early freshman year, my roommate Megan and I used to watch out the window as Chase and his friends, who lived two floors below us, played Frisbee on the lawn.

"They think they're such hot shit," Megan said. "It can't be more than 65 degrees out and they all have their shirts off."

But we watched anyway. Chase had hardly any hair on his chest. He was my favorite of all of them. His smile was cool and smug.

I swear to God, it was Chase who approached *me*. Not the other way around. One Friday afternoon at the end of September, I ran into him in the laundry room. I didn't know what to do because there was no way in hell I was going to empty all my underwear into the washing machine with him watching. So I stood there in the doorway, not sure if he had seen me yet, not sure if I should turn around and run back up to my room.

"This one's free," he said, motioning toward a washing machine.

"Yeah, well, I was actually just seeing if my friend was down here."

I remembered as I was saying it that I was holding my laundry bag.

He grinned without looking at me. He was rolling his socks into balls and his hair was falling in his eyes. *You are incredible*, I thought. *And I am a moron.*

He found my room later that evening to ask Megan and me if we wanted to go to a party with him. He knocked but didn't wait for us to answer the door, just strolled right in with that half-smile on his face. Megan was talking on the phone and cutting her toe nails and I was lying on my bed reading *The Awakening* and crying my eyes out.

"Want me to cheer you up?" Chase asked, looking calmly amused.

Megan and I just stared at him blankly.

So it was Chase who found me. It was Chase who kissed me first. It was Chase who called the next day. And the day after that.

I fainted when they lowered his casket into the ground. I remember feeling light-headed and thinking, *I haven't eaten yet today. How could I have done this? I have to eat. I need my strength. I can't get sick. I can't.* And I felt like I was sinking, or like whatever was holding me up was wobbling and there was nothing to grab on to. Terror gripped the back of my neck with cold fingers. The next thing I knew, I opened my eyes and I was on my back and I saw my father's face above me and the sky was behind him, and even then...even then, in the confusion and the sickness and the light-headedness, I remembered immediately that Chase was dead.

I've spent most of my time this summer reading. I say to myself, *This is what I've always wanted. Endless hours to spend reading whatever I want.* I go through three or four books a week. Everything from trashy romance novels to best-sellers to classics. I've even read *Henry the Eighth* twice since I got back from San Francisco. I read and re-read everything. Paper-backs and hard-covers and even comic books once in a while. My mother sends me new books all the time, so I never have to go to the library. But if I did, I'd go to the public library, not the school one. I can't show my face at the school library anymore.

Chase always read science fiction and fantasy and car magazines. None of that used to interest me, but I found some of his books and magazines around the apartment after he died. Under the bed and on the window sills. I read them, but I can't concentrate on them. I'm imagining this, but I think I smell him in his books.

I go to the grocery store at odd hours, after midnight usually, when I know there aren't going to be lines, when I know that I won't run into anyone who knows me. Grocery shopping is really the only thing that gets me out of the house these days. I've thought about having my groceries delivered. But it's only a thought right now.

Two weeks after I met Chase in the laundry room, his roommate went out of town for the weekend. In bed that first night, Chase traced my ribs with his finger and said, "I want to make you feel good."

It didn't feel good. Not the first time. But afterwards, in his arms, I had to squeeze my jaw and my eyes shut as tightly as I could to keep

from hugging him as hard as I wanted to.

This is what I loved: That night, before we got into bed, he checked under the pillows and under the top sheet for spiders.

“Once when I was little, I woke up with a spider crawling on my face,” he said. “Now I always check before I turn the lights out.”

I didn’t say anything, but he quickly added, “I’m not afraid of spiders.”

I laughed.

“I’m not,” he insisted. “It’s just a habit now.”

The first time Chase saw me was a week or so before we met in the laundry room. “I already had my eye on you,” he used to tell me. “You were always sitting under that big tree outside the library, reading. And the way you read, it’s like the whole world has stopped, like your breathing has stopped, like life doesn’t go on around you and your book. Sometimes, I wish I could be part of your reading.”

That’s what Chase loved about me.

My parents live an hour away from campus. Not like Chase’s, who live all the way in San Francisco. The summer after our freshman year, Chase had to go home to California. I cried my eyes out all the way through finals. I was going home, too, of course. It wasn’t like I was expecting Chase to stay. It was just that the thought of being apart was unimaginable.

“I don’t mind,” Megan told me. “Now maybe I’ll get to see you once in a while.” Megan’s parents live three towns away from mine.

