

I'm Here

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I'm Here

by [Bandtrees](#)

Summary

Evan Hansen has found himself wrapped up in a spiral of lies like no other. Fuel is constantly added to the fire, intentionally or otherwise, and by the tragedies that begin to follow the Connor Project and its associates, getting burned is the least of his problems.

Keeping the secret is hard enough, but it's much harder when lives are on the line.

Canon-divergent horror AU.

Sincerely, Me

Chapter Notes

Welcome to I'm Here! A fun horror DEH AU I've been brewing for a while :] I don't wanna spoil too much of what I have planned, but I hope you stick around and find out! :D

Later on, the story will get pretty violent and grim, so if you don't think that'll be your thing, feel free to click off. For now, though, we're just getting through Act 1, so feel free to sit back and enjoy the calm before the storm.

Hope you like! Comments are appreciated ^^

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

If you'd asked Evan what he thought of Connor Murphy maybe, like, a week ago, he'd barely be able to come up with anything. Zoe's brother, the one there were hushed, whispered rumors about, maybe the fact he took a nail filer to his teeth to make them look like fangs in freshman year, but not much else.

If you'd asked him now... unfortunately, not much would change. He'd say unfortunately, because right now, his life pretty much hinged on pretending to have complex thoughts on Connor Murphy — on which he had none.

There were bits and pieces he'd learned from his family at dinner, yeah, but nothing that made him feel like he had a real, genuine friendship with the guy. Embellishing an anecdote to include Connor in it was easy, with the added bonus of nobody at the dinner table wanting to be *that asshole* and point out the inconsistencies of a story from a boy in shock, but actually getting into Connor's head was... much harder.

What did he even like? Knives? Pushing people? Hating skiing? What if he had some weird typing style Evan didn't know about and couldn't imitate that would blow a hole in the whole thing? What if he didn't even *use* emails? What if the Murphys knew this was all bullshit and were just humoring him, and he didn't know, and he was humoring them humoring him? What if —

"You good over there?" Jared didn't even look his way as he pressed his laptop's power button, but likely knew after ten years of not-quite-friendship that a quiet Evan was a spiraling Evan.

Fidgeting with the ridges of his cast, he just nodded, then promptly remembered Jared couldn't see it and mumbled some affirmation. "I— yeah, I'm just, a little scared?"

"Shocker."

His one family friend Jared may have been, the other's dismissive tone still pissed him off. Not usually, but here, they really couldn't afford to act smart. He hoped it didn't show in his voice. "No, I, really, Connor's family knows him way better than we do... way better than I do." He gnawed on a fingernail, a gesture he knew grossed Jared out, but one he couldn't really help. "If we mess this up..."

"How hard can it be?" Jared deadpanned with a shrug, the kind of thoughtless confidence that Evan couldn't dream to imitate in a thousand years, even if here he got the feeling it was more dangerous than admirable. "Look, all you need to know about Connor is that he acts pretty much exactly how you'd expect him to." He leaned back in his chair as he watched his laptop boot up. Evan did too, if only because he felt like he'd get even more of a headache if he watched whatever old sitcom was playing on the TV. "Weird edgy freak, probably has some true crime blog, salted snails as a kid, you get it."

Evan distinctly remembered Jared salting snails when they were younger — far past the age of "kid", even. He chewed his lip nervously — that approach didn't feel quite right, but he was probably the last person on Earth with a right to say so. "I, I mean..." he started, tongue dumb in his mouth as he fumbled for a moment longer before finding his words again. "You talk to your friends... differently... than you talk to your parents, right? He'd be more honest with me, 'cause we're friends."

"Well, yeah." Jared sat back up straight, irritably clicking the mouse as his computer refused to load past a buffer screen. Every cycle the little circles went spiked Evan's anxiety higher — what if they couldn't get to it tonight? "But we don't wanna weird out the Murphys. Just gotta make it sound like Connor and we're good to go. We're not writing his fuckin' memoir, we're covering your ass 'til this blows over."

That approach didn't feel quite right, either. Evan wanted this to be over as quickly as possible, but doing it just to cover himself left him with a sour feeling. Connor's mom had been so happy when he told that story about the orchard, and his words probably meant more to the family than he'd ever understand — God only knew how many times he'd accidentally tugged some heart-string of theirs he didn't even know existed because Connor secretly had a crippling fear of trees or something — he could do more than the bare minimum, right?

He couldn't do much but stew in his thoughts, because Jared was prickly and hard to talk to during their day-to-day, much less about anything personal. The other didn't seem to mind this, fixated as he was trying to get his laptop to work. Evan just stared down at his shoes, counting the floor's tiles.

"Swear to God, if I have to waste another night on this..." he heard Jared grumbling and looked up, only to be cut off by the screen suddenly cutting to black...

...accompanied by the harshest, loudest static sound Evan had ever heard in his life. Screeching, something that sounded more likely to come out of a broken TV than a new laptop. He screamed in surprise as Jared recoiled, but the other quickly began to laugh as the sound vanished just as quickly as it came, shifting to the desktop screen like nothing happened. Evan wasn't sure if he was laughing at the sound or his reaction.

"Holy shit, dude, we're totally in a horror movie right now. You ever see Unfriended? Connor's about to stick my hand in a blender."

Evan laughed along, in his weird low this-isn't-funny-but-I-want-to-be-nice laugh. "Please don't say that." His voice cracked. He never believed in the paranormal — living people were stressful enough to be around, thanks — but he didn't need any more reminders on how morally dubious this was. Having Connor lingering over his shoulder would be too much to handle.

Regardless, Jared was already opening up a fresh email account as Evan's heart still hammered in his chest. He was typing something, and Evan squinted to get a closer look. It looked to be account information for the fake Connor, and Evan's eyes fell on the email address Jared typed. "...sexygoth69420?"

Jared snickered proudly as he began inputting a password. "What, jealous you couldn't come up with it first?"

"This has to be realistic...!" Evan whined, starting to regret his decision in enlisting help from his so-called best family friend of all people. Didn't he understand how devastating this would be if it got out?

There was an overblown sigh of annoyance from the other, like he'd just been told to run a mile. "Fiiiine, God, fuckin', uh... 'murphythrowaway'." He tapped it out. "There." Generic, but it got the job done. Evan really wasn't about to explain to the Murphy parents the significance of the number 69420 to Connor - having to come up with convincing friendship details was stressful enough.

Clicking past extra account setup details - Evan doubted Connor's phone number was relevant to any of this - they finally reached the inbox. "Now for the fun part." Jared grinned, the look on his face both a relief and a terror as he opened a text box to draft the first email. He was in his element, for... better or worse. Evan hated to waste a friend's time, but that grin was a sign this would be a very, very long night. "So your weird narcissistic sex letters ___"

"I-it's not a sex letter, I told you before, it-"

The pleas could not have fallen on deafer ears. "—they all start off, like, 'dear Evan Hansen', right? 'Cause that's what the Murphys found when Connor Cobained himself. So I'm just gonna..."

Jared leaned forward to start typing, and Evan felt a sudden chill. He knew deep down — hell, not even deep down, knew on the *surface* — that this was fucked and wrong, but what else could he do? His only option was to dig deeper, and if nothing else, Jared would be happy to help with that - he was down for anything he thought was funny or otherwise benefited him, up to and including Evan's suffering.

The room was cold as Jared slipped all too easily into the fake Connor persona, and Evan watched the words form across the text box, knowing this was a point of no return.

Dear Evan Hansen,

We've been way too out of touch...

Chapter End Notes

Sincerely, Me is sacred ground. This may be a horror AU but I can't ruin it.

Don't Say It Wasn't True

Chapter Summary

Zoe spends a night in Connor's room.

Chapter Notes

Time for chapter 2! I've already written up several chapters in advance, so if all goes well the next one should be up tomorrow!

...though I probably just jinxed myself by saying that. Whoops. XD

(For the curious, I publish the next chapter when I finish writing the one that comes after it. There's probably an easier way to do it, but it's how I've approached the few multi-chapters I write. ^_^)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Connor's room was perfectly frozen in time. A half-empty crushed water bottle was still on his night stand, never to be finished, clothes were strewn across the floor, his bed was unmade with one pillow missing its case, his video game controller was collecting dust next to the TV that continued to play the tabloid talk shows he liked so much, oblivious to the fact their watcher was long dead — it was honestly pretty uncanny.

Zoe hadn't set foot in it since she first found him, entering it with the same nervous step she had when he was alive, like he would pop out and yell at her again. She couldn't take her eyes off the support beam she saw him dangling from only a week or so prior, though to any other eye it was just another part of the ceiling. Time was a blur, to be honest — all she knew was that one day Connor was there, and another he wasn't. She felt guilty for being kind of thankful — she'd wished over the years of torment for him to go away, but while seeing it happen was so, so different, there was a certain relief to it, too.

Was that criminal? Probably. But she couldn't look at those printed emails about how he was some misunderstood boy who wanted nothing more than some support and separate them from the brother who once tried to strangle her for losing his phone charger. (And she knew it wasn't because of the charger — he'd gotten into a fight at school that day and needed to finish the job on something.)

The one at the top of the stack in her arms was from 2014, as Connor described to Evan a concert of Zoe's. She should've been angry, dismissive, but... another part of her kept reading,

desperate to know if Connor thought of her as anything but an annoyance, or property — a punching bag for when he had a bad day at school — maybe like when they were kids, before everything went wrong. Anything to shield her from the miserable truth.

I wish I could tell her how she means everything to me, it read, and it stung her. If he thought this, couldn't he stand to show it? Could she really be blamed for her anger when the only time he expressed any remorse was in places she wouldn't even see until after his death? Fuck. She sighed heavily, unable to bring on any tears. Mom kept chiding her for being too cold about this, but she watched her shaking and crying and could never in a million years imagine feeling that way about Connor.

When they were kids, maybe. When he was better, before the stress of school and their family seemed to hit him all at once like an oncoming truck and he became a monster. He wasn't the only one to blame — she wasn't a saint when she was freaked out, either, and anxiety and insecurity seemed to run in the family, even when they manifested in wildly different ways for each Murphy (what a fucking train-wreck of a household this was, huh?) — but even when Zoe experienced that same helplessness and anger and confusion, she wasn't beating up random kids or making her family miserable.

It doesn't sound like Connor, she thought as she read through another from January this year. But that's just what Mom had said, too. Every kid had their own private life - Zoe reckoned that if Mom dug through her texts and emails, she wouldn't think it sounded like her daughter, either. Zoe wasn't exactly an expert on how Connor acted with people he didn't seem to want dead.

Like Evan.

He said they were friends — best friends, in fact, but the only time Zoe ever saw them talk was when Connor shoved him in the hall the day he killed himself. It didn't make sense, but she supposed if anyone would be pushing their best friend to the floor for talking to them in public, it'd be him.

Despite herself, she was pained by it. Maybe that had been the final straw for him. Maybe he had been considering killing himself already that day, just hadn't decided, and having his friend breach his privacy like that was his breaking point. The thought made Zoe sick — Evan was exactly the kind of guy that'd get roped into Connor and his bullshit because he felt sorry for him, thinking he could "fix" him like Zoe used to. He didn't deserve that cross to bear in Connor's life, much less his death.

As much as it infuriated her to see her brother being treated like some martyr just because he killed himself, it couldn't have been easy on Evan. He already looked like he'd burst into tears at any second, much less coping with the sudden death of his... "best and most dearest friend".

God. Ugh. Everything about this just put a bad taste in her mouth — from the death to how her family handled it. She couldn't blame them — going through the suicide of their son would never have been easy or clean — but treating him like some "angel that wanted to return home" (that's what Alana Beck said the first day she came back from school, in an effort to comfort her) felt like a disservice to not only the people he hurt in his life, but *him*.

If he were alive, he'd probably clock Mom right across the face for treating him like a sad teen suicide poster boy instead of a person. He always hated her dumb miracle cures, the insistence that some exercise and positive thinking would rid him of all of his woes, and this felt about on the same level.

It was all too much to handle. Zoe thumbed through the papers in her hands, skimming the words for answers — of which there were none. Even in death, with these emails that supposedly told the whole story, everything her brother thought that he never told his family, he was an enigma.

She sighed, plopping onto his bed and lying back — this was far too emotionally exhausting. She couldn't just lock herself in her room and be rid of it all, as much as she wanted to. In a perfect world, this'd all just be a bad dream, and Connor was getting real help instead of the bullshit his parents shoved on him. But this was no perfect world — Zoe had learned that from the moment her brother first started drifting away.

When she next opened her eyes, the room was darker, the sky visible through the crooked blinds now a hazy and gloomy blue. Before she could even register that she'd fallen asleep, much less whatever woke her up, there was a loud noise she almost thought she was imagining.

A bang against the door. A single knock, as if to confirm Zoe could hear it, followed by violent, *violent* pounding. It didn't sound like Mom or Dad, or even Evan, if he was still around, and she forced herself out of her frozen fear to back up into the headboard. She scrambled for the emails, some scattered to the floor, grabbing them and crumpling them to her chest in her haste. The banging continued as she did, unbroken, and she felt as if it was getting louder and louder, like the door could break off its hinges any second.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she drew her knees to her chest, wide eyes fixed on the source of the noise. She couldn't quite tell what, if anything, was behind it, and even as she waited with bated breath for what felt like five minutes, it showed no sign of stopping. No yelling, nor scuffling of feet across the ground, accompanied it, and Zoe didn't know if that was good or bad.

Throat dry, she swallowed, emails in one sweaty hand as she pulled herself off Connor's bed and to her feet. One foot after the other, she could hear her heart hammering in her chest like the swell of an orchestra in a horror movie as she approached the doorway. The strikes against the door continued, uninterrupted by her movements, and she swore she could see the wood shaking with the force as she turned the knob, shielding herself just in case to find...

Nothing.

Immediately, Zoe deflated. Her head dropped into her hands as she promptly realized how either dumb or delusional she was being. Fuck, she was going insane. And her parents would send her to some loony bin like they did for Connor. She shut the door behind her, intending to return to her room so she could doze off for good, but was cut off by another unexpected sound — but definitely more welcome than the last.

She could hear her parents, and peered over the interior balcony's railing overlooking the living and dining rooms to find Larry and Cynthia talking on the couch over the printed emails, a half-empty glass in the former's hand.

Zoe began to descend the staircase, and Larry turned his head to the sound. "Were either of you knocking on my door just now?" She asked. *Probably not*, she realized, *but... to be sure*.

Her parents just glanced at each other, Larry shrugging as Cynthia just shook her head. "No..." she replied, with a hint of confusion.

"We didn't hear anything." He added.

Zoe just exhaled, visibly stressed as she ran a hand through her hair. "Guess it was just a nightmare." What kind of nightmare, she wasn't sure, but she had more than enough bad memories of Connor trying to break down her door to fuel one.

A small frown came on Cynthia's face — the kind she only ever used for her late son, now. "Aw, honey..." Her voice was soft and sympathetic. "It's okay you're scared about Connor."

There it is. Zoe blinked. That wasn't it, or at least she didn't think so, but what was she supposed to say to that? "I guess," she mumbled a little lamely as she averted eye contact.

"Come on." Cynthia shifted aside to make room for Zoe on the couch. "We can talk about it — I think we all need it."

She didn't. But Zoe made her way over regardless, setting the damaged emails in her grasp onto the coffee table as she seated herself on the couch's armrest. Not where Cynthia had gestured, but it was always her favorite place to sit.

"Honey, it's a school night..." Larry chided in an all too familiar tone, though Cynthia didn't seem to listen as she got up to head for the kitchen.

For hot chocolate, Zoe guessed, like when her and Connor were kids. It sounded nice right now, but she still chewed her lip nervously. She knew what Mom wanted out of her — not a real conversation, but a change of heart over her brother, like she'd been trying to milk out of her for the past week. Still, though, she supposed this was better than just stewing in her anger alone in her room.

Or Connor's room, rather, she thought, glancing up to the door upstairs. She didn't really want to do *that* again. She remembered hearing a story on some ghost hunting TV show a while back about a woman's dead mother pounding on her door, standing over her at night, calling her a bitch and a whore while she was trying to sleep.

That sounded like something Connor would do. She sighed, looking away and to the emails on the table — if that was what he was planning, it seemed her suffering was far from over.

For the sake of balancing this fic and not making it too grim (or convoluted, conflict-wise), some stuff is generally lighter than in canon, if not pretty much omitted completely. It's why If I Could Tell Her and Requiem are sorta rolled into one, among other plot events that'll happen later I don't wanna spoil :>

...also, can you tell Zoe is my favorite character? XD

The Connor Project

Chapter Summary

Evan has doubts, but it's a bit late to back out now.

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to everyone who's stuck around for this so far! This is my first go at a fic like this, so I'm pleased it's going well.

Aaand special thanks to Kayla (kachinnate on Tumblr) for letting me use their awesome fanart as a cover image :D

<https://bandtrees.tumblr.com/post/621775311668953088/kkamikazed-so-bandtrees-made-the-mistake-of>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"We're calling it the Connor Project."

There were many times Evan's empathy overrode his common sense — this was one of them. Hell, this entire situation could be described pretty aptly as "a time Evan's empathy overrode his common sense", but this felt like a new low. Just as it was all beginning to fizzle out, and he could let Connor Murphy fade into obscurity, the same part of him that started spinning this dumb lie to begin with forced him to keep it alive.