“What do you mean?” I laughed. “You see me plenty. We live together.”

"Doesn't seem like it these days," Megan muttered.

Chase and I talked on the phone every night that summer, sometimes until the sun came up.

"Let's never do this again," we both kept saying.

It was some time in July when we decided to move in together once school started. I had been planning on living in the dorms again and Chase had leased an apartment with four of his friends. He was going to be sharing a room with one of them.

"Share a room with *me*," I said.

"I can't. I've already signed my lease."

"Find someone else to take your place."

"I guess I could do that. Maybe."

So we got an apartment together.

His parents didn't care. Mine were pissed.

"You're wasting your college years," they insisted. "You're going to regret this. You need girl friends. You need to be going out and having fun. You're not married."

They wouldn't pay my rent. It didn't matter. I just took on more hours at the library. School started. Chase and I had a home.

"I don't check for spiders anymore," Chase told me.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. With you here, I don't need to."

Two weeks later, I had my first panic attack. I didn't know what it was, really. I was standing in line at the grocery store and I started to sweat and shake and I thought, *My God, if I don't get out of here,*

*I'm going to die.* I left my cart in line and ran out the door as quickly as I could.

When I got home, I fell into Chase's arms, shivering and crying. I didn't want to tell him, though. I made up a story about almost getting hit by a car. What was I supposed to say, that I had developed a sudden fear of the grocery store?

The next time it happened, I couldn't hide it because Chase was with me. It was a Friday night and we were on our way to his friend Ryan's apartment and it started again with the sweating and shaking, which I tried to conceal, but then I guess I fainted. I was only out for a few seconds and then Chase carried me home and put me in bed. As he knelt on the floor and held my hand, I finally told him about what had happened at the grocery store.

"That used to happen to my uncle," he said. "Every time he left the house. He went to therapy for it."

"And what happened?"

"We'll, he's fine now."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he had Agoraphobia. He was afraid of going outside."

"That's not me, Chase," I said.

He kissed my forehead. "No. Probably not."

After I quit my job at the library that afternoon a couple of months ago, Megan called me and asked if she could take me out to dinner.

"I know we haven't hung out in a while, but I thought it would be nice if we could talk."

"All right," I agreed.

"Haley." She paused. "I can't even imagine what you're going through."

"Yeah, well."

"I'm so sorry."

"I know," I said wearily. "Thank you."

Our plan was to meet at Alberto's Pizzeria at 8:00. I got there at 7:45 and sat down to wait. I was fidgety. I started tearing a paper napkin to shreds. My mouth was dry. I asked the waitress for a glass of water. *Where the hell was Megan?* I pressed my thumb to the pulse in my neck. It was pounding so hard, I was sure other people could see it. I wondered if I was dying. If maybe death was contagious. *Maybe I'm at the wrong place. Maybe Megan didn't say Alberto's. What if she gets here and sees me like this?*

The waitress set my water down on the table.

"Do you know what you'd like to eat, Honey?"

I stood up abruptly and the water glass tipped over. I felt ice on my shins. The muscles in my face were tight, but I was light-headed. *Am I going to be sick?* I wondered. Everyone...everyone was looking at me and there was a blur of colors of faces of voices saying Oh my God are you OK is that girl OK and there was Megan and the colors more colors and lights and I need a glass of water I need to get out of here I need fresh air Someone help that girl help her she's falling. That girl is falling.

That night I had a terrible dream that Chase and I were running on train tracks and we could hear the train but we couldn't see it and I told him, "You're going to die. I know you are. Please run faster."

He just laughed. "You're paranoid. I'm not leaving you."



"You're playing house," my mother said half-way through my first semester of living with Chase.

"You don't make time for me anymore," Megan complained.

I had only seen her twice all summer.

"You don't know what you're doing," said my father. "You're still a child."

But Chase said, "We're great for each other, Haley. We take care of each other." And at night, in bed, I didn't care if we were playing house or if I was losing my friends or disappointing my parents. When he was inside me, I would think, *I can't get you close enough. I want your whole body and your mind and your past and your future inside of me.*

I guess that was all that mattered.

I've been avoiding Megan's calls since that night at Alberto's. She even stopped by my house once, but I didn't answer the door. She also sent sympathy flowers. I've gotten lots of those. From relatives, professors, old friends from high school who I barely even know anymore. I've even gotten flowers from a couple of Chase's friends. But none of them call me. My parents call me every day and that's about it.