When writing the emails with Jared, the other's computer kept crashing when he tried to backdate them. Some were lost altogether, needing to be rewritten, and it got to the point he had to send them to Evan as he worked, just so there was a backup copy of each one. It probably would've been easier on everyone now if they decided it wasn't worth the work, but... if Evan Hansen was good at anything, evidently, it was digging his own grave.

Cynthia blinked at his proposal, looking a good 50/50 between hopeful and lost. He didn't quite blame her. "The Connor *Project*?" She echoed, as if trying the name out.

Zoe, who had been sitting at the table on her phone since his entrance, pulled out an earbud and gave a confused look. He didn't quite blame her, either.

He nodded nervously, fumbling for the pamphlet in his pocket, with great difficulty given his cast. He wasn't sure if he was thankful or annoyed when Jared leaned over to pluck it out for him, unfolding it and presenting it to the Murphys.

"Imagine a major online presence..." Evan began, scratching the bases of his fingers now that he had nothing to do with his hands, only to be abruptly cut off by Alana stepping up towards the table to give Cynthia her own pamphlet. Evan's voice died in his throat — it was probably better to leave the speaking to the ones who were actually... good at it.

"With links to educational materials!" Alana spoke, with that wide, desperate grin Evan grew to recognize as just as nervous as his own.

"A massive fundraising drive," Jared proudly continued, oblivious to the odd look from Larry, who didn't seem very fond of his energy.

"And for the kickoff event, an all-school memorial assembly next week." Alana clasped her hands. "Students, teachers — whoever wants to, they can all come and talk about his legacy." Her voice was stirring and sentimental — perhaps too much so for a kid she barely knew, but at least someone here felt some true connection with Connor.

"I don't know what to say..." Cynthia scanned her pamphlet with wide eyes, running a hand through her hair as she passed it to her husband.

Evan could see Zoe cross her arms as he lingered behind his friends, watching Larry read with an unsure, almost scrutinizing gaze.

Part of him really, *really* wanted them to shut the idea down. It'd make his life way easier — "see, Evan? You don't have anything to worry about after all! Not even Connor's family cares if he disappears!" (...okay, it sounded cruel when he put it like that, actually) — but he knew Cynthia spoke for all three Murphys when it came to Connor, and she would be enthusiastic. Anything for her perfect little boy, which was a sentiment Evan grew increasingly uncomfortable with — it was hard to look at who Connor really was: the ticking time-bomb waiting to go off, who shoved Evan and stole his property just for saying his sister's name, and know it was the same boy Cynthia idealized so much.

He said that like he didn't have anything to do with it, but still.

"I didn't realize Connor meant this much to people." Larry said, glancing back towards Evan and the others, likely wanting to leave it there to avoid a spat with his wife in front of his... son's friend's friends.

Alana squealed and bounced on her heels. "Oh my God, he was one of my closest acquaintances!" The Murphys gave her an odd look at the word choice, but she continued. "He was my lab partner in chemistry, and we did a presentation together on Huck Finn in tenth grade!" She laughed. "He was so funny — he kept calling it... well... instead of *Huck Finn*..."

From what little Evan knew about the guy, he could probably guess.

Alana trailed off, clearly not wanting to say it, as she turned back to the Murphys. "...no one else in our class thought of *that*!" He could hear Jared try and hide a laugh behind a cough.

"I was also thinking, um, maybe the jazz band could do something?" Evan's voice quivered, and he avoided eye contact with Zoe when she glared at him.

"Yeah, maybe..." she huffed.

"Great idea, Evan." Jared said far too loudly, either trying to be supportive or maximize Evan's embarrassment. He could honestly never tell.

"Thank you, Jared." He spoke through gritted teeth in an attempt to silence him.

"No problem!" It didn't work.

Eyes wet, Cynthia smiled, though Evan wasn't quite sure what brought her to that. The pamphlet? Alana's ramble? The inclusion of Zoe as a sign she was starting to turn around? He didn't know, except for the fact that her approval was yet one of many points of no return.

"Oh, Evan, this is just..." Her hand clasped over her mouth.

He grinned a grin that quickly faltered and became forced, looking down to the floor as Cynthia walked over to wrap her arms around him.

"...this is wonderful."

Her touch was so soft, the crack in her voice so genuine. So genuine when he wasn't.. It should've made Evan happy at the validation, like the happiness he felt when the Murphys hung onto every last word of the orchard story, but it only made him sick.

Really, really sick — oh, God, he felt like he was going to pass out.

The world spun, Evan's vision red and blurred as he violently staggered and missed his footing. He felt himself detach from Cynthia and nearly fall to the floor, only for Alana to grasp his shoulder. For a moment, he didn't even realize what had happened, looking with unfocused eyes past the others, until it finally registered and he slowly blinked.

He spotted a shadow passing by at the end of the room, and he glanced over his shoulder to see if there had somehow been another person present to witness this mess. None, and the looks the Murphys and his friends were giving him when he turned his head back finally sank in.

He was guilty. He looked so guilty right now and the Murphys had no idea why and he couldn't come up with a reason why because *who the fuck randomly blacks out when they're hugged?* "I — I, um," he stammered — even Zoe was looking up from her phone now, and he could see Jared rolling his eyes at him. His hands balled into fists.

It would be easy, wouldn't it? To back out now? That's what his subconscious was screaming at him to do, just pull out some sorry excuse because anything's better than having to dig this dumb dead kid lie deeper and deeper, but his bleary gaze went to Alana and Jared, and he knew he couldn't. Not now that he'd dragged them into it, too.

"—y-yeah! Sorry, um," He finished, trying to straighten himself and assure Cynthia that *no, he was having no second thoughts at all, what would ever give her that idea.* "Yeah, I'm, I'm

excited. It's gonna be..." *A train-wreck, because I can't keep this lie up in front of the audience of a major online presence, or a massive fundraising drive, or an all-school memorial assembly.* "...really important."

He could see her shoulders slump with relief as he put on an uneasy smile, and she glanced down to the pamphlet in her hands to read it over once more.

His grin fell as he hooked his fingers beneath the opening in his cast to anxiously scratch the skin beneath. The name scrawled across the front was not helping his feelings of guilt — he knew acutely that Connor wouldn't have wanted this. He didn't care about fundraising drives, or having his name all over some feel-good mental health blog. But when someone wanted something of Evan, he couldn't refuse it — even if it meant twisting the memory of a dead classmate.

As they left — he didn't have the appetite to stay for dinner — Alana stopped mid-stride on the way to Jared's car to turn her head to Evan with a frown. "Were you okay in there?" She asked, without any of her exaggerated mannerisms.

"...me?" He squeaked.

"He's just like that." Jared cut in, hands stuffed into his pockets. "You know how when you gotta put your hands up as you walk towards a feral cat to pet it, otherwise it'll freak out on you? Yeah."

Thanks. Evan couldn't say he was wrong, though.

Alana nodded like she understood, and Evan hoped she wouldn't take that to heart every time she went in to hug him. "Well, you won't have to worry!" Her frown vanished as quickly as it came. "The Connor Project is just as much about raising awareness of mental issues as it is about Connor! You won't have to be uncomfortable anymore, Evan."

She beamed at him, making a show out of being careful with her movements as she placed a supportive hand on his shoulder, and again, it only brought unease. He looked away, hoping it would keep that sick feeling he had in the Murphys' dining room from coming back. If only she knew how uncomfortable this whole thing truly was.

Chapter End Notes

Consider this a breather before *You Will Be Found*, because like the musical, it'll be a big one! The archive warnings are here for a reason :] Comments are appreciated!

The Destruction

Chapter Summary

"I— I would just like to say a few words here today about... my best friend, Connor Murphy."

Chapter Notes

I'm sure the chapter title being a reference to the Carrie musical bodes well.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Evan couldn't do this. Public speaking was his absolute worst nightmare already, much less when it centered around the lie he'd been cultivating for the last two and a half weeks. His hands trembled as he reread his index cards for what felt like the fiftieth time, to the point where the pencil lettering was growing smudged.

He attempted to take a deep breath, but it quickly turned into hyperventilating as he recited his speech. Ironically, the affirmations of "someone will come running" were doing nothing for him now as he paced up and down the length of the backstage area. If someone came running for him right now, he'd be so full of nerves that he'd end up puking on them.

Trying to calm himself, he peered out the door — okay, okay, not as many people showed up as he feared, which... he should've been more upset about, stuck as he was in an odd metronome between being excited to be part of a genuinely good cause and disgusted at his role in it, but now all he could feel at the turnout was relief that there were less people to embarrass himself in front of.

The school auditorium was decorated with those posters for the Connor Project that Jared made, though Evan had asked Alana to try and make the event accessible for anyone looking to grieve, not just those interested in supporting an organization he was certain would never make its way off the ground.

He adjusted his tie — not his, it wasn't his, it was too small on him and Cynthia herself said it would've been Connor's if he made it to graduation — and stared harder into the mirror than was appropriate to make sure it wasn't crooked. Nobody would be looking that close, but if he was going to desecrate a dead kid's name, then by God he'd do it in style.

...he mentally smacked himself upside the head for thinking that. Not funny.

Distantly, there was the tapping of a microphone to silence the chatter in the room. Evan rubbed a hand across his face, adjusting the stack of cards, thumbing through them a final time to make sure they were numbered correctly.

Another deep breath. He focused on Alana's voice booming through the auditorium, thanking everyone for coming tonight, how important a cause it was, how much Connor Murphy meant to people. He could do this. He could do this, because he'd reread these cards a million times and nobody would care if he fumbled a bit and it was just a school assembly and most of them would be on their phones anyway.

Good? Good. Okay.

He stepped onstage, startled by the applause. The Murphys were in the front row, because of course they were, and Cynthia was clapping loudest. He averted his eyes from them and wet his lips nervously, wondering acutely if it was socially acceptable to do so in front of so many people.

A single microphone was in the center, and he had to resist the urge to grasp it out of fear. The shrill feedback noise would be too much for his heart to handle right now. He raised the index cards so he could read them clearly, careful to keep them at a level where he could still (kind of) look at the audience.

His voice cracked as he began, and the words seemed to spill out all at once. "Good evening, students and faculty. Um..." Oh, God, he was going to kick himself for saying "um" out loud. Fuck. "I— I would just like to say a few words here today about..."

His tongue felt swollen in his throat. He made an odd croaking noise as he managed to uncomfortably force the words out — if he couldn't say them to some kids at school and their parents, how could he to the world? "My best friend, Connor Murphy. About..."

Another deep breath. His anxiety was palpable, no doubt, but he knew this story. He remembered just how happy it made the Murphys to hear. He could do it again.

"About the day over the summer we went to the Autumn Smile Apple Orchard together. Connor and I." Reading directly from his cards, he winced a little at the wording. God, he couldn't have noticed that before he came up here? "We stood under an oak tree, and Connor told me he wondered how the world would look from up so high, and—"

Realizing he was talking too fast, Evan was unsure if anyone was even getting what he was saying. He couldn't read their faces, couldn't tell if they were laughing on the inside or weirded out or what and God this was a disaster.

"—and... we decided to find out." Evan wheezed, finding it hard to breathe all of a sudden. His tie was too tight, and his hands involuntarily twitched and trembled. He did his best to focus on the cards in their grasp — look there, away from the strange faces. He could pretend they weren't there, but if they weren't, then who the hell was he spinning this dumb yarn for?

"We climbed up there, one branch to another, about, um, twenty-five to fifty feet high, and..."

The shaking ceased. The one part of the story that wasn't a fabrication was here, the one part he wouldn't worry himself nauseous over.

"I could feel the sun up there, how hot it was, and... suddenly the branch gave way, and. I fell."

Despite himself, his eyes swept over the audience, gauging their reactions. He couldn't tell if they were invested or not, but his brain went on autopilot as he fell into the familiar story. His hands lowered. The stage lights flickered, and Evan resisted the urge to look over to whoever was manning them. He didn't have time to worry about that — all he needed was to get through this speech. What would happen next, he didn't know, and was scared to find out, but forcing his way through this performance was preferable to embarrassing himself in front of the whole school by backing out.

"I fell, right on my arm, and... I could feel it. I could feel it going numb but not all the way numb, just enough to feel the aching in my hand and the breaks in my wrist and I couldn't move, I wasn't strong enough, but..."

A smile came across his face, even when the audience likely didn't get the significance of it. Lie everything about Connor was, it was a comforting lie — not just for his family, but Evan. He needed someone that day, someone to pick him up and help him so he wouldn't be lying there for hours in pain.

"I reached out, and Connor came running. That's the gift he gave me, he showed me I wasn't alone, that I mattered even when we were alone out there, and... I just wish I could've—"

With a creak, the spotlight on Evan shifted away from its subject and towards the open auditorium, making Evan freeze. The audience winced at the sudden light in their faces, those in the back realizing this wasn't part of the assembly as Evan cast a worried glance over his shoulder at the malfunctioning light in question.

He was about to curse himself a second too late for breaking character, but he suddenly realized he had far bigger problems. His eyes widened. It was detaching.

The rest of the stage lights sputtered out as the one hanging precariously over his head began to fall before he could step aside.

A loud creak of metal on metal that sounded like nails on a chalkboard, the *ka-chunk* of something being pushed off-kilter, the gasp of the crowd, and a heart-rending mix of glass breaking on impact, the crash of a heavy object dropped from a height, and the wet thud of it hitting something *alive*.

The side of his head took the brunt of the blow, and already he could feel hot blood on his temple as he crumpled to the stage, concussed at best and with a caved-in skull at worst. He was crushed beneath the light, pinned to the damaged ground by his side. The cast on his arm did nothing to cushion it as broken glass dug in, hot and searing against his skin. He felt like it was melting. He couldn't look over to tell.

People began to scream, though the most noticeable was a pained, guttural shriek of his name from Cynthia, some making their way over as Evan could barely open his eyes through the pain. When he managed to, he glanced through tears over to his broken arm, which was now almost completely pulverized with cuts and burns, a large shard of glass digging right through the middle of Connor's name in one spot — mercifully, it was mostly hidden beneath the shattered light, but the sight of his own injury made his stomach turn nonetheless.

He shut his eyes again as security scrambled to pull him free, with haste that made him wonder if they thought he was dead. The pressure over his body lessened, but the open wounds hurt ten times more against the open air. He could feel himself going limp in their grasp, the cuts and bruises and blisters all convening into one big pain throughout his entire body, before slowly, it gave way to nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

There's the off-chance some of you remember an old BMC fic by me and my pal Ty (TheArtisticIntrovert), wherein Jeremy listens to the Squip's orders and goes full EEEVIL, which also involved a character being crushed by a fallen spotlight. Some might call this unoriginal, but I prefer the more idealistic 'recycling something that didn't work into something that does', haha.

Anyway, that aside, thus closes Act 1! If you couldn't tell, here's where the story dips into more horror territory. If that's not your thing, then feel free to hop off, and thank you for sticking around thus far! If it is, well... prepare for a wild ride. :]

Comments are appreciated!

Sincerely, Me (Reprise)

Chapter Summary

After that deafening crash, all Evan hears is an unsettling silence.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Act 2! The real meat of the story, if you will. Chapter updates might be a tad late going forward, just because the chapters themselves will be longer. The next one is the longest I've written yet. Yay for meat!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was like falling asleep — when one second, you were doing something, and the next, half a day had passed. It didn't feel like anything. You didn't even remember dozing off, or how long you'd been awake, or what was a dream and what wasn't.

For a blissful moment, though, none of it mattered to Evan. Not the lie. Not the Connor Project. Not the Murphys, or Zoe, or Mom. Not even the accident during his speech. After slipping away as he was dragged off the stage, all that followed was idyllic emptiness.

He was just peacefully unconscious, with none of the pain or stress he'd endured for the past weeks — the kind of peace he had been yearning for when he lay there alone beneath the tree last summer, broken and weeping, wanting nothing more than for it all to *stop*.

But it couldn't last forever. Slowly, sensation returned, and with it came the pain. It had been reduced to a dull ache, the crushing pressure of the fallen spotlight the uncomfortable itch of layers upon layers of bandages.

His bad arm was in a cast twice as thick, as well as a sling, and the irony wasn't lost on him. He would have laughed if it didn't feel like his midsection was on fire. He could barely see the world around him, at first worrying that some stray glass from the light punctured his eye or something, but as his vision returned, and with it, the pain, he realized how many goddamn painkillers he was on.

He was in a hospital room, thankfully, and more often than not — or at least when he was awake — it was empty and quiet. He knew he got visitors, and that people looked after him — he heard the muffled voices of his mother and the Murphys in his sleep, and had memories he wasn't sure were real or not of being fed by nurses — but aside from that, Evan's stay in

the hospital thus far was somehow more detached and surreal than the accident that landed him there in the first place.

There was a TV in there, but it didn't play, and he acutely wondered if that was coincidence or if Heidi had told the staff how he didn't want it on — if only because of the time he broke his ankle when he was ten, watched only reruns of Fireman Sam while he was hospitalized, and developed such a Pavlovian response to the show that he started crying whenever he heard the theme song.

That was a dumb detail, but it was good he remembered it, good that not everything had been lost to the haze of painkillers and repressed trauma. Wouldn't it be funny if he had only been in here for, like, a day, and he was just being dramatic because he didn't have a sense of time?

...hm. Not really, now he thought about it.

One night, he began to see a shadow at the edge of his room. He uses "began" hesitantly, because his vision has been so murky with sleep and drugs that it may have been there the whole time, but regardless, there was a shadow that paced the wall back and forth. When it wasn't excruciatingly painful to do so, Evan turned his head to find nothing casting it.

The shoulder he could still move slumped. It wasn't like he was aware of anything the hospital staff told him, but to his limited knowledge, hallucinations weren't a side effect of morphine. With nothing else to do, he watched the shadow, unable to open his mouth and call out due to the uncomfortable position the bandages had pressed his jaw into.

Mostly, it paced.

Sometimes, it stopped and looked over.

Then, he learned it was no shadow — or at least, no shadow of a person. There were small white pinpricks where its pupils would be, the only thing breaking up the pitch blackness of its form. Those pinpricks, though they were only a suggestion of eyes at best, stared hard into him, and he felt as if they touched his very soul.

As he looked closer, though, there were details that made him begin to think this was more than that. It was hard to make out, but the angular features, the ripped edges in its clothing, and the curls of its hair made Evan realize he was looking at the shadow of Connor Murphy.

Or, well, a guilt-induced hallucination that took the form of the shadow of Connor Murphy, most likely.

At this revelation, the shadow shifted its weight. He couldn't see its face, but got the feeling it was smiling, when it spoke in a voice he hadn't heard in forever.

"We've been way too out of touch. It's been three weeks now, hasn't it?"

Heart twisting, Evan glanced away from the far wall to his lap, where thankfully one arm and leg continued to function, unharmed. He scratched nervously at the edge of his hospital gown, saying nothing — what could he even say to that, anyway?

When he glanced back up, the shadow was now sitting on the hospital bed, a mere foot from his face. He didn't know if it was more or less unnerving that he couldn't discern any of its features up close. He shut his eyes tight, pulling the hospital sheets up to his face to shield it — thankfully met with no resistance. It was a deeply uncomfortable position, but having half of his limbs held upright in slings and clunky casts, he'd gotten used to that from his first night here.

Evan drifted off, and when he woke up again, the room was light and the shadow was gone. A nurse stepped in to feed him. He saw no more of the Connor-shaped-*thing*, and began to wonder if it really had been some odd painkiller-induced delusion.

God, Dr. Sherman would have a field day with this.

The sky was, fittingly, dull and dreary today. For the first time, Evan glanced over to the window to find his reflection in the glass. There wasn't much he could tell, but his hair was unkempt, thinner, and even when his skin was pulled taut against his bones by the bandages, he could tell his eyes and cheeks were more sunken in with exhaustion and pain. To say nothing of the scars, good God — to give the doctors credit, the bandages covered most of them, but he saw glimpses in moments like these. Cuts marred the lower corner of his face, making him even more asymmetrical than he had been with his old cast — the times where its itching was his worst problem felt so far away.

He once blacked out and woke up in the middle of his wounds being redressed, and couldn't do much but moan in disgust as his eyes landed on what had become of his shoulder — gashes and holes and raw red skin and fucking hell he would've been driven insane by that alone if Connor's shadow didn't seem to want to do the job for him.

It appeared when the sun started to go down, and stayed there. At the foot of his bed, at the edge of his wall, in a corner just barely out of sight. It rarely spoke, but when it did, it knew just what to say to guilt him.

"Didn't you want to be friends with that Jared guy? I'm sure he'll be happy to know you're just using him because he can play a convincing suicide victim."

Evan couldn't move his bandaged side, but did what he could to press his head against his aching shoulder, free hand over his ear.

"Does your Mom even know where you are? How do you think she'll feel when she finds out you nearly died giving a speech she didn't even know about?"

All it did was bring him more pain. The voice was coming from inside his head.

"Says a lot about you that your idea of a fake best friend is the guy who talked to you for three minutes and treated you like shit. Guess that says a lot about your real friends, too."

He shut his eyes tight, feeling tears come on — he hadn't cried since the pain of the spotlight's impact, but hearing his worst fears from a mouth other than his own made him crack in a split second.

"Funny how you act like you're just some nervous nice guy when you're lying to a dead kid's family for an ego stroke and a chance at getting in his sister's pants."

His unmarred hand balled into a fist, beating his temple hard, only bringing a fresh wave of pain but anything he could do to make Connor shut up, anything, anything, *anything*—

"Can I say it? Fuck it, I'll say it. You'd be happier if you died in that park last summer. We both would."

In the first time he'd used his voice since that fateful speech, Evan let out a strangled yell somewhere between a shriek and a sob as he continued to pound on his temple. He kept screaming and screaming as the insults kept coming, louder and louder until the two were shouting over each other — until suddenly, he woke with a start.

The sky was still dull and dreary, his hair still thin and his skin still taut. No shadow. Hands shaking, he brought the one he could still move to his face, pinching his cheek hard.

Nothing.

His eyes were wide, and his breathing hard and fast.

What happened... Was it a nightmare? He lightly smacked himself once more to be sure, finding he was, in fact, awake.

Maybe.

Right?

Please tell him he was awake.

He buried his face in his hand, but the afterimage of Connor at his bed remained. It was all in his head, after all. He could hide his insecurities beneath the validation from the Murphys all he wanted, but the loneliness that permeated when he returned home was inescapable. This was that, but so, so, *so* much worse.

The Murphys felt so far away. His Mom felt so far away. Jared and Alana felt so far away.

All he was left with was himself, and nothing terrified him more.

Chapter End Notes

Evan Experiences Sanity Slippage ASMR. Also, shadow person Connor is here!
Welcome to the party.

Comments are appreciated!

Where The Grass Is Greener

Chapter Summary

Evan gets visitors.

Chapter Notes

Aaand here marks the start of longer chapters XD The one that comes after this is... I wanna say twice as long as the Requiem chapter. We're getting into the BIG BOYS.

Thanks to everyone for their support on this fic! I've said it before, I just really appreciate it. If you wanna follow me for... hyperfixation shenanigans and memes, pretty much, I'm @bandtrees on Tumblr! I need more DEH mutuals, hehe.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Holy shit, it's alive — *alive!*"

"Hwwhhuh?"

Evan opened his eyes and, slowly but surely, color returned to the world. The pink of that tacky "Get Well Soon" balloon, the yellow of the flowers at his bedside, neither of which he'd noticed before, the lively tan skin of another human being that wasn't some weird shadow apparition — wait, what?

He blinked. Jared was standing there, at the edge of his bed. He was grinning, and it sunk in that he'd probably been holding onto the opportunity to make that "It's alive!" joke for... however long he'd been out. Shit, how long *had* he been out?

"How..." Evan cringed at how hoarse his voice was, having gone unused for so long, not to mention reduced to a mumble at best by the neck sling holding his head in place. He must've looked — and sounded — like what some people would've expected a zombie to. Suddenly Jared's joke made a bit more sense. "How long's it been?"

Jared moved over and plopped himself down on a chair by Evan's side. "About a week, maybe. We visited — your mom, who you really owe an explanation to right about now, the Murphys, Alana, the whole gang, y'know — but you were either asleep or too off your shits on drugs to really notice us. I've got a video, it's pretty funny."

A week, huh? Evan faltered, going into thought. Did it *feel* like a week? It didn't really *feel* like much of anything. But people were here, visiting him, and he'd just been too out of it to

tell? How much of what happened was just some nightmare? God, he was more out of it than he thought.

Wait.

"My... mom?"

"Duh, dipshit." Jared chuckled. "You never even told her about the Connor Project, but suddenly you nearly die doing some speech for it, she's pretty reasonably freaked out. Don't worry, though, I covered for ya." He grinned proudly, that Jared-style 'look-how-nice-I'm-being' grin. "Said she should hear it from you, cause I'm not about to dig your grave even more with my big fat mouth, y'know?"

Evan glanced away, unsure of what to say. The Jared he knew would have thrown him to the wolves for a few laughs, but here was... an act of empathy he wasn't even sure the other was capable of. He must've really been worried, huh?

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Jared leaned over to smack Evan's shoulder affectionately, making him gasp in pain. "Shit. You good?"

A strained nod.

"Okay, cool." He sat back in his chair. "Oh, by the way, someone was filming your speech and posted it online and now the Connor Project's got that crush fetish clout."

Evan was still recovering from the physical blow, but that sentence seemed to shoot him in the chest. He sputtered. Jared could really just put words in any order, huh? "That — it — *what?*"

"Yeah! Your speech is everywhere — or, well, your *accident* is everywhere. Connor Project got a biiiig jump in followers, 'cause of the publicity. You could be a cam boy for gore sites."

"I... don't think I want to."

"Pussy. Hey, you mind if I let Alana know you're good? She's been flipping her lid for the past week."

"Go ahead..."

This was a lot to take in. The Connor Project, it was... never meant to get that big. He worried how it'd look under an untrained eye, if anyone could sniff out the inconsistencies. They probably could — and then what? Evan slumped, shutting his eyes and letting out a sigh. He had to explain this all to Heidi, and he really didn't want to, but he guessed it'd be pretty dumb to think his double lives would never interact. It was... fine. She'd understand, right? Hopefully?

Everything ached. Even that little conversation had taken the wind right out of him. He didn't even realize he'd fallen asleep, which was a feeling he'd gotten used to but still managed to be

surprised by every time, until he woke up again and found Jared long gone.

The sun was low in the sky, the room bathed in that familiar gloomy gray. His heart sank, eyes sweeping the room before landing on that familiar shadow standing to his left.

"Whhh..." He moaned, his throat dry and his voice a strangled slur. He sounded exhausted, which he was, but his wide eyes were wide and alert. If he had the energy, free from drugs and restraints, he'd bolt to the other end of the room, but... "What d' you want now...?"

The shadow said nothing, its beady little not-eyes hard on Evan — it didn't breathe, but he swore he could hear breathing. He remembered reading about sleep paralysis, how little movements forced the mind out of it — he never experienced it, at least not to his knowledge, but from the moment he first heard about it he got paranoid every night — it was why he stopped sleeping on his back, which by now was pretty much just habit.

He started wiggling his free toes, then his fingers. That was what this was, right? Sleep paralysis, or some... weird drug thing, or just his mind fucking with him. Something he would eventually wake up back to reality and escape from.

It laughed Connor's laugh — a sharp, crude, short noise. "Bet you wish that light fell a bit more to the left, huh? It would've been easy." He wasn't sure if the muffle to its voice was the sling blocking his hearing or just how it sounded. "But I couldn't let you take your bullshit to the grave."

Evan just groaned in response — whatever this was, it seemed very intent on his misery.

"You take back your dumb fucking stories, and we can both move on. You've got chances. You can get rid of this whenever you want." It wasn't that easy, and Evan wasn't sure if his weird insecurity apparition knew that or not. It turned its head to the door. "Your mom's driving up. Now would be a good time, don't you think?"

No. No time would ever be good. It wasn't that easy. How could he just throw everything away, now he'd gotten so far? Did it really want to make the Murphys miserable — tell them the truth that their son died alone and amounted to little more than school shooter rumors and a traumatized sister? Lying wasn't bad if everyone needed it, right?

The shadow didn't say anything more as the minutes ticked by, and after five, Evan could hear the doorknob turning. He sighed through his nose to look over and find the... thing ...gone, but he supposed it would've been hard to have that serious talk with his Mom as it lingered over his shoulder.

She shuffled in, clutching her satchel. Heidi always looked tired, her hair always frazzled with strands out of place whenever she came home, but now, she looked like she hadn't slept in a week. Her hair was down, a riot of thinning blonde curls reaching her shoulders. There was none of the Alana-esque forced enthusiasm Evan had come to expect from her, only worry as her fists balled and eyes went wide.

She exhaled with relief when she saw him, as if a weight had been taken off her shoulders, but it didn't quite reach her eyes — he couldn't blame her. She had a lot to worry about.

"I sacked my shift as soon as I heard from Jared." She pulled her bag from her shoulders, placing it down on a bedside chair as she stepped closer. There were times Evan felt he and his mother were completely different people, but he could recognize the anxious fidgeting of her hands as his own. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting, Evan, I—"

"s fine..." It just kind of came out, but he really did mean it. He appreciated the ample time to get a heads-up from Jared — who knew how badly he would've fucked up this conversation going in not only blind but high off his ass.

"No, it's, it's not, I should've been here for you when you woke up, I should've known what you were doing. I never even heard you *mention* the Connor Project, and now you're doing speeches and I wasn't even..." She awkwardly reached her hand out in some kind of desperate gesture, before clenching her fist and letting it fall limply to her side as she forgot her words. "I would've loved to see you do this, Evan, but... you told you didn't even *know* that boy."

I didn't. He shut his eyes, only having a moment to look over his options. He couldn't tell the whole truth, because his Mom was a reasonable authority figure who loved him but would not hesitate to rat him out to the Murphys because her heart was even bigger than his. But he couldn't afford to dig this any deeper, either.

Attempting to force down the quivering in his voice before he even started talking, Evan tried to keep a level tone, even when some fear was probably perfectly acceptable in this kind of situation. "I panicked. When you asked." His eyes opened to see a realization dawning on Heidi — there was no easy answer for her to hear, but this was hopefully the least damning one. "I'm sorry, just... I didn't want t' worry you..."

"*Didn't want to*—" She echoed, sounding defensive, before promptly holding her tongue and cutting herself off. Taking a deep breath, she slowly nodded. "...right. Okay. I'm hurt you didn't, but... I can't be mad at you." She wiped her face with a hand, a nervous habit of hers when upset — even if she wasn't crying. "I'm sorry about your friend." She whispered.

Evan couldn't formulate much of a reply to that, and when it became clear he wasn't going to say anything, Heidi continued to push conversation — asking about how he was faring in his hospital room, which he couldn't have answered with more of an understatement if he tried ("Could be better."), asking about Jared, and, of course, the elephant in the room, Connor himself.

Evan felt a chill at the name, and at least his hesitancy to give any definitive details could've been interpreted as grief rather than guilt. Guilt and psychological torment. Heidi was understanding, eventually leaving him when visiting hours ended — though not without a fond kiss on the forehead, which she always seemed to assume he had grown out of.

Like clockwork, the shadow appeared again in moments.

Evan didn't sleep at all that night, between the whispered taunts in his ear, the pain in his chest he was unsure of the source of — Fear? A broken bone he didn't know about? Neither would surprise him. — and the new information he'd received in his first hours back in the land of the living. He ached to know what was happening on his phone, though he didn't know where it was. While on one hand, getting to see the Connor Project's growth for himself

was better than worrying himself sick over it, on the other, seeing it with his own two eyes would only add to his stressors.

And then there was the shadow with Connor's voice. He couldn't block it out, no matter how hard he tried, as it lobbed insults and insecurities that hit so much stronger coming from a mouth that wasn't his own.

"I'm doing you a favor, you get that, right?" It asked, sitting on his chest as he felt his ribs were about to crack, white pupils one of the only things he could see in the darkened hospital room. "If I wasn't here, you would've done this forever. You're real happy with yourself, like you were so ready to jump ship into some random family because you're too much of a lazy ass to appreciate the one you have. It's fucking disgusting."

The Murphys visited the next day, oblivious that their son — something in the vague shape of their son, rather — was in the room with them, watching from a corner with those pinprick eyes. Evan was beginning to see even more things out of the corner of his vision from the lack of sleep, but tried his best to be attentive — having someone to talk to helped. Larry taught him how to break in a glove, talking about his favorite sports as they turned on the TV for the first time since coming here.

The noise was nice, even if Evan wasn't really one for watching sports. It gave his mind something to listen to other than himself and the manifestations of his anxieties. Larry's passion for baseball was pretty fun to listen to — it reminded him of when Jared would ramble about the plots of TV shows Evan could never catch — and he got the sad feeling that the guy never had a son to talk about it all with.

Cynthia, when not fretting over Evan or the medical bills — apparently she didn't believe in most modern medicine, which... added an uncomfortable layer to what little he knew about her relationship with her children — shared stories about Connor. Things he had to play along with, whether through pretending to know about them or pretending to really care. He'd adopted Jared's "nod and confirm" technique to a T, not to brag, if only because he was realizing all too quickly that being stuck in here was rotting his brain from the inside out. Trying to lie would only make things worse. He was a sucker at it, even when he didn't have a sleep paralysis demon hovering inches over the shoulder of his conversation partner.

The Murphy matriarch always hung onto every last one of Evan's words, no matter how backwards or shaky the lie. He began to suspect she knew what was going on — if only because it hurt to think that he somehow knew more about Connor in passing interactions than she had in the 17 years of raising him.

Finally, Zoe, who Evan felt even sorrier for in this equation than he did himself. She was the last to enter, which didn't surprise him — she would've had complex feelings on this matter even if it didn't involve being guilted into sympathy by a violent stage accident.

By the time she came in, he was feverish and antsy, his body needing to rest but his mind far too awake to let it. His medication was wearing off, the shadow in his peripheral watching its sister with an expression he couldn't define but filled him with dread nonetheless. He didn't even remember their conversations, save for the fact he was rambling at a mile a minute, and Zoe could pretty evidently tell he was unraveling in his isolation.

Then, like Jared, she did something he didn't expect. She sat down beside him, very carefully combing her fingers through his hair, even when it stuck to her hands as it flaked out from stress. Something about that made him break. He'd been trying his damndest to keep stable — not let his visitors see him at his worst because they didn't deserve to be guilted even more than they already were — but he found himself bawling like a child as he rattled in his restraints and tried to move closer to her when she pulled away.