I cried a lot when I was a baby. My father tells me that I was a total nightmare. My mother argues, "You were just anxious. You weren't ready for the world yet." My father says, "Nothing could calm you down. You screamed if you were away from your mother, and when you were back together, you kept right on screaming."

When I was a few years older (and this I remember), I used to ask my mother for a brother or sister. She would say, "We don't need anyone else. We already have a perfect daughter.

My father told me later that they actually tried a million times, but after me, they just couldn't have babies anymore. So I wasn't perfect; I was just the best that they could do. My father also told me that when they first got married, my mother told him that she wanted to have at least eight kids.

My mother made every effort in the world to be the envy of other mothers. She even tried to get me into modeling when I was 11 years old and at the height of my awkward stage. She all but dragged me to a modeling agency. Me, with my hair that was cut too short, my braces, my body so bony, you could have snapped me in half. And she actually said to some guy (I can't remember who he was....I just know that he was sitting behind a desk and he was bald), "Haley's going to be a model."

Of course, this didn't work out.

So she sent me to modeling school. You know, those classes that anyone can take and their mothers (well, my mother) pay a ton of money and you learn how to eat (yes, how to eat) and how to walk with a book on your head and all this other shit. And meanwhile, I'm in sixth grade and all the boys are making fun of me because I'm flat-chested. Everyone's flat-chested, but I'm ugly and flat-chested and every day that I have to go to that goddamn modeling school, I'm thinking, *I will die if anyone finds out I'm doing this. I will deny it forever, but if that doesn't work, I will die.*

I told her finally, "I can't go to modeling school anymore, Mom.

I hate it.”

“But Haley, you have a gift. You’re beautiful.”

“I’m not beautiful. Everyone at school tells me I’m ugly and flat.”

I burst into tears.

“You are not ugly. They are ugly people. They’re ugly on the inside if they say those things to you.”

The very next day, she bought me a bra. She presented it to me with a huge smile and tears in her eyes and she hugged me so hard, my ribs ached. “We can’t trust anyone but each other, Haley. We stick together. Family is all we have.”

I remember this one panic attack that I had right before Thanksgiving break, three months after the first one in the grocery store. They were starting to come on more frequently, sometimes a couple of times a week. I was walking home from work when it happened and I was about a quarter mile from the Economics building, where I knew Chase was in class. So I crept into the lecture hall quietly and beckoned to him. He followed me outside and I burst into tears.

“You can’t keep doing this,” he said. Snow was falling in his hair.

“I’m not doing anything. I can’t help it.”

“Well, I can’t save you. Do you understand that? You have to take care of yourself.”

After that I stopped leaving the apartment except to go to work and class. I read furiously every evening and barely looked up when Chase left the house. He did everything without me.

We both went home for semester break in December and it was nothing like the summer before. We talked only once in the

whole three and half weeks. I couldn't eat. I lost five pounds while I was home. I had panic attacks at least every other day. Our one phone conversation happened because I called him in the middle of a panic attack.

"Please talk to me for a few minutes," I said.

I heard him let out a heavy breath. "Have you told your parents?"

"Not yet."

"You need help."

"I know."

"No. Really. Please do something about this."

The night we both got back, Chase announced, "I'm going out."

I didn't say anything.

When he crawled into bed late that night, he smelled of alcohol.

I buried my head in his chest.

"Come on, Haley. It's too hot." He pushed me away.

The next night, he said casually, "It's Ryan's birthday. We're going out to drink. Just the guys."

I wouldn't talk to him as he got dressed.

"Please don't pull this right now," he sighed. He ignored me for a few minutes and then glanced over at me. "And what the hell are you reading?"

"You don't even care anymore," I said without looking at him.

My face was buried in *Love Story*.

He leaned down to kiss me on the cheek. "You know that's not true." He pulled his coat on and left.

Now, in my dreams, he tells me, *Don't think I don't appreciate you. I know I haven't been myself lately. You're great for putting up with me the way you do.*

*I know, I say. It's because I love you.*

My father's birthday is June tenth. This summer I thought I'd take the train home and surprise him. I wasn't expecting it to be easy, but I hadn't seen my parents since the funeral. I woke up early that morning to catch the 8:35 and as I was walking to the train station, I had my eyes fixed on my right hand. *Is that really my hand?* I found myself thinking. *It's almost like cardboard or a cartoon or something.* I touched it with my left hand. *How odd.* And then I started to feel light-headed and I had to stop and crouch down on the sidewalk and then I realized it was happening again. I was suddenly terrified. *There's nothing to grab on to, I thought. The world is too big.*

*The world is too big.*

Sometimes on the phone, my mother asks, "Why don't you give Megan a call? She was always such a sweet girl."