"Don' go, please, I, I can't be al-l-alone here, I c— I can't, I—"

The words just kind of tumbled out before he could stop them, Evan's shaking free hand reaching out to grasp Zoe's sleeve. He could see her confusion through his tears, and in any other frame of mind, would've immediately backpedalled or mentally smacked himself for freaking out. But all he could manage now were gasps and sobs as Zoe's hands lowered to very carefully wrap around him.

"It's okay. I'm not going anywhere. You hear me?"

She had to pull up a chair to reach him, and couldn't have been very comfortable. It was an awkward embrace, and he couldn't imagine the discomfort she must've felt — he wouldn't be surprised if he was put in a straitjacket after this — but despite it all, she still held him close, likely with no idea of the full extent of his fear.

He trembled in her grasp, even when she tried to soothe it with soft touches. "It's okay, Evan. I'm here." The words were practiced, steady, as if comforting people in such states was second nature to her. It may have been, now he thought about it — with Connor. Like her father, odds were all that she wanted was someone she was able to care about, without the fear they'd turn on her the next day.

If nothing else, Evan wanted to give her that. She was a good person, truly. She deserved better than her wild family, than to have Connor as a brother, than to have Evan as a friend. But she accepted him anyway. It was a bittersweet feeling — the happiness that someone like her would care about him, next to the sadness that came with the acknowledgment that he was only stringing her along.

He couldn't think about that, though. Not tonight, on top of everything else. Even as the shadow lingered at the end of the room, Evan eventually exhausted himself and fell asleep against Zoe, for the only decent sleep he'd had during his hospital stay.

She was gone when he woke, of course, but he felt a sense of peace he hadn't in a while — at least upon waking up. He could actually manage small talk with the nurses who came in, which visibly surprised them — as far as they knew, he must've been mute and deaf.

He was getting better — at least, he could manage with a less insane amount of bandages and restraints, and his wounds were healing up so they were less viscerally disgusting to look at. He still didn't look quite alive, but it was a far cry from the mangled, pale, empty-looking shell he'd arrived in the hospital as.

Days passed. People visited. He could begin to make updates on the Connor Project again, able to distract himself with his phone when not around people to block out the noises in his

head.

Somehow, though, the afternoons were the worst. When the Murphys were at work and his friends at school, and he'd long since exhausted his list of videos to watch and books to read to keep the static from returning, he began to feel that sense of dread creeping back.

He leaned back in his bed, exhausted. Usually, he was able to scrape by with *some* energy, but there were low days. This was one of them, as even through the sunlight in his window he could see a familiar shadow cast on the wall, and he couldn't muster the energy to block out the cruel whispers in his ear any longer.

Chapter End Notes

I love writing Jared a lot. This AU needs the comic relief.

One more hospital chapter after this! Comments are appreciated!

Good For You

Chapter Summary

Everything starts to unravel.

Chapter Notes

Hell! on! Earth!!! Warning in advance for some suicidal ideation in this chapter, specifically from the paragraph starting with 'For all the differences', to the end. Will include a TL;DR for people that wanna skip that sorta thing!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He'd be out of the hospital soon, or at least that's what Heidi told him. Evan was thankful for that — there was only so much progress he could make on the Connor Project and school cooped up in the hospital with only one functioning arm, even when Jared and Alana helped out. Writing emails was a slog, but if nothing else, he had fallen into the familiar rhythm pretty quickly, to the point where he didn't even need Jared's help with them anymore — save for proofreading and backdating. He knew his fake Connor like the back of his hand — he was the kind of friend Evan wanted to have. Someone to confide in and be important to, not someone who stuck around him just out of necessity.

Speaking of Connor, the apparition seemed to vanish at a point as Evan recovered, leading him to believe it really was just some... terrifying fever dream. There was relief that came with that — Evan didn't have to have his every insecurity lobbed back at him every five seconds — but it was a double edged sword. Fantasy was no longer his biggest problem now — reality was.

He had to answer an FAQ regarding the emails, and was currently staring dead-eyed at his phone, trying to come up with a reasonable answer to one of the many inconsistencies he thought he'd never have to answer for. He supposed it was good he had someone to proofread them now, because he was currently mulling over an explanation for how Connor could've gone to a certain rehab facility a year before it was founded.

Chewing his thumbnail in thought, he was interrupted by a knock on the door, making an affirmative noise to let whoever it was come in.

Oh, it was his Mom. Wait, it was a Monday, didn't she have work toni—

"I talked to the Murphys today."

—ah, shit. Evan tried not to let his fear show as he set his phone aside, sparing a glance at Heidi to find rare disappointment etched on her face. This couldn't have been good.

"How many times were you over there?" She asked, and he could hear in her voice how she was trying her best to keep a level tone. "When you said you were at Jared's?"

"I—I, um," Evan stammered. *Almost every single time.* "A-about... half the time." Her hard expression didn't let up, and he winced a little. He'd grown accustomed to the pang of guilt that came with each and every little lie that left his mouth, but they were still painful — especially accompanied with the fear that if anyone could see through them, it'd be Heidi. "But it's just, it's just like what I said, I didn't want you to worry about me 'cause of Connor so I didn't tell you where I was going."

Silence fell over the hospital room, and Evan couldn't bring himself to look up and see the pain that must've been in his Mom's eyes. He saw her arms shift, assuming she was exasperatedly rubbing her face or holding her head in her hands. "I just— I feel like you don't have faith in me, Evan. I'm your *mother*."

"I— I don't know, i-it's just—" Like many, many of the things Evan said, it came out before he had much of an idea on what to say, and couldn't back out by the time Heidi looked up at him expectantly. "—you're busy. A lot, and... I didn't wanna stress you out more. You already do... a lot, for me, I just figured it'd... be fine if I did this on my own."

At least this was... mostly the truth. Right? Just... not about the same thing.

"I'm supposed to be *here* for you." Heidi finally replied, in a blend of self-deprecation and scolding. "I can't do that if you don't keep me informed, I-I didn't even know you had this, this *project*—" She gestured out, fumbling for words for a moment longer, before simply dropping her hands to her side. "Could you imagine how it feels to be so disconnected from your own son that you don't even know he's doing the speech of his life?"

Her voice cracked and her chin quivered, hitting Evan with a feeling of overwhelming guilt. He couldn't grasp any excuses, even as he searched through his brain for them. The accident seemed to hit his mother harder than it did him — at least he was aware of the risks associated with doing an onstage speech, even if they were pushed into the back of his mind. For Heidi, it was any other day — she expected to come home after work, see Evan on his laptop, and maybe have some awkward small chat. Instead, she was called home to hear the news second-hand that her son had been nearly crushed to death.

"I—I'm... sorry." He didn't deserve her sympathy. He didn't even deserve to survive that fateful accident.

Heidi softened at the apology, but he winced to find she wasn't done. "And that family — they're not *yours*, Evan. It hurts how they talk to you. It's like..."

She stopped the words as they came out of her mouth, opening and then closing it as she shook her head.

Evan didn't want to know, but he felt like he deserved whatever was coming. "Like what?"

Taking a deep breath, Heidi continued, hesitantly — like she knew what she was going to say was wrong. "...why do I take the time to visit, or buy you your prescriptions, or do *anything* I do if you're just going to jump the fence and be happy over there?" It was a question, but the tone was more like a statement, as if she'd been thinking of it for a while.

Feeling her gaze on him, all Evan could manage were more apologies as he sank into his pillow. What else could he even *say*? Excuses would only make him seem worse.

Heidi appeared to realize this — her son had nothing more to add, and she simply slumped. "I'm sorry. That was... too far. But you understand why I'm hurt, right?"

He understood all too well. It plagued him from every angle every time he spoke to them, every time he lied that his Mom knew where he was. She didn't. She never did, and she must've been so scared, and how much worse would she have felt if that spotlight fell just a bit more to the left and killed him then and there?

"I-I do, I'm... I'm sorry." *I won't do it again*, he wanted to add, but he knew he couldn't be sure of that. He knew he'd see Cynthia's sad eyes when she talked about her son, break, and go running there again.

"I know." Heidi's voice was soft as she sighed, stepping away. "I'm sorry, I... didn't mean to scare you. I just... figured I should let you know."

This somehow hurt more than her screaming in his ear would've. Evan just nodded, saying nothing else.

Unfortunately, this was only the first in line of uncomfortable conversations. He would be free and back in school and at home by Thursday, and though the past weeks had gone by in a blur of medication and nightmares, now, the days seemed to drag on at a painful crawl.

On Tuesday, Zoe stopped by to ask about Heidi's behavior at their dinner. It went... well, it could've gone worse. She wasn't suspicious of him, only confused, and accepted his answer of "I was nervous and never told her" fairly easily, but... he couldn't call it *good*. None of what was happening could be defined as *good*, as the fear he would be found out continued to linger over his shoulder. All *good* talks did was prolong the inevitable, and he knew it was pointless, but he wasn't ready to lose everything — not yet. He could enjoy his new life a little longer, enjoy the affection from Zoe and chats with her parents before the Internet inevitably sleuthed everything out and had him jailed for fraud.

He began to find comfort in his stuffy hospital room. It was a welcome buffer from reality, a temporary world where all he had to worry about was resting easy and making sure his injuries healed okay, even when it was clear it wouldn't stay that way forever. Everything was on the verge of falling apart, but if his injuries did anything good, they gave everyone something else to think about. No one in their right mind would rag on some mangled kid and accuse him of faking the speech that landed him in the hospital to begin with.

Alana on Wednesday, though, was clearly not in her right mind. Upon spotting the incoming call, Evan nearly missed it — not intentionally, just because he only had one usable arm and

wasn't about to spill his shitty hospital coffee everywhere in an attempt to answer the phone as quickly as possible.

Phone calls were hell enough already — he still hadn't quite grasped how to hold the phone correctly, and more often than not had to put the person on speaker so he could hear them. He did so this time around, but quickly realized his mistake when Alana's blurted question of "Why did Connor kill himself?" came out at top volume for everyone and God to hear.

Evan scrambled to turn off his speaker as Alana continued, putting it up to his ear in a probably incorrect position as he only managed to catch the tail end of her sentence. "—was getting better, every email. So much of this doesn't line up—"

"S-sorry, I, y-you cut out for a sec there, um. What?"

Taking a deep breath, Alana collected herself, before repeating less frantically, "Why did Connor kill himself?" Even the second time around, Evan still had no clue how to answer. He didn't need to, evidently, as Alana continued to ramble. "He was doing better, he thought he was doing better, he said that in every email he wrote, and... and then a month later, he just kills himself?"

Evan ground his teeth. Shit, shit. He'd been so focused on trying to bring the Murphys reassurance, that their son really had a friend and someone to listen to his woes when they wouldn't, that he'd completely forgotten the reality of it. Connor killed himself just a month after the email set most recently, yet in that same one, talked about how going on walks like Evan told him was keeping him sane.

"Because— because sometimes, sometimes life doesn't make sense, okay?" It was a cop-out, sure, but a true one. None of what he'd gone through this school year thus far made the least bit of sense. "I didn't know everything about Connor, or, or how he felt, I just did what I could t—"

"If you were such good friends, why didn't he tell you about any of it?" Alana cut him off. "Your friendship that wasn't your 'average kinda bond'—" He could just hear the air quotes in her voice. "—the guy that helped you when you broke your arm and confided in you about his sister, he... he couldn't tell you about how much he was hurting?"

Deep down, Evan knew why he didn't include any of it. It would've involved facing his own issues, and even when he didn't know Connor, he could get the feeling. The feeling of wanting nothing more than to disappear, because you made everyone around you miserable, because nobody took the time to understand you, they just wanted to fix you, and — ...yeah.

"Look, why are you so obsessed with this? Not everything has to fit in your, your—" Evan stammered, intending to come up with some scathing remark, but unable to find the right words. "—your dumb feel-good perfect story...! I-it's not, it's not inspirational, or, fucking... marketable, it's just what happened! What, do you just want... another extracurricular for your college application, or something?"

"I'm not the one being disrespectful here! Do you know how easy it is to backdate emails? To make up a story about a concert? I'm trying to do *good* here, Evan!" Alana snapped, her voice

cracking at the last sentence, and he could just picture her angrily gesturing about. "But I can't! People are asking questions I can't answer, and... I need you to work with me here!"

The yelling was making his heart rate quicken. His hand shook as he held the phone, and as much as he tried to be rational, manage to talk his way out of it like he had with his Mom, the implications hit too close to home and he suddenly *exploded*. "You think I know?! If I knew everything about Connor, I would've been able to stop him, but he, he didn't tell me anything! Okay? Not everyone... not everyone just dumps their life story around like you! Some people are *normal*, and, and keep shit to themselves!"

Alana stopped. That did it. The guilt hit him like a truck, hard and fast, but he didn't let it topple him.

"Is that— i-is that, is that good enough for you?" He said, voice shaking as he blinked back the beginnings of tears — *he was saying this about one of his only friends, what the fuck was wrong with him?* — and waited for a reply.

"*Fine*." Alana spat. "You want me to keep shit to myself, I will. You can do the blog on your own if you don't want my help."

Before he could say anything, the line went dead.

No, no, no, *no*. Evan fumbled with his phone, unsure of if to call back, text her, or just let her cry it out — he felt like he was on the verge of that himself. His heart twisted in his chest as his breathing came hard and fast, his fingers shaking as exiting the call just brought him back to his home screen.

And then his eyes fell onto his contacts. Jared, Jared... Jared was another Connor Project staff member. If he couldn't talk Alana down he could at least help him run damage control, right?

"C'mon, please pick up, please pick up, please..." He needed water, a paper bag, anything, but right about now, his mind was running a mile a minute. If he didn't get this out, he'd die.

After only about five seconds of waiting that felt more like a century, the image of a still ceiling fan in a dimly lit room appeared on Evan's screen. It stayed on that frame for a moment, before there was the sound of shuffling clothes and the phone being moved, and Jared's face came into view.

He looked tired, likely not ready for whatever bullshit Evan was about to rope him into, and Evan started babbling before he could even manage a greeting. "Jared, we, we need more emails, showing Connor was getting worse, I, I get out tomorrow, I can come to your house, or something, I just need these as quickly as possible, Alana's suspicious, and, and—"

He stopped in his tracks when his eyes focused and he fully took in Jared's expression. All he could hear from his end was the background noise of a TV in another room, but it was mostly empty silence as Jared just shifted in his seat.

"Is she?" He smirked. "Wonder what'd give her *that* idea."

Evan really wasn't a fan of that tone. "Look, this is serious, I... I can pay you again this time, if you want, Alana's not listening to me and I can't do this without her, we need to make these realistic."

"Jeeze." Jared just rolled his eyes — he couldn't have looked like he gave less a shit about Evan's plight if he tried. "And here I thought you wanted to hang out like normal friends, or something."

"Normal friends?" Evan blurted. "You never even talked to me before all of this, we aren't even—" He held his tongue. This didn't matter. What mattered right now was the emails. Everything else could come later. "—whatever, I'll, I can write most of them, whatever, we just need these out soon so people don't get suspicious."

Jared visibly perked up. His dull eyes seemed to widen. "What was that?"

"Wh—what was what?"

"Go back. We aren't even *what*, Evan?"

His voice was uncharacteristically bitter, and Evan shut his eyes tight — he couldn't do this, he really didn't have time to fight with Jared on top of everything else, but everything was hitting its natural breaking point. He was stupid to assume people would play along for this long. "We aren't even friends. You only talk to me 'cause of your stupid car insurance, 'cause you're stuck with me, you, you don't have a right to complain about shit 'cause this is the only time you've ever been anything but *horrible* to me."

He jolted at the sound of the other's sudden laugh. His screen shook with it, though by the look on his face, he found no part of this truly funny. "Do you even hear yourself? You only talk to me 'cause I was the only one around who'd enable you and your bullshit. You can't say that and act like I'm the asshole here. Sorry I care more about having basic morals than I do about helping you jerk yourself off over how good of a fake friend you are."

"Wh— *you're* the one who went along with it in the first place!" Evan's voice cracked, phone trembling in his grasp. "I wasn't holding a gun to your head! It, it says more about you that you wanted to write a bunch of emails pretending to be a kid who killed himself! For, for twenty dollars!"

"Because I was being a halfway decent friend and helping you!" Jared snapped. "You think I had *fun* dragging a dead guy's name through the dirt like that?! Lying about his life for shits and giggles?"

Evan started to respond, realized he could very easily accidentally alert staff with his volume, and lowered his voice to an angry whisper. "Yes! You were the one joking the entire time, I was trying to take it seriously and you would've known that if this wasn't all just some fucked up kinda game to you!"

"You should be grateful I helped you at *all*!" Jared's face was turning red as his glasses were jostled off-kilter — anger in Evan's usually jovial... acquaintance's face like he'd never seen before. "I could tell everyone *everything*!"

"Go ahead, then, go and tell everyone how you wrote a bunch of emails pretending to be a kid who killed himself!" Evan's chest was heaving, all of his energy spent in that last furious remark as he dropped his phone into his lap. Anxiously, he dragged his fingernails across his face, leaving red marks he could just barely see in the corner of his screen. Shaking, he wretched the hand away to end the call, taking his phone and slamming it face-down against the bedside table in his anger.

He could hear something crack, and sunk into his bed to boil in his fury. The shadow was nowhere to be seen, the room still colorful, not at all befitting the mood of the hour. Part of him wanted it back. At least then he had the crutch of isolation-induced-insanity to fall back on for being the shittiest person alive.

By Thursday, he was finally let out of the hospital, perhaps in lower spirits than he'd entered it in. The chilled fall air wasn't kind to him, even with the buffer of sweatpants and a gray hoodie, with the sleeve of the broken arm cut off by Heidi to make it easier for him to take on and off with the bandages. It made him look like a slob, but it was loose and easy to move around in, if nothing else.

Everything felt like it was falling apart around him, between the altercations with Alana and Jared and the newfound fame of the Connor Project that it was never meant to *get*. It was now simply a game of if his friends would crack and expose him first, or if the Internet would.

Lost in these thoughts as he wandered around outside — he needed not only the sunlight but the exercise, as his limbs had gone stiff and aching — he caught sight of a fenced-off area he'd passed many times before, but never with as much thought paid to it as he had now.

The abandoned orchard. Guarded by a fence. He didn't even know why it had been shut down, integral as that was to his story.

His hand pressed to the chain links, and something compelled him to grip them and climb over. For a moment, his brain was on autopilot as he made his way up, until the sudden strain on his injuries brought him back to reality. He gasped in pain, looking back to see how far of a jump it would be back down. It wasn't worth it — he could afford to continue.

Managing to jump the fence, though it hurt like a motherfucker to do so, Evan stumbled as he hit the ground, still aching. Lifting his head to look at the place, he was hit with a sudden sense of... grief? Guilt? He wasn't quite sure. The trees should have felt familiar to him, one in particular, but none of them did. He had never even seen this place on the inside before. His experiences here were nothing but lies, and all he felt now was hollow with shame.

The leaves crunched beneath his feet, the usually relieving smell of nature like a band-aid on a stab wound. There was no happy ending for what was to come. Either the guilt would kill him or he'd have his life ruined when he was eventually discovered for fraud. He told himself it made him happy, and it was helping the Murphys, and.. he was. He loved Zoe. He loved her family. He wished he had it.

But he couldn't bring himself to enjoy it, knowing how he was stringing along some poor grieving people just to feel better about himself.

He looked through the orchard, trying to imagine himself and Connor goofing about in it like the story he'd told what felt like forever ago. Connor racing towards the tallest tree with a grin on his face, showing off those crooked teeth of his as he called for Evan to follow him.

He couldn't picture it. No matter how vividly he'd described it, no matter how easy it was for everyone else to believe. Because Connor Murphy was an asshole loner with no friends who would rather eat glass than make any, and they would've hated each other. And his fall over the summer wasn't in a nice orchard with a buddy to catch him — it was in a wooded park far, far away from home, and he waited for what felt like hours in pain after he fell.

For all the differences between then and now, though, he felt the same way. Maybe even worse. His eye landed on the tallest tree he could find in the orchard, and before he could do anything else, he began to walk towards it.

Fifty feet high, give or take.

His injuries ached and burned as he attempted to grasp the bark with one hand — he wasn't an apprentice park ranger for a whole summer to fail at climbing one measly tree — but he couldn't find a foothold, and after only about twenty seconds of struggling, was forced to hop back down.

Of course he couldn't even get a second try right. His shoulder was on fire, and everything else ached at best as he dropped to the grass. He held his head to his hand — tempted as he was to climb back up and try again, all he could think was that he'd just scare his Mom for the third time in recent memory. He couldn't do that to her.

What was that she always said? "Someday, this will all feel so small."

He tried to believe it.

He couldn't quite.

But it was something, and it was enough to make him turn tail and walk home.

Alana and Jared were right. He could salvage the Connor Project on his own, and he would if it was the last thing he'd do.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was very fun and very sad to write.

TL;DR for those skipping the last scene: Evan is let out of the hospital, goes to the orchard, considers climbing a tree to fall, but is unable to because of his injuries.

(Ghost!Connor voice) You think you can escape that easily?

Also, fair warning in advance, the next chapter WILL bump this up to an M rating, as well as make use of some of these nasty tags in the blurb. It also might be a day or so late because I'll be away from my computer, but try and enjoy the anticipation ;]

Comments are appreciated!

Goin' Viral

Chapter Summary

Another tragedy strikes the Connor Project.

Chapter Notes

Home stretch, baby! Chapter 8! Aaand it's the one that earns this fic its tags, and also bumps us up to an M rating.

Specifically, I'm warning for gore descriptions as well as suicide. They kind of permeate this entire chapter, so if you don't think you can handle that, there's no shame in sitting this one out. Like last time, I'll include a TL;DR in the end chapter notes so people who do can still get the gist.

Without further ado, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eleven missed calls from Alana weren't exactly the most inspiring thing to wake up to. Especially not after their fight the other day. And especially not at...

Evan squinted at the clock.

...3:51 in the morning. Still, he was way too tired to really care, putting his head back down against the pillow to try and fall back asleep.

Immediately, his phone started ringing again, and with a groan, he sat up in bed to take it. The room was dark, his laptop still at the foot of his bed, and the phone screen nearly blinded him as he moved to answer the call.

"Uh, hel—"

Before he could finish his greeting, he was met with panicked noises and desperate half-formed words from Alana, and she took in a few shuddering gasps to regain her composure. She sounded almost like she was on the verge of a breakdown, breathing shallow as Evan still couldn't quite determine what she was trying to say.

"Alana?" He asked, quickly going from agitated to concerned. "You— you okay?"

"The blog—" She managed to stammer out, audibly swallowing as she tried to steady herself. "Jared, i—it's, it's Jared, I—I don't, I don't know what's going on..."

Jared? Evan froze. Was this because of their argument a few days ago? He hadn't seen him post anything to the blog since, even after Alana returned to her routine.

"Hold on, I'll check..." Evan put her on speaker and pulled open his laptop, quickly logging on and making his way to the Connor Project's page. As he did, he asked, "are you okay?" Alana said nothing, and Evan irritably tapped his spacebar as the page loaded. What could she have even seen to shake her up so badly?

And then it finished, and he quickly found out. He couldn't hide his audible gasp at the page's most recent post, one from Jared — an untitled, descriptionless image of a person's hand sliced into ribbons with a razor, nearly to the bone, blood coating the edge of their sleeve. Their palm was splayed to give the viewer an ample look at the inflicted wounds. The hand was too large, its fingers too thin and long to be Jared's, thankfully, but that was only an answer to one of many, many questions running through his head.

Perhaps most concerningly, it was posted five minutes ago.

Despite himself, he scrolled, finding two other images in a row of similar violent displays — one picture taken of the front seat in a brutal car accident, the other a surgery photo of some kind of dental procedure. Evan just stared bug-eyed at the surreal sight, before being jogged back to reality by Alana's choked breathing.

"Maybe, he—" Oh, God, his voice was shaking, but looking at this, how could it *not*? "—he probably got hacked, or... or something." He continued to scroll, and the words were caught in his throat when he saw a text post.

The truth about the Connor Project.

He had to will himself to click it.

The words were there in front of him but he could barely take them in, not with Alana's panicked breathing in his ear. All he could glean were the vicious insults hurled at him and his co-president. This did *not* sound like Jared. The hacking theory held some water, but with it came the fear of acknowledging that someone would even target the Connor Project in such a way. "Have you talked to him lately?"

"I— I— that's it, I," She was hyperventilating, and Evan cursed himself for not being there physically to calm her down. He just felt overwhelmed and *useless*. "I know he's posting and he's awake 'cause he's dismissing my calls, not just, letting them ring, but I can't reach him, I've texted him like, five hundred times, ever since I saw the first one, and—"

"Hey, hey, breathe, breathe," Evan began. He could barely breathe himself, but Alana was his only source of information here. "I can... I can try and get a hold of him, y-you just..." He clicked out of the slanderous blog post to the dashboard, trying to offer some words of comfort but finding himself unable to at the sight of that mutilated hand again.

He scrolled further, feeling bile rise in the back of his throat. A naked woman's dead body dumped into a landfill. Wide and glassy eyes, deep gashes crusted with dried blood, missing limbs, maggots crawling across her skin. He had to pry his eyes away, but the caption brought another wave of nausea.

What I'd like to do to Zoe Murphy.

He was going to be fucking sick — what was going *on*? "...y-you just, f-focus on taking these down, okay...? I'm..." He was going to say "gonna call him", but he couldn't even lift his finger off the track pad. The most he could do was go back and refresh the page. Try and hide the hand picture, even when it'd be replaced with something no doubt doubly horrific. "I'll... I-I'll do something, I, I'll have to hang up for a second. Just do that, can... can you do that?"

"Mm-hmm..." Alana's voice was thick and strained, and Evan's heart broke as he could easily imagine the tears streaming down her face. The call was put on hold as he fumbled through his contacts to find Jared — their last text conversation was about homework, which felt like a million worlds away compared to... whatever was going on now.

The call was declined almost immediately. Evan's blood ran cold, and was met with the same result when he tried again. His texts were left on read about ten seconds after he sent them. Jared was here, awake, just... not answering. Posting...?

Refreshing the page again, Evan could see Alana making progress on taking the posts down, and he wasn't sure if it was good or not that no new ones had been made. Sighing deeply, he went off hold to return to her.

"I-I can't get to him, I don't know what the matter is..." He forced his eyes away from another gore image — where did Jared, or, or whoever, even *find* a picture of a guy with his dick chopped off? — in favor of a text post just below it.

He scrolled further to find that this was the last one, as just before it was a completely normal masterlist of suicide hotline resources Evan posted just a day before. Back up to the text post, its contents were just as revolting as the shock images.

The Connor Project is a scam full of lying cocksuckers who don't give a shit about mental health. I've been wanting to kill myself for two years and it went completely unnoticed. They care more about the feelings of a dead kid they barely knew than the suffering of someone on their team.

Anyone whose story they can't exploit doesn't matter. I'm not that sad and troubled rich boy, so they don't care. I wish I could kill them. I think every day about it. I wish I could've seen Evan smolder from the inside out under that spotlight. One less self-righteous asshole in the world. But I guess this is as close as I'll get.

This project is going to fucking burn, and making that happen is the only happy thing working here has ever given me. Do you like my pictures? :)

He didn't. He really didn't. The words blurred, then disappeared altogether as Evan realized he was crying. "Jared, he—" If he'd eaten anything lately, it definitely would've come up by

now, but he hadn't, so all he felt was pain and revulsion. Jared thinking all of this — Evan knew he'd been an asshole lately, but... the Jared he knew just kind of brushed it off with a mean joke and went back to normal. Nothing to indicate hatred or an intent to *kill*.

Memories flashed through his head, of every time he'd wronged his friend — was there any resentment he missed? Anything he should've picked up on? He didn't want this. They fought, but he didn't want *this*. Jared was his only family friend, the guy he'd been attached by the hip to since he was little, even if just out of obligation. Wouldn't he have noticed if... if any of *this* was there?

His hands shook. What did it say about him that he *didn't*? Was he that much of a self-righteous asshole? The argument in the hospital — shit, shit, *shit*, it was *right there*. Right there, and he was too angry to notice — was that the last straw, the thing that made him decide Evan wasn't worth that friendly facade anymore? The theoretical launch button for... all of this?

Evan refreshed the page once more, surprised to find a new post. Alana said what he was thinking, sniffing, "There's another one." A video upload, this time. The title made his skin crawl, as he prepared in advance to click and see something horrific beyond all imagination.

This is what a real suicide looks like.

And any suspicions that this was just a troll that brute forced their way into Jared's account vanished in an instant when Evan hit play.

There his friend was, in his bathroom. His glasses were crooked, his messy and unwashed hair shining with grease as strands stuck out at different angles. His eyes were sunken into his skull, with the same emptiness they bore in the argument with Evan. He hadn't changed his clothes since that day, either. His jacket was stained and filthy, sweat visible along his shirt's collar.

It was Jared they were looking at. It was hard to deny that. But there was no cocky raised eyebrow, or practiced posture, or usual crude and smug smirk — like a complete stranger was living in his skin. He stared into the camera for a few seconds, dull eyes seeming to look past it into nothing in particular — an expression Evan recognized from his own dissociative moments.

Without blinking, Jared's eyes went to something off-screen in the corner, and his arm shifted as he reached for it. He was so robotic that it was unnerving — usually he'd pull on his backpack straps, or shift his weight, or *something* as he talked, but now, it looked almost as if he was acting completely on autopilot.

When he pulled his hand back, it held a gun.

Evan's eyes widened.

This is what a real suicide looks like.

No.

No, no, no, no.

He had to be dreaming, this had to be some fucked up nightmare or something — was he still in the hospital? "A-Alana, Alana—" He choked out as Jared's empty gaze studied the weapon in his grasp. "Don't, don't look at it, just, just click off." He couldn't follow his own advice — his eyes were glued to Jared cocking his head to the side to press the gun's barrel against his chin, but he couldn't subject Alana to the same thing. "Please don't look at it, please, just, delete it—"

The sound of the gunshot was drowned out by Evan's scream and Alana's breaking into sobs. There was the sound of the weapon clattering to the tile, but save for it, the video was painfully quiet and still following the deafening *crack* and final convulsions. Blood-filled brain splattered the wall behind him, his head lolled back to show the grisly entry wound — and even when it was right in front of his eyes, the physical proof that Jared Kleinman could not be dead, a part of Evan was in denial.

"I—it's okay, it, it could, j-just..." His reassurances were as much for himself as they were for Alana. "...be a f-fake, or, or..."

Some deepfake, right? Like people did with politicians? It'd make sense — Jared himself couldn't upload the video if he was... — and there was the question of who would even do such a thing, but whatever painful answer existed, it was easier than looking at the empty skull of his friend and oh *fuck* what was he going to do *now*? Alana's crying in his ear only made him shake more — it was so guttural, so pained, and she'd be traumatized for life by the sight of that alone, to say nothing of the assassination of her name from that first text post.

Evan continued to let out gasping sobs, unable to take his eyes off of the final brutal frame of that video. Police. They needed to call the police. Get to the bottom of... of whatever this was.

"Alana, I, I h— I... h—have to..." He couldn't even form any words, refresh the page, do anything except shake and cry. "...go. Go and call the police." He didn't even know if she could hear him, and the guilt for hanging up on her as she bawled was worse than any he'd experienced in relation to the Connor Project. By far. But he needed answers, evidence that this existed at all beyond his and Alana's laptops, and the silence as the phone call abruptly ended was deafening.

He'd never called 911 before. He never thought he'd have to. Usually, he'd be working himself into a panic about the etiquette, about talking to people, about bothering the operator, but here, he had no room to. In one of the very few displays of confidence he'd given in his life, he quickly dialed and called, rocking in place as he waited for someone to pick up.

The blackened gore on Jared's bathroom wall stared back at him as he did. Even as he shut his eyes tight, it didn't leave. "I think, I—I think my friend just killed himself," he told the operator. He didn't *think*, he *knew*, it was *right there*, but if he didn't have some buffer between the screen and reality, he'd go insane from the revelation. He rattled off Jared's address, and was told not to hang up until they got there. He just cried into the phone as he pulled up his texts with Alana.

He didn't even notice that she'd been begging for him to pick up between every call. At least he had the luxury to hear about it second-hand — how must she have felt when she opened the blog to see that on her screen?

aalana

are you there

i called thhe police

i cant hang up on them but im here are you ddoing okay

Of course not. But she was his only lifeline right now. Their argument in the hospital was pushed to the very back of his mind, and likely hers, as they were forced through this god awful situation together.

There was the typing bubble on Alana's end. It kept coming and going, like she wasn't sure what to say, and he couldn't blame her. In the silence, Evan slowly collected himself, breathing deeply as he wiped away the snot and tears with the back of his hand. This was too surreal. Too fucked up. There were no good answers to the question of what was happening tonight. He knew it wasn't a dream, but God, he could wish it was.

Finally, his phone buzzed.

I dont get it

I dont

Understand

None of her usual perfect grammar or over-familiar smilies. Evan had never seen her in such a state before — not even after Connor's death. He was quiet, letting her type as the 911 call ended. The officers would be at Jared's house. Where were his parents, even? Away? It might've explained why he picked tonight to...

God, he couldn't even think about it. Another buzz.

It doesnt sound like him he wouldnt do that he was our friend Evan

I

Did you ever

See him act like that

Evan swallowed, thinking back again. Every interaction he'd ever had with his friend was put in a new, terrifying light. But the only time he'd ever been violent, to Evan's memory, was when he'd salt snails in his backyard. Jared was an asshole sometimes. A lot of the time, really. But he wasn't... a sadist.

He'd show Evan shit like this to rile him up, maybe, but as a joke, not some fucked up statement or slander campaign. ("Hey, Evan, look up 1Guy1Jar. Just do it. It's funny. I promise.") His calling Evan a pussy and Connor a freak never had any real malice or hatred behind it. It was just kind of how he talked to people, because he was Jared, and Evan learned not to think anything of it.

But maybe he should've. Because no matter how much he thought this didn't sound like Jared, it was all right there. Like how the Murphys must've felt reading those emails. Who was he to dispute it? They weren't even close, just... family friends. The irony was cruel, and maybe that was what he intended.

Still in thought, he slowly began to type out a reply to Alana.

i didnt but its not like we were super close

sometimes you just

dont know? whats going on in someones head

It should've been a reassurance, that she couldn't have stopped it, that it wasn't her responsibility, but Evan chewed his thumbnail nonetheless as he placed his phone down in his lap. It was an insult as much as it was a reassurance. How do you see someone so depressed and misanthropic that they're planning *murder*, and... not know?