"Yeah, we went out to dinner the other night," I tell her evasively. *And I made a scene and spilled a glass of water and almost fainted and I can never show my face in Alberto's again. Oh, and did I mention that I haven't left my apartment in two months?*

"Are you cheating on me?" I asked Chase. It was February, sophomore year. I knew he wasn't cheating on me.

"No, Haley, I'm not cheating on you."

I was sitting at the foot of the bed, putting my boots on and getting ready to go to work. I started to cry.

“What’s wrong, Haley?”

“I’m just really stressed out. I have a paper to write and I have to go to work and my boyfriend hates me.”

I saw Chase smile a little. He knelt on the floor in front of me and took my hand. “What is going on with you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I rested my cheek on the top of his head. “Do you love me?” I asked. I hadn’t meant to ask that. It just slipped out. I heard him sigh. “It’s not a trick question,” I said. I pushed him away from me and stood up. “Why can’t I get through to you anymore?” I shouted. “What did I do?”

I knew I hadn’t done anything.

“You haven’t done anything.”

“You’re not trying anymore. You don’t even think about me!”

He didn’t say anything, just stood up and pulled my sweater over my head. I let him. He unhooked my bra. I was going to be late for work. “How could I not love this body?” he asked. He unzipped my jeans. I let him. Even though this wasn’t enough.

This wasn’t nearly enough.

A few days later, I asked him, “Did something happen over Christmas break? You’ve just been so different since then. What happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

“That can’t be true,” I said, shaking my head. “That can’t be true.”

“Jesus Christ. Nothing happened!”

He was washing his dishes in the sink.

"I just don't get it!" I cried. My voice broke. "I don't understand you."

I saw his back tense. He turned the water off, but he didn't turn around. "You're crowding me," he said quietly. "Please don't crowd me."

I pretended to be asleep that night when he got into bed. I wasn't, though. So I saw him check for spiders.

It's a Saturday morning and I'm drifting in and out of sleep and I hear someone knocking on the door. I wake up and it hits me like it does every morning, right in the stomach, that Chase is gone. I get up and throw my robe on and stumble toward the door. I'm not planning on answering it, most likely. It's probably the mailman, and I'm slowly remembering, in pieces, the dream I was just having, that I was in the passenger seat of Chase's car and he was driving and he was drinking from a blue thermos. I kept asking, "What are you drinking? You're not going to see the speed bumps."

"Yes, I will. Just relax."

I look through the peep hole and it's my goddamn mother.

I open the door.

"What are you *doing* here?" I ask.

She reaches for me and hugs me and presses my head to her shoulder. "Is that any way to greet your mother who you haven't seen all summer?"

"Well, I didn't know you were coming."

She smells like my mother. The same vanilla-scented perfume

that she's always worn. Vanilla and Lysol spray and something else. Something that's just her. Suddenly I want to sit on her lap and tell her everything. I want to tell her, *All the boys at school make fun of me because I'm flat-chested.* I want that to be my problem.

We go into my room and she starts to make my bed.

"Mom, stop!"

"What? Haley, it's a mess in here!" She scratches a mosquito bite on her shoulder and studies my face. "You're so pale. You look like you haven't left the house all summer."

"That's ridiculous."

"Well." She bites her lip and then brightens. "I thought I'd help you start packing. I brought you some new boxes. I thought we could get a start on your move and then maybe go somewhere nice for lunch. How does that sound?"

God help me.

"I don't know, Mom."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Well, I was going to go over to the library today and see if I could get my job back."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I just...I don't know. I guess I'm ready to start working again. Today."

"Can it wait until tomorrow?"

I look out the window. The day is colorless.

*I love days like this.*

*I don't. They make me miss California.*

*You miss California?*



*No. Just the sun.*

*Do you want to go outside?*

*It's raining.*

*So? You got something better to do?*

"Haley?" My mother pushes my hair back from my shoulders.

"Yeah?"

"Can it wait until tomorrow?"

I don't say anything because I'm going to cry. I feel it climbing up inside of me like it does every morning. You'd think the pain would be worst at night, but it's not. It's in the mornings when I wake up and remember all over again. I can't stop it. I can never stop it.