You really think hed say that

That hed say all of that stuff about us and zoe and tcp

He was having fun. I thought he was having fun

Evan's head dropped into his hand as he let out a long, shuddering sigh. He could understand where she came from. Really. But somehow, the possibility that this really was Jared was the least terrifying one. If it wasn't... What freak would do this kind of thing to a blog run by a couple of teenagers? He knew his accident had garnered the attention of some less than reputable people, but he could handle Jared suddenly snapping better than he could being targeted by some grown adult full of hate enough to orchestrate a teenage boy's fake suicide.

im not saying that i just

we cant say for sure he didnt

He let that stay there for a minute, but when Alana left it on read, he continued.

it hurts more than anything but we saw what we saw

what did we see then

if not jared?

Glancing up to his laptop, at a point, the page reloaded on its own. The video was gone, as were all of the posts. At the top of the page was that suicide hotline list, then an FAQ post, and a vlog from Alana. No sign that anything had even happened, like waking out of a fever dream, but he and Alana — alongside any of their followers who may have been awake at this hour — would never be the same. God, he didn't even check to see if any of the posts had comments. They'd definitely owe everyone an explanation.

Its crazy, but

I think something is going on.

Like

Something bad.

Evan bit back his knee-jerk reaction — "Clearly." — and let her continue.

You think I didnt double check how safe the assembly was? Triple and quadruple check before you went on? There was no sign of any tampering with the lights or anything

And the emails that kept getting deleted

and now Jared suddenly kills himself after posting all of this creepy stuff when he never even showed signs of anything? It can't be a coincidence

There it was again. Alana's need for everything to be rigid and organized, to fit her preferred narrative. There were no random tragedies in her eyes. Everything involved a pattern — it was why she was on board with the Connor project to begin with. The belief that it'd cause some domino effect and fix everyone's problems. Evan thought back to their fight in the hospital — every time he thought he'd reached rock bottom, he'd somehow find a way to keep digging — this seemed to be its logical extreme.

what are you talking about?

Evan's head perked up at the distant sound of a door opening, just as Alana began to type. Mom was home. He didn't even realize she was gone, but she did work a night shift. Frantic footsteps came down the hallway, and after a moment, Evan's door flew open.

In came a windswept Heidi, heaving with panic, though she tried to calm herself down as her son looked her way. She looked like she just ran all the way here, running a hand through her frazzled hair. "It's Jared, he... just a few minutes ago," She didn't know he knew, visibly trying to be the reasonable adult figure here, but couldn't hide her panic about the whole thing herself. She'd known Jared since he was a baby.

It just made the whole thing all the more incredulous to Evan. Didn't Jared realize he was hurting more than just those he hated?

"They found him in his bathroom." She took a deep breath, then shook her head. "He killed himself. I — I'm so sorry, honey."

Just hearing the misery in her voice was enough to start the tears anew. "Alana told me already, I..." He would elaborate, but where would he even begin? He'd spent all of his screaming and sobbing on witnessing the act itself. All he could do was nod as Heidi noticed the signs of grief on his face. "I know. Is... are his parents okay?"

Heidi just sighed, putting her head in her hands. She shakily inhaled, sniffing. "No." She couldn't sugarcoat it, and Evan was a little glad she didn't. "They woke up at the sound of the..." Heidi stopped herself, likely realizing that she didn't need to relay all of the grisly details. "The police are over. Deanna's hiring a cleanup crew later today."

Her eyes went to him.

"Are *you* okay, Evan?"

He went quiet again, unsure of what to say as he glanced towards his phone. It buzzed. There was another text from Alana, but he couldn't read it right now. Heidi still lingered in the doorway, watching him with that wide-eyed, sad look on her face.

"...I—I don't know." He finally answered. He really didn't — coping with the death, on top of the questions of its legitimacy, was too much for his brain to handle. The threshold of acute trauma his brain could handle was passed on that stage those weeks ago. "I'm just. really... really in shock, I guess."

Heidi didn't look satisfied with that answer — he wasn't, either — but slowly nodded regardless. "Okay. I understand. Just... please come talk to me whenever you're ready, okay?" As Evan nodded, her eyes wet again, and she broke a little. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Evan. I can't lose you, too."

It was another thing that just kind of came out of his mouth, but he hoped it brought her some comfort to hear him say, "You won't."

She hesitated a moment longer, before turning and going. The door was left open behind her, something she never did, but it was an invitation to talk. His stomach churned as he lay back down, alone with his thoughts as she stared at the ceiling. His phone buzzed again.

Jared was the only one who knew the truth about the Connor Project. He didn't reveal it, not even in his suicide post.

Why?

If he hated him and the project so much, why?

Evan's arm covered his eyes. It was all too overwhelming, too confusing. Never had the words of his unfinished speech hit a sour note more than they had now.

You are not alone.

What a load of shit. He had only one confidant through all of this, and his brain matter was being scrubbed off the tile in a bathroom all the way across town. Now there was only one

living soul who knew the truth about the Connor Project, and he'd be tormented with that guilt for the rest of his life.

Maybe that was the point.

Chapter End Notes

BET YOU WERE STARTING TO THINK THAT GRAPHIC DEPICTIONS OF VIOLENCE TAG WAS JUST FOR SHOW, HUH? I'm sorry for ruining Goin' Viral for y'all. It's such a fun song.

TL;DR for those sitting out: Evan wakes up to hear from Alana that Jared's posting some weird stuff to the blog, and finds gore images and slanderous posts about TCP and its staff. This culminates in a video posted of him committing suicide on camera. Evan and Alana argue about the legitimacy of the situation (on one hand, super OOC for Jared, on the other, they saw it happen), and the chapter ends on Heidi coming into Evan's room to inform him of what happened. Sad and scary times all around :[

Also snatched the headcanon name for Jared's mom from Kayla (@kkamikazed). If you haven't read their fic Omissions, do it now please :D we both have Jared dying! Which is... pretty much where the similarities end XD But seriously, they're an awesome writer who's pretty much been my moral support and beta reader through this whole thing. ~~So you have them to blame for all of this too.~~

Comments are appreciated!

I Feel You Near

Chapter Summary

The grave is dug deeper and deeper.

Chapter Notes

Initially, this chapter and the next were rolled into one, but I realized how long it'd be and decided to split 'em, hence why this one isn't suuuper eventful. I think y'all deserve a break after Goin' Viral.

Speaking of last chapter, @insanelycooljk on Tumblr drew some awesome art for it and I haven't stopped looking at it. Lookie!

<https://bandtrees.tumblr.com/post/623113502183342080/hhooooohh-i-just-saw-this-oh-my-gosh-this-is-so>

In general, I'm glad the last chapter was so effective! I've had it in mind for a while and was super excited to get to it - I'd definitely consider it this fic's Signature Scene, haha.

Without further ado, enjoy its aftermath!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Coping with the loss of Jared was hell on every front imaginable. It would've been on a personal level, but it was even harder as the co-president of the Connor Project. Not only did this nonprofit about fighting teen suicide have a member's suicide right under its nose, but there was the very violent and angry context of it that couldn't have gone unaddressed. It was like Evan's stage accident all over again — people hearing a gunshot and wanting to see the crime scene itself.

It shouldn't have been his and Alana's jobs. It'd be hard to address this in a reasonable way as an adult running a business, much less as two random seventeen year-olds running a blog that was never meant to get attention past their school. A statement, written by both Evan and Alana, had been released the day after Jared's death, after countless emails and comments demanding a follow-up. Not even to explain why Jared felt the way he did — just for another piece in the story, because that was what those commenters wanted.

The Connor Project was back under the limelight, with even more of a cynical, voyeuristic tone than it had before. If asked what percentage of people cared about the cause and what percentage of people just wanted to see the aftermath of the bombshell that was Jared's suicide, or any of the other bombshells that had been dropped lately, Evan would place it at a

good 30/70. He had doubts — so, so many doubts — but couldn't bear to bring it up with Alana. It was in his name, sure, but she was the one running the show, and seemed even more desperate to keep everything under control than he was.

They were both in horrible states. Evan couldn't even remember the last time he ate — or slept, for that matter. He'd snapped at Zoe the other night, then Heidi, and still felt like shit for it. His hair was beginning to come out on clumps the few times he could bring himself to shower. He even began to see things out of the corner of his eye again — the pitch-black form of Connor, watching from every wall, from the screen of every laptop and TV and phone Evan saw — unsure if he was losing his mind again or if he was legitimately starting to believe Alana and her haunting theory.

That's what it was, to her. Haunting. Ghosts. How else could Jared have uploaded that video? And why else would he have been acting so strange? Evan loved his friend dearly, but if that wasn't one of the dumbest things he'd ever heard — especially coming from the mouth of the girl who prided herself so much on rational facts. Moreso, though, he didn't know what he'd do with himself if it really was true. Jared snapping, he could handle, painful as it was, but what the fuck was he meant to do if Connor Murphy's *ghost* was after him?

Needless to say, morale at the project was awful. On top of having to put up with interviews from not only police but reporters and Internet sleuths all over, Alana was stretching herself thin with Jared's old duties as they both struggled to run damage control. Evan never would have suspected something of this capacity happening when he first told the Murphys that little white lie, but the universe seemed intent on punishing him for it.

And school, on top of it all — at first, Heidi had him stay home following Jared's death, giving him time to process, but it was only prolonging the prods of questions and demands that came on him and Alana both. Evan was the only person anyone saw Jared around, so he got the brunt of not only invasive curiosity but backhanded sympathy.

"I'm sorry," someone said, "it must be so scary to not know that about somebody you thought was a friend."

That stuck with Evan most. The implication — reality? he didn't even know anymore... — that Jared had been some kind of violent bloodthirsty freak waiting to strike. It never sat right. Maybe it was just... a healthy amount of shock, but he couldn't remember the dumb chat about their summers from their first day of school and imagine Jared wanting to kill himself — or Evan — during it. It just didn't line up, but... not much did lately.

Life wasn't fair, though. It never had been. Sometimes there were senseless tragedies, with nothing any amount of prayer or theorizing could do about it.

The branch broke.

The letter was a coincidence.

The computers were glitching.

The spotlight was an accident.

The shadow was a hallucination.

Jared was masking his misanthropy.

That was it. Nothing more.

Life was messy and complicated and made little sense, and that was what Evan said every single time Alana approached him about the legitimacy of the emails, but that answer would only be satisfactory for so long. To the girl who was convinced of Jared's innocence, to the point of chalking his death up to some violent possession, there were no such things as unfortunate accidents. That inconsistency with the letters wasn't just a typo, or a testament to Connor's unpredictability, it was a sign that something else was puppeting him entirely.

Which. Was true. But that didn't make it any less infuriating to hear.

"Connor is angry with us and I know why!" Alana spun in her chair to face him, eyes wide and bloodshot. "I mean, just think about it!" She whined, hair undone and spilling down a nightgown she fidgeted endlessly with the hem of. (Evan's inner teenage boy, under better circumstances, would've ignored her words entirely in favor of staring at her actually looking casual, but there were other things on his mind. For better or worse.) "You said you were friends, but... nobody even, like, saw you together!" Her fingers twitched, nails dirty as he was beginning to feel she was cracking just as much as he was.

Evan had rehearsed a confrontation like this a million times in his head, but now that it was happening, nothing seemed convincing enough. "What, are you saying I'd just... make all of this up? To look like I have friends?" He bit at his thumbnail, hoping Alana knew him well enough to think of it as his usual fidgeting as opposed to the tell of a liar. "If I was gonna... make up having friends, you think I'd pick someone that wasn't Connor, right?"

Her eyes widened, eyebrows furrowing, and she pointed a finger to his chest as if he'd just outed himself. "See? See, that! You don't even treat him like a friend aside from these emails! On the first day of school, you just walked past each other, didn't even say a word!" She shifted in her chair to cross her arms, scrutinizing Evan. "You sure never acted like best friends 'til now."

The go-to response didn't feel like Evan's best bet, but he tried anyway. "I, I told you before, it was a secrete—"

"I know, I know, we've heard it a bajillion times!" Alana snapped, before realizing what she said and slinking back into her chair. "I don't know what it means, but something's fishy here and I'm not gonna go another two days without sleeping trying to run damage control for something I don't even know is real." She took a deep breath, voice low and broken when she added, "okay?"

He could hear her defeat. This had gone on too far — and yet, Evan feared even more what would happen if it all stopped. Mentally, he apologized to any higher power listening, and began to scroll through his phone to find the Word app. "I can prove it." He blurted, making her look up.

"I, if... if we weren't friends..." Export, text Alana, add the attachment... he turned his phone to her as the file sent. God he hoped to fuck that he'd never mentioned his therapy assignments offhand to her. "Then why'd he write me his suicide note?"

"Huh?" Alana's phone dinged, and she pulled it from her desk and glanced down to check her texts. She scrolled a moment, before her eyes widened and distress crossed her face. He could see the reflection of the familiar words in her glasses. "Oh my God."

"Do you believe me now?" Evan asked, trying to keep his voice level as panic began to crawl its way up his body. Alana of all people shouldn't have been given access to something so personal, real or fake, but he needed to quiet her. There was only so much he could deal with at a time.

"*Oh my God.*" She repeated, eyes flickering from the text to him as she presumably finished reading. Finally, she turned to him with an unsettling resolve in her eyes. "Evan, we need to make this work. For Connor. Everything that's happened made them forget what the Connor Project was really about, and we can't let that be his memory." Holding her phone close to her chest, Evan could see her leg bouncing as she was clearly at her wit's end. "We have to turn this around. This is exactly what the people need."

Before he could say anything, she began to furiously type, and realization dawned on him. "What are you doing?" His voice must have raised an octave in panic, but it did nothing to deter her. "No, no, no, that's private, it's *private*, it—"

"Would you rather we just be that failure of an organization that got one of its staff killed?" She snapped back, and Evan feared for a second she'd throw her phone across the room with the force she suddenly stood up. "We have to do something, okay?! I'm sorry, but it's... it's the only way. Connor can't rest unless we do something good."

Evan felt hollow. His mind went to his Mom, his therapist — this would reach them in an instant with the notoriety the Connor Project had been receiving. It would all be over — what that meant, he had no clue, but was terrified to find out. Defamation at the least, criminal charges at the worst, as it hit him what he'd just done.

The Connor Project was a scam. A lie. An ego stroke. So Evan could pretend he had friends that didn't hate him and a family that wanted him around, and this was his punishment. The judge and jury had made their verdict, and all he could do was await the execution.

Back home, his bedroom was pitch black as he fumbled for his laptop. He didn't have the power to take down Alana's post — besides, with an audience as wide as theirs, nothing ever got deleted, especially not the suicide note of the boy who'd been the talk of the entire Internet for over the past month — and clarifying would only dig himself deeper.

Maybe he could... shit, did he remember his Mom's Facebook password? Maybe he could... filter it out. Was that even a thing you could do on Facebook? Anything to prolong the inevitable — which was a sentiment Evan had gotten more and more used to lately.

In the middle of trying to brute force his way through Heidi's Facebook account, his cursor froze. At a point, so did his keyboard, and as he gave in and decided to just turn the whole

laptop off and on again, he finally spotted two familiar white pinpricks in the darkness.

Rubbing his eyes, they didn't leave.

He supposed he could humor it.

"Yeah, I'm in some deep shit, huh?" He blinked its way as his laptop booted back up. *This is just like that night with those emails*, his brain unhelpfully offered, *except you don't have Jared to make it bearable*. He had to shut his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose at that thought.

"Mmhm." It answered, making Evan jolt in surprise. He never got quite used to the voice coming out of it sounding so... human, save for an odd muffle. "Hard to feel sorry for you, though. You know how much work you gotta put in to spread this bullshit? You had every goddamn chance to pull back. You had the perfect one just half an hour ago."

Evan whined wordlessly, trying to bury his face in his arm even when he knew by now that wouldn't block it out. "I don't... I, I don't get why we're so torn up about this. I'm doing good. I'm—"

"—helping the Murphys, sure." It droned, finishing his sentence for him and making the words die in his throat. It shook its head, jostling its hair and rolling its eyes. "But lemme tell you something."

The buffering of his laptop cut to the log-in screen as the shadow dragged its fingers along the monitor's edge. Evan typed in the PIN to unlock his computer, beginning to make his way back over to the browser, before a text document opened without prompting. He was so exhausted that he could barely question it, pure fear the only thing keeping him from passing out in his chair.

It was one of the first emails he and Jared wrote, set November 15th, 2014, as the fictitious Connor described a concert of Zoe's, pouring his heart out to Evan about how he truly felt for his sister. He remembered having to backspace Jared taking the keyboard and making Connor call her hot, and he remembered the concert the email was based on. He even remembered seeing Connor in the crowd, maybe.

"I did actually go to that concert." The shadow said, casually, without the bitterness or resentment Evan had grown to expect from its voice. "Mom and Dad dragged me out there. My phone died, so I sat most of it out in the bathroom. When we got home, I was so frustrated at her for wasting my time, for taking our parents' attention. I stole her binder and destroyed all her sheet music. Her teacher was pissed. She ended up having to pay for the copies."

Its hand reached down his screen, a dark finger dragging across one sentence in particular. "Pretty far cry from 'she means everything to me', isn't it?"

The document closed.

"And nobody's gonna know how I felt that day, or care, 'cause you wanted to make it about your weird wet dreams for my sister." A harsh, short, mirthless laugh. "I think you'd be pissed too."

Seeing no reply from Evan, it continued.

"Rehab was one of the worst experiences of my life. Some shitty wilderness treatment camp, wasn't allowed to talk to my parents. No phone calls, letters, zilch. Kids I met just got me hooked on even more shit. Came home feeling worse than I did when I left. But hey," it shrugged. "I thought that joke about sucking dick for meth was *hilarious*."

Evan burned with shame, and the shadow just shook its head. "How much good are you really doing, if it means turning me into some fucked up caricature so people actually care? Nobody likes Connor Murphy or Evan Hansen. They like the adorably heartwarming story on your blog's About page."

Evan rubbed his eyes with his jacket's sleeve, which felt tighter and tighter by the day, even as he was actively losing weight. "Shut up. Shut up, shut up, it... I was, I was writing from the heart. Every time." He was crying again, he realized, as his voice cracked. "I swear."

Infuriated by the audacity, the harsh, bitter edge began to return to the shadow's voice. Evan didn't miss that very much. "Yeah, whatever. You just want an excuse to be listened to, no matter what backhanded shit you gotta do for it. And that's worse than anything I've ever pulled."

By the time his browser finally loaded, all of Evan's resolve had sapped away, and he simply held his head in his hands.

Whatever was coming, he was growing certain he deserved it.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to get that last scene down — show some of Connor's motivation for... all of this. He goes pretty far, of course, but in his defense his memory is being pretty bastardized — that and dying and becoming a ghost will probably fuck with your problem solving skills. Sincerely Me (Reprise) is fun, but I'm kind of wiggled out by it, given rehab for Connor was likely a pretty traumatic experience for him. But hey, jokes about yoga and dicks!!! (Not to say it's PROBLEMATIC since that's the point of the song, but it's still something I think about XD)

Anyway, at the time of posting this, I've finished writing the entire main story of I'm Here! I say main story, because I intend on including an epilogue after chapter 10 as an equivalent to Finale in the musical, which I haven't started yet. Hence why there are now 11 chapters instead of 10. Look forward to that! I'm so happy this fic is getting love. I'm being enabled.

Comments are appreciated!

Words Fail

Chapter Summary

If Evan didn't care what happened to him, then Connor could do the next best thing.

Chapter Notes

OH GOD OH FUCK.

Here it is! The home stretch. Thank you so much for joining me on this ride :]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Some Connor Project followers were in it for the voyeurism, the tragedy, but there were dedicated people who cared for the cause and had from the very beginning. Some may have dropped off following the death of Jared, but others stuck around in support. Evan never thought the two groups would overlap, but as it turned out, they did. The vitriolic thrillseekers drawn to suffering flocked to the leaked suicide note like vultures, as did the loving followers close to home who wanted to spread Connor's memory.

The middle ground was the worst of them, Evan quickly learned. Not half a day after the note was published, the Murphy family was bombarded with harassment from every direction under the assumption they were the ones to blame for Connor's death — a belief many held even before the leak, but the note seemed to confirm it. Zoe was a stuck-up bitch who never listened to him, Cynthia and Larry were greedy rich bastards who wanted a prop more than a son, Evan was the only one who cared.

In moments, phone numbers and addresses began to leak, thanks to Zoe's social media being more public than anyone with that amount of notoriety safely should've been. Evan was doing homework in her room as she struggled to understand her Physics lab instructions, and could count the moment her phone number went public by the second the calls began to roll in.

At first, she was sickened, nearly moved to tears by the insults that must've been flung her way as she answered, and Evan did what he could to comfort her. Then her dismay quickly turned to anger as she completely abandoned her work in favor of blocking numbers. "What the fuck is these peoples' problems?" She hissed, turning her phone off and tossing it onto her bed.

He kept his head down when Cynthia marched in, demanding to know where these people got Connor's suicide note. He said he didn't know — in any other situation, that lie would've eaten at him, but now, they were a mere survival instinct, coming as second nature to him as breathing.

"This'll all blow over," he assured Zoe, but he knew the kind of people he was dealing with. The kinds that downloaded Jared's suicide video to use in the same way he'd used that image with the cut up hand. The ones who begged Evan and Alana for a statement, when they'd never even touched the blog prior. He watched the posts closely — the ones he could find, anyway — and did what he could to keep Zoe updated. She privated her social media, making sure to not answer numbers she didn't recognize, but as he hugged her protectively, he began to fear for what could happen if the threats escalated past cruel calls and text messages.

When, rather. That was the worst part of the Connor Project's location and home school being plastered all over the site. Everyone knew what school Connor went to and where he came from, because nobody ever anticipated it'd reach people who had wrong intentions with that information.

He stayed awake in bed the entire night, dry eyes locked on his phone screen as he scoured every corner of the Internet he could find for what people were saying — not sure if it was out of a sick need for validation of his stupid letter or genuine concern. The shadow at his desk insisted it was the former.

Limbs limp and nearly immobile with exhaustion, Evan knew sleeping would make this easier. Even if it was only two hours, it was two hours he'd be away from it all, but he couldn't bring himself to. Every time his eyelids fluttered, he could hear the muffled whispers, the breaking glass from a spotlight, the wet crack of a gunshot — see the shadow, his mangled side, Jared's empty skull. At a point, he began to hope that whatever brain damage the sleep deprivation could cause would kill him before anything else bad happened.

By morning, though, he wasn't that lucky. His mother no doubt knew of his lack of sleep and food, and while she started making sure to eat dinner with him at home more, there wasn't much she could do to ensure Evan was getting his full eight hours. He pretended to when she walked past, feeling like a little kid again, and the whispers were worst when he lay limp and still in bed, head buried in a pillow.

The word KILLERS was scrawled across the Murphys' back door the next morning, the security camera perched nearby shattered with a rock. Evan felt like he was going to be sick, but he knew it paled in comparison to the fear the Murphys must've been feeling. If someone were to take it a step too far, the blood would be on his hands. What would trying to tell them off even accomplish?

His hands shook every second. It wasn't even cold out, but he couldn't stop trembling. The pain in his stomach was no doubt caused by the fact he hadn't eaten since dinner two days ago, but it kept him from keeping even his medication down. His eyes were bloodshot when he looked in the mirror, skin stretched over his thinning body to the point where he was beginning to look like a skeleton. A low drone constantly played in his ears, sometimes

forming something resembling words or a voice, but more often than not its only purpose was to show another way his body was shutting down from stress.

And then there were his thoughts, drowned out by the drone and the whispers and the painful growl of his stomach. They stopped being complete sentences at a point, simply becoming disjointed fragments, half of which were terror for the Murphys as people in school gave Zoe disgusted looks and Evan unearthed more and more slander posts towards her parents. Nearly all of them were from fellow adults, by the profile pictures — they were more forgiving of Zoe than fellow teenagers, but not all of them. Nothing made Evan's blood run cold like seeing a 27 year old wish death on someone a decade younger than them.

School was a blur. Evan was surprised he didn't collapse at any point, the previously debilitating guilt of leaving Alana to the metaphorical wolves that were their invasive schoolmates — because of course everything with Jared had to be happening on top of this — reduced to a dull ache as his body went through the motions of the day. He didn't remember doing a worksheet in Spanish, but he remembered walking up to the teacher to turn it in, and thought distantly that he didn't look — or feel — all too different from Jared in his suicide video.

Hopping from the bus home, intending to knock on the Murphys' door, had he even told Heidi he'd be going anywhere...? He knew he did at one point, but maybe that was three days ago. Or today. He couldn't tell anymore, but shrugged it off as he stepped in anyway.

Immediately, he was snapped out of his delirium by the grave, fearful expressions on Cynthia and Larry's faces. The former was pacing the living room, chewing her fingernails, as the latter scrolled through his phone with a franticness Evan had never once seen from the older man. He watched the scene in confusion, suddenly alert, as it finally dawned on him what he was seeing.

"Zoe...?" He whispered, hearing himself as a lost, hurt child. His voice was hoarse and quiet, but it caused Cynthia to turn all the same.

"Did you see her at school?" Larry asked, voice hard, but Evan had known him long enough to recognize the unnerved undercurrent. "She said she didn't have band today." He looked back to his phone, eyebrows knitted together as he lightly shook his head. "She hasn't been answering our calls."

"Try calling her teachers, or..." Cynthia interrupted before Evan could get a word in. "Or the principal."

Larry retorted, "the principal won't know."

"They give him attendance records, don't they?" His wife asked, and even in his state, Evan knew it wasn't the time for this conversation. He looked down to his feet, fidgeting with the end of his pant leg with one of them in an attempt to return feeling to his limbs.

"U—um." He started. "I, I saw her earlier today, in between second and third period..." He felt unsure, but at least they knew she'd made it to class. Except, for whatever reason, she hadn't made it out.

Cynthia sighed deeply, running a hand through her hair as she stammered for a few moments, before finally weakly stating, "she might be skipping."

"Skipping?" Her husband asked, dialing a number and pressing his phone to his ear. As it rang, he added, "she's not Connor."

She just made a noise between annoyance and exhaustion. "I'm trying here, Larry, I just — who are you even calling?"

He put a hand up to silence her. "One of her teachers."

The tension in the air could be cut with a knife, and it felt like a painfully suffocating decade, even when it only lasted a few seconds — cut short by the front door opening behind Evan.

The first thing he felt upon seeing Zoe Murphy as he turned was sheer relief, but it quickly turned to shock as he saw the state she was in. Her jacket hung off her shoulders, skin marred with dark, large bruises — the ugliest of which on her collarbone and temple. Her lip was busted and bleeding, as was her nose, having turned a deep purple as it was visibly smashed in out of shape. Blood continued to run past her mouth and chin from her damaged nostrils, staining her shirt. One eye was fluttering shut, another shining bruise around it.

She staggered into the living room, losing her footing and collapsing into the closest thing — Evan. Her hair was miraculously still up, though strands fell out of place, and he felt something hot and sticky touch his knuckle as he realized her ear was bleeding — one of her star-shaped piercings had been roughly yanked out, cutting her earlobe in two.

"Zoe? Zoe, what..." Evan's stomach churned as he shifted to properly hold her.

Her parents gasped, Larry dashing over to remove her from Evan's grasp. She moaned in pain as he touched her shoulders, and any doubt Evan ever had about Larry's care for his children was vanquished in an instant when he all but roared, "what happened, Zoe?!"

"Oh my God, oh my God," Cynthia whispered, reaching for her husband's phone.

"...Iiii — I..." Her eyes were glassy, her voice hoarse and broken. Just hearing someone so strong and resilient sound so... *not* tore Evan's heart in two. "I d'... I don't know, I was... walking home, and..."

The Murphys were hanging on to ever fragmented word, as was Evan. "Evan," Larry started, voice low as Zoe let out a quiet sob and continued to struggle for words, likely not wanting to interrupt her. "There's a first-aid kit in the bathroom next to Cynthia and I's room, right next to the towels." He didn't even wait for any confirmation from the boy as he knelt to study his daughter's injuries.

His eyes were glistening, Evan suspecting he was mentally kicking himself for letting this happen just as much as he was. He didn't want to leave Zoe's side, but that wasn't worth letting her go without treatment, and he could catch the beginning of her recollection as he turned to dash up the staircase.

"...didn't... know who they were, but... grabbed me and started hitting me, and..." She was taking shuddering gasps, and Evan could just hear the fear in her voice — as if she worried her attackers might follow her inside. "And... I couldn't move, I tried to fight back, but I couldn't move, I..."

Evan almost tripped up the stairs at that. It was too much to handle. Despite all they'd been through together, he still found himself thinking of Zoe at times as that kind and pretty junior with a perfect life who could do no wrong. Picturing someone cruel enough to want to hurt that made him want to break something. All she ever wanted was to play jazz and live a peaceful life — God, did she deserve it — and yet... here she was, on the receiving end of a beating in the street from people thinking they were doing her brother's memory a favor.

He bit his lip as he located the first aid kit, closing the cabinet door with his shoulder. It must've been her worst nightmare. Leaving the bathroom, the sound of the Murphys' raised voices reached him from downstairs. Peering down the railing as he made his way closer, he saw Larry pinching his tie to his daughter's ear to slow the bleeding — Cynthia was out of view, but he could hear the ice machine underneath her yelling.

"—wait until this blows over', that's all you ever do, Larry! Some- some—" She sputtered for a moment, and Evan winced when she continued. "—fucking *lunatics* are spray painting our house and attacking our daughter!" He'd never even heard the usually kind-hearted Murphy swear before, and was beginning to think she wasn't even capable of it until now. "This isn't just the Internet comments, the police can do something about this!"

"You want us to draw more attention to ourselves?" Larry spat back, before pulling his tie away to check for blood. "You know that's what they want us to do. Go running for the cops and make us look weak." The fighting was making Zoe shake — Evan could tell even from across the room — prompting him to walk faster. His vision grew unfocused and red, feeling the familiar panic attack coming on — he didn't even think he had the energy for one anymore. All he could think as he rummaged through the kit, unsure what any of these things were even for as he tried to make himself useful, was that this was all happening because of *him*.

He may as well have been the one to rip out Zoe's earring and punch her in the face. He never should've accepted that letter. He never should've let it out of his sight. He was so sorry, so fucking *sorry*, but he knew apologies didn't mean shit now, not when people were really getting hurt, not when —

"It's not your fault, Evan." Larry's voice was almost dismissive, and — wait, shit, did he say all of that out loud? His chin quivered, and he knew this wasn't the time, he *knew*, but he watched Cynthia press an ice pack to Zoe's cheek, wiping the blood from her face with a paper towel, and could feel his heart hammering in his chest with how desperately he needed to confess and make it all *stop*.

"It is, it *is*, I, I," Evan's eyes were shut tight and he could feel his hands shaking, the first aid kit slipping out of his grasp and tumbling to the ground. He could barely even get the words out through his hyperventilating. "I'm sorry, I never should've, I, I never should've..."

"Evan." Larry repeated, more firm and direct as his hard eyes went from Zoe to him. "It's not your fault." He spoke steadily and clearly, Evan's brain unhelpfully offering that he never must've spoken that way to Connor, and continued, "If these... Facebook freaks can find where we live, they can find the letter. I don't know how they did, but it's got nothing to do with you."

Jaw clenched so tightly Evan was afraid his teeth would splinter and drive into his gums, he just shook his head, feeling himself nearly fall backwards as he stumbled. "No, no, I, I'm not..." His voice was inaudible even to him, and he knew he couldn't take the time to explain himself. He took one last deep breath, back hitting the wall as his eyes flew open and he summoned all of his strength to shout —

"I never should've written it!"

A strangled noise escaped his throat, somewhere between a sob and a gag as he dropped to the floor, not even catching the looks on everyone's faces. Did he say that? Did he say that, or was it just another hallucination? "I never should've written it." He repeated, just to make sure the words were real and coming out of his mouth.

It felt as if the weight of the universe had been lifted off of his shoulders, but there was no relief in it. Only bare, naked exposure, there for the knives and pitchforks to rip apart. He was hiding in his hands, unable to even look up to reap what he had sowed. He swallowed dryly, the silence stretching on after his confession feeling like a decade.

"...what?" A voice finally replied — Cynthia's. "Evan, you didn't write Connor's suicide note." She spoke slowly, incredulously, like she was worried he'd been dropped on his head and woke up wrong.

"I-I did! I did, it, it was a therapy ass-s-ignment, I, he t..." His voice was reduced to a wheeze, and he knew he had to breathe and gather himself, but he couldn't bear to as the words just kept tumbling out regardless of his ability to formulate them. "...took it, that was the first time we ever talked, I, I, I di—" Another wheeze roughly cut him off. "—I—I didn't know him! We weren't friends! E-ever!"

As he forced himself to open his eyes, he looked up and saw the nervous smile on Cynthia's face beginning to waver. She knew it made sense. She must've. "But... the emails..."

"I made them up with my friend Jared!" He blurted. "We made a fake account and backdated them! We got the dates wrong and Connor wrong and everything *wrong* but I didn't know what to *DO*!" His voice broke by the end, floodgates opening to make way for heaving sobs as he backed further into the wall. "I never went to the orchard! I broke my arm in Ellison Park! *Everything*! I was lying!"

He was growing hysterical, fingers curling in his hair and ripping out strands flaked with dandruff and thin with malnourishment. "I was *lying*!" His voice was alien to him, guttural and monstrous with depths of grief he never thought he would even reach. "I was lying, I was lying, I was lying, I was *LYING*!" He shrieked, not even aware the back of his head was slamming against the wall until Cynthia's shock visibly turned to worry. "I wasn't friends with him! I *hated* him, I *hate* him, he's ruining my *life*!"

A rough gag ripped through him with the force of his screaming and sobbing, but there was nothing to come up. His skin stung, as he acutely realized he was scratching his face in his mania. His bloodshot eyes filled with tears, distorting the family's dismayed faces — Larry was stunned speechless, Zoe's undamaged eye wide and her mouth agape. In their eyes, he may as well have strangled Connor to death with his bare hands and strung up his empty, broken body to take his place. Inserting himself into their home the second there was a vacancy. He couldn't imagine a worse crime on the planet.