"What's wrong, Honey?"

"Nothing."

"You miss Chase."

"Yes," I say. I look away from her, out the window. "I do miss Chase."

I can handle packing, but I know that I can't handle going out to lunch. It seems slightly less scary with my mother being here, but I still don't want to take any chances. I suggest we order in and she's not thrilled with the idea, I can tell, but she agrees. So together, we start folding my sweaters, gathering pots and pans, filling plastic trash bags and cardboard boxes and I can't help but think of the day when Chase's family came for his things. It was a week after the funeral. They flew in from San Francisco, his parents and his sister, and it was so surreal because we didn't talk, any of us, other than to say, "Where should I put this?" and "Do you want this?" and those kinds

of things. It was as if all four of us were dead, too. I kept thinking, You are taking half of my home from me. *You are taking half of me.* I missed Chase more that day than ever.

My mother is making small talk, sort of. She's telling me about the new carpet in her bedroom, that it's a shade of mauve a tiny bit lighter than the color of the wall paper in the downstairs bathroom, and I'm thinking, *I'm going to miss the old carpet. I grew up with that carpet.* I'm honestly wishing that my parents had thought to consult me before getting new carpet in their bedroom.

"Haley, I have never seen more books in my life," she muses. There are boxes and boxes of them. She smiles. "You've always been our little reader, haven't you." She doesn't wait for a reply. It wasn't really even a question.

I still want to tell her what's wrong with me. She's sitting here, chatting and folding my clothes and I can't get it out of my head that I just want to tell her. *Help me, I want to say. I don't think I can move out of this apartment in two weeks. I don't think I can do much of anything. I am terrified.*

It's like one of those dreams where you're being chased and you can't run or where you're trying to scream and no sound comes out. It's like one of those bad dreams, because the time is passing and now my mother is hugging me good-bye and I can tell she wants to cry so I'm hurrying her out the door and now her car's starting and she's gone and I still haven't told her.

After last spring break, Chase came back from San Francisco and said "I think I'm going to go home again this summer."

"What?"

“Haley, we need a break from each other.”

“What do you mean by ‘break’?”

Chase ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what I mean, but I can’t figure it out when I’m coming home to you every night. I have no room to think.”

“I can give you more room.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“No.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No!” he exploded. “I’m not. And stop asking me that. You will survive without me this summer. You’ve done it before.”

I ignored him, spread the fingers of my right hand in front of me, pretended to be examining my nails.

“Listen, I’ve told you that you need to get help. You’re driving me away from you. Do you understand that? I’m 20 years old. I’m not qualified to fix your problems.” He paused and then touched my face. “I’m sorry.”

I wouldn’t look up.

“I’m sorry for getting mad, for hurting you, everything. I love you, Haley. I really do.”

“Then don’t leave.”

“I’m not leaving. I just need time.”

So he left. And then one evening in late May, he called me and said, “I miss you. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I do miss you and I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

"I *am* hurting."

"I know." He paused. "This isn't healthy."

I sighed into the phone. "I'm going to love you forever, Chase, and that just sucks."

Later that night, he got hit by a drunk driver while crossing the street to go to a friend's house.

"Tragic," everyone said.

I heard that word so many times, it lost its meaning.

It's a terrible night. It's raining and my mother has left me with a room full of boxes and I need something. Someone. It occurs to me that I need someone. So I call Megan. I barely even say hello before I find myself telling her about my nightmares, about the panic attacks, about grocery shopping in the middle of the night, about loving and hating my parents and how if I ever have a baby, I'll do everything in my power to make sure that it has nothing to cry about. I tell her that I'm stuck, that Chase was stuck, too, that I wish I hadn't made him feel that way.

"OK," she says over and over. "It's going to be OK."

Megan is going to come over tomorrow so that we can talk more, maybe call a doctor. She says I need help. *I know*, I say, and I mean it. Megan is stuck now, too. Stuck to me.

I open the door and feel a warm August breeze on my face. I'm barefoot and I step out into the rain. I take another step and I feel my heart speed up so I turn around to go back inside.

*Better get out of the rain*, I tell myself. *Don't want to catch cold*.

I wrap my arms around my body, even though the air is hot. I'll try

again when it's sunny out. Another day. I go back inside and close the door and lean heavily against it, trying to catch my breath. Beside me, a spider is struggling to weave the perfect web. □