In spite of it, he kept going.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*!" He knew they must've fallen on deaf ears — no apology could make sense of what he'd done, but on a greater scale, nothing could've made sense of what was taken from him in punishment. He couldn't breathe, no matter how hard he tried, he could feel his fingers grow wet as the scabbed scars on his face from that fateful fall reopened. He should've known then. He should've stopped then. He should've stopped then and nobody would've been mad but he *didn't* and now he had one friend six feet under and another beaten within half an inch of it.

"Evan!" Cynthia's voice cut through, and he could feel her hands on his wrists, trying to wrench them away, her breathing as shallow and panicked as his as tears streaked down her face. Her last lifeline, the last thing she could use to convince herself that she hadn't completely failed her son, that he amounted to anything more than money wasted on rehab treatments, was torn away and stomped on with every apology that came out of Evan's mouth, but she still managed to reach out her hand in an attempt to console him — even when he was the last person she ever should've.

"I just want it to stop!" He wailed. "S-s-stop, just let me out, PLEASE! *PLEASE*!" A wordless yell escaped his mouth, framed by more and more tears, gasping for air as his panic suffocated him, unable to hear Zoe's frightened demands or Larry's insistence for his wife to deal with Evan as he tended to his still-injured daughter.

The only appropriate definition was chaos. The voices all blended together as he continued to rant in a desperate attempt to make the pain and suffering stop, to the point where he was certain he couldn't even breathe anymore. The words coming out of his mouth were closer to choked noises or alien wheezes than words.

Shadows blotted his vision, and he wasn't sure if it was his body reaching its limit after so much stress and sleep deprivation or Connor coming to watch him fall apart. He could only pray that it was the former as his legs failed and he collapsed into a heap on the floor. Evan's vision blurred and finally faded into nothing, but with the last of his strength, his eyes darted from wall to wall for any sign of a lingering ghost.

I always thought You Will be Found (Reprise) was a part of the show that went overlooked by the fandom, which bums me out because it's such an important and terrifying moment. I had to crank it up to 11, hehe. The Internet is scary, man. (I think that can just be a tagline for this whole fic. I'm Here: The Internet Is Scary, Man.)

Fun fact! In development I jokingly called this AU "you will be found, and that's a THREAT", completely forgetting that's... actually a thing in the actual show. Whoops.

Also, when I'm done with this fic, I don't want it to mean being done with this AU :] I have... so many sketches and stuff that will finally get to see the light of day, as well as cut ideas/scenes I wanna show off in some capacity. This AU's like my nightmare baby. My creepy horror movie baby. I'm very glad it seems to be other peoples', too!

Like always, comments are appreciated!

Finale

Chapter Summary

One and a half years later...

Chapter Notes

Here we are! Thank you for sticking around this long <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The past year and a half hadn't been easy.

But it was easier than the months that preceded it.

So that was something.

The physical scars began to heal, to the point where nobody would notice the blisters, cuts, and burns from the spotlight accident still marring Evan's body unless they knew to look. There was no full healing — his twice-broken arm was crooked and left with a permanent dent, but the aching and scabbing was gone. He didn't realize how much the acute strain of moving around and panicking with his injuries must've contributed to his awful mental state until they were gone.

Those scars, on the other hand, were far worse. People would note that he always looked terrified, his breathing always labored and his hands always shaking. Even when others stopped being hurt and he could finally rest easy knowing Connor's shadow had left his side for good, the experience had irreparably damaged him — witnessing everything he did would have already, but the guilt bearing on his shoulders of knowing it was all his doing made it even worse. Some of his classmates would give uncomfortable laughs as he'd suddenly look over his shoulder with wide eyes at nothing, but most knew better.

After he collapsed that fateful afternoon, he remembered waking up at home, Heidi standing over him as he poured out his soul to her — all he could manage, anyway. He didn't think Heidi even got a word in edgewise, even when all his recollection amounted to was panicked half-uttered words, sobs, and apologies. It was better than nothing, though.

At least the Murphys were kind enough to bring him home, even when he ruined their lives almost singlehandedly and he wouldn't have blamed them if they threw his unconscious body out into the street to get hit by a truck. That was the last time he saw them — he couldn't

show his face near that house again, not after he'd burrowed his way in like a leech, and he stopped seeing Zoe at school. At first, he feared the worst, but then heard on the grapevine that she was being kept home following the incident.

That didn't surprise him, but it left him with an aching emptiness. He never got to answer her questions — how confused, scared, *manipulated* she must've felt to hear the truth — and he found by next week that he never would. The family was forced to move due to the harassment, going out of state and changing their names. Starting fresh, like Heidi always spoke of so fondly, but Evan imagined it was less of a chance to explore opportunities and more a painful last resort.

He should've reached out, but it was far too late. There was no way Zoe's phone number was the same, nor her social media. He never checked — his own phone went largely unused, due to the ever present fear that those shadowy eyes were watching from it somewhere.

The Connor Project was shut down the weekend of Zoe's attack — the weekend of the truth getting out. He remembered it clearly — the foggy afternoon, the now empty Murphy house just barely visible out the corner of the window. Evan was sitting up on the couch that had become his new bed in the wake of it all, as he could never feel truly safe in his room anymore, calling Alana, asking for her to come over. This wasn't a conversation for texts, that much he knew.

When she sat down beside him, all he could manage was a trembling, "You were right. About everything." He expected her to be furious, grab him, shake him, scream, but all she did was take off her glasses and slowly nod, likely having been waiting for this very outcome. The room was painfully quiet, Evan's anxiety not kicked into overdrive for once as he studied her expression. He felt relaxed, even, his shoulders slumped as he fidgeted with the edge of his sock. "Connor didn't write that note. I did. It was a, a therapy assignment, he took it from me, he..."

It was hard to explain, eyes fixed on the floor. For once, Alana said nothing, visibly searching for words for a few moments. "You... felt that way?" She finally asked. Evan just nodded. She frowned, glancing back away. "I'm sorry."

"Um. Don't be." He could barely imagine that first day of school now — a time when potentially getting embarrassed because of his letter was the worst-case scenario, a time when all he had to worry about with Jared was how he was making anxiety-inducing jokes, a time when Zoe only crossed his mind as a crush to hold onto when things became dire. Despite how lost and miserable he felt that day, strangely enough, it was a happier time.

"I. I don't think we can do the Connor Project anymore." He admitted. It was what he really called her over for, but that made it no easier to say. Despite all the pain that goddamn blog had brought them, it was Alana's pride and joy. "Not because of this, just..." He gestured with his head to the window, towards the Murphys' vacant house. "It's... hurt too many people."

Glancing at Alana, she looked broken up, and he couldn't blame her, but she finally nodded. "I never thought it'd go this far. I wanted to do something *good*, but... your accident, and Jared, and everything, just..." She hugged herself, wiping her face with a sleeve. Evan always viewed the Connor Project through a somewhat detached, cynical lens. He was bitter from

the very beginning, because he knew the truth and felt as if he was being strapped to a chair and forced to watch a car accident every time he updated it. But Alana didn't have that gift of knowledge — she believed wholeheartedly in what the blog was spreading, believed wholeheartedly up until the very end that her co-president was Connor's best friend. How much *worse* must it have been for her when she watched the trigger be pulled, or saw the threats lobbed the Murphys' way?

"I-I—" Evan started, and he realized the second he did that what he was going to suggest would be stupid. "—you could... try again? A different project, maybe. You were, um. Really good at it." He felt a blend of relief and fear to be referring to the Connor Project in the past tense — the part of him that clung to the status quo, the part that lived in denial until he saw the only person who had ever managed to pull him out of that sea of misery bruised and broken before his very eyes, wanted it back immediately. There was almost safety in the tragedy — at least he didn't have to go to school, right? — but he knew the more he thought about it, the worse he'd feel.

Alana just sighed heavily. The taciturnity was unlike her, but he supposed it made sense. Throughout all of this, as much as it was painful to admit, her attempts to help had only caused more pain. Without her help, the Connor Project never would have even existed, which... wasn't the positive sentiment it should've been. "Maybe."

The last time they ever spoke was to co-write the final statement before the Connor Project blog was logged off of permanently, and it hurt. Alana was Evan's last friend, the only other kid he could confide in, but she didn't need any more reminders of all that had been broken. It wasn't her battle to fight — she deserved to move on, as much as Evan selfishly wanted someone to suffer with again.

And then came now. Having to repeat senior year didn't come as a surprise due to his god awful attendance record — even when the hospital time made it excusable. It was a relief, honestly — even amidst the odd looks as he was visibly older than the rest of his classmates — he didn't think he could manage struggling through his final year of high school with everything that happened on his back. Heidi knowing the full story — or at least all of it Evan could describe confidently, which... wasn't much — at least gave him a line of support. It took months of goading to make him get professional help, endlessly paranoid that a therapist could turn him over to the authorities, but the truth was that as much as he cared about Heidi, he couldn't rely on just her help. And Dr. Sherman, good as he was, was far less equipped to deal with the intricacies of Evan's new trauma than he was his everyday anxiety.

Slowly but surely, Evan relearned how to act like a person, which... admittedly, was something he struggled with even before all of this, but he was proud to find he could socialize enough to handle small chat as a furniture store cashier. Baby steps, Heidi always said — he still couldn't bear eye contact, his natural anxiety doubled by the association between staring and people he cared for being hurt — between Jared's expression during the suicide video and the empty eyes of Zoe as she staggered in bloodied that afternoon. They looked hollow and soulless, and even when he knew it was irrational and stupid, he couldn't look people in the eyes for that reason.

He thought about them more than he knew was healthy if he wanted to move on, but he felt as if he had to make up for his weeks of denial — for ever taking what he was seeing at face value. The language was hard to grow accustomed to, conditioned as he was to believe it was the most outlandish shit ever, but he remembered what Alana described as possession — Jared's dull eyes, robotic movements, out of character behavior, Zoe's inability to move as she was being beaten within inches of her life — and while the idea of anything supernatural there was still a hard pill to swallow, it still made his hair stand on end to think of them as mere passengers of their own bodies as they were forced into suffering by their own hands.

Unable to move, but able to think, hearing words coming from your mouth and your keyboard that you never wanted or intended...

Evan could relate to that, almost. He looked at the remains of the Connor Project and could never imagine wanting any of it.

He tried to push it all behind him, really, he did — Jared wouldn't want him spending forever in a rut, and Alana and Zoe were already moving on with their lives — but that proved difficult when he saw a reminder around every corner. On the worst days, all Evan saw when he looked at peoples' hands were the exposed bone and sinew slashed with razors on the Connor Project page. Those were the days his chest was tight with anxiety as he convinced himself Connor's shadow still crept over his shoulder — even when he turned to find nothing.

The monotony of work gave his mind room to wander, as much as it inevitably found terrible things when it did. He was jostled out of his spiral — thankfully, as he was beginning to fear he'd have to excuse himself to the bathroom to recollect for the second time that day — by the sight of a girl he needed to do a double take to properly absorb.

Fingers with chipped nail polish nervously tapped the handle of her shopping cart. The short dark brown hair wasn't familiar, and neither was the style of dress, but the tired hazel eyes were unmistakable — as was the crooked nose much like his crooked arm. He froze, unsure if he was seeing what he thought — and furthermore, mentally running through a million different potential scenarios if he *was* — when she glanced his way.

She looked like she was doing a double take, too. The girl froze, before hesitantly placing one foot after the other and walking over. Up close, it looked even more apparent — the familiar moles, pointed nose that ran in her family, the permanent little pout on her face — but he couldn't bring himself to say anything as she glanced aside.

"...hi." She finally managed, with nervousness Evan would associate more with himself than her. He just stared for a few seconds — she'd be used to the awkwardness, though, right?

"...a." Great start. "Are." He felt like a dumb kid again, trying to speak to her outside of that jazz band concert. He picked at his nails, stammering for a second longer before the words tumbled out all at once. "Are you the person I think you are because this'd be *really awkward if you weren't*."

A nervous chuckle escaped her lips, and she lightly shook her head. "No, no, it's me." Zoe — that probably wasn't even her name anymore, could he still call her that? — glanced behind her. "I'm not holding up a line, am I?" She asked as she set her things on the counter.

"No! No, not at all, I, um, I was just..." Shit, right, he had a job to do, and frantically began to scan her items like she was a regular customer and not *Zoe fucking Murphy what the fuck*. "Surprised? I thought you moved out of state, or something..."

Zoe's expression dropped a little. "I did, just..." With a touch of sorrow, she shifted her weight. "Paying a visit to Connor for his birthday and all."

Evan really just forgot cemeteries existed for a minute there, huh. Maybe he wasn't reintegrating into society as well as he thought. It was... startlingly, easy enough to forget who Connor really was. Evan knew him as that shadow on the wall that made his life a living hell, but to Zoe, he was the brother she had no choice but to mourn. "Oh..." He squeaked, having no clue how to really respond to that. "Right, right, 'course. I— I've never... visited him, personally, um..."

He trailed off, realizing he was taking this conversation in the worst direction imaginable and clearing his throat.

"...yeah. Your parents doing okay?"

Zoe sighed through her nose as Evan began to realize there weren't any really *good* directions to take it. "It's rough, but they're doing better."

He forced a chuckle, hoping it didn't sound like he was laughing at her. Then again, this was *Zoe* he was talking to, someone who always seemed to care for him, warts and all. Even now, after all he'd done to manipulate her and her family, she took the time to talk to him. The thought made him want to cry, but randomly crying was probably the worst thing to do in this situation.

"...look, I—" He began, cutting himself off as he wasn't actually sure where to start. "—I'm sorry. About everything, really, I know that sounds *super* guilt trippy and I know that doesn't make up for it, but I'm sorry, I just—"

"It's fine." She abruptly cut him off, before scrunching up her face as she backpedaled. "I mean, it's not." She motioned towards his... everything. "But you've gone through enough. You fucked up. Bad." He winced a little at that, even when he knew it to be fully true. It still hurt to hear from her. "But you didn't deserve all of that, either. I don't think anybody does."

"I... guess." He responded lamely. "I've been wanting to call, but... I — I didn't wanna..." Biting his inner cheek, he quickly diverted. "Didn't. Know if you wanted. And, I mean, you probably changed your number, 'cause of all of the..." Vague gesturing. "...that."

It was surreal. He never thought he'd be talking to Zoe again, and at a point, accepted that. But here this coincidence was — he thought acutely that the Alana from a year and a half ago would insist it to be some miracle of fate. Zoe sighed, running a hand through her hair — it was short now, almost like a boy's, but she still looked pretty, and — gah, why was he thinking about that right *now*?!

She crossed her arms, the striped blue cardigan she wore looking more like something Evan would see on Heidi than her. "Yeah. I've been wanting to, too, honestly." He blinked in

surprise at that, though he supposed it made sense with all of the questions he'd been too hysterical that day to answer. "It's been... a really shitty year. For all of us, probably."

Her eyes were fixed on a point on the counter — he didn't know if she was just nervous, or if being rattled by everything gave her the same issues with eye contact that he had. "I know I should be angrier, but I think I had enough of that with Connor." She let out a sad little laugh, with no humor in it. It was a habit Evan recognized from her brother, and it made him freeze despite himself.

The two were silent for a moment, though he could tell she was mulling on something. Finally, Zoe let it out, sounding almost embarrassed. "...I... wanna keep in touch, if that's okay with you."

Hm?

Evan stopped. He took a moment to process.

"Are you coming onto me?"

The look of surprise and confusion of Zoe's face was both a relief and kind of heartbreaking. "Oh, God, no." It turned to laughter, and for a second Evan let himself laugh too, because it was a normal friend thing to laugh about but he could still barely process that he was talking so casually with *Zoe Murphy*. Her smile wavered, "I just need someone to talk to. Thought you might, too."

Pointing to himself and glancing over his shoulder in surprise, Evan felt a debilitating sense of *deja vu*. "*Me?*"

Zoe's composure broke as she adjusted her cardigan, looking almost as if she wanted to hide in it. "It's fine, you don't— you don't have to, I just—"

"No!" His voice was too loud, too quick, but he couldn't let this interaction pass him by. He'd regret it forever if he did. Lowering his voice, he had to keep it level, not let his enthusiasm and surprise be so apparent. "No, I'd, I'd really like that."

"Oh!" Zoe sounded equally surprised. "Um. Cool." She laughed awkwardly as he rang up her items, and he watched her anxious swaying as he did. She was always so down-to-earth, he remembered, even throughout all the suffering. Popular and rich — or, well, *was* — but liked not for materialism or status, but because she was so nice that it was impossible to *not* like her. Observing her nervous tics — tapping her nails together, brushing a finger across her temple as if to tuck back hair that was no longer there — it pained Evan to think not only that someone *wanted* to hurt someone so good, but that they *succeeded*.

She took her receipt, plucking a pen from across the counter and scrawling out her phone number across the whole paper in familiar big, bold lettering. He wondered if that was something she and her brother always had in common, or if she'd picked it up after his death, smiling his first genuine smile in a while as the receipt was passed back to him.

Offering to help take her bags, she declined, and in moments, the encounter was over as she turned and left — to visit Connor, if she hadn't already. His impulsive side longed to follow, ask more, see if Larry and Cynthia were waiting there in the parking lot, but he had work to do, and she had places to be.

Evan glanced down to the receipt in his hand, and then around him for any odd shadows. None. He exhaled in relief, folding up the receipt and carefully tucking it away.

Thinking about what happened last year had always been hard, and something he preferred to avoid — even when the nightmares and irrational fears made it almost completely impossible, and he knew it'd be so much worse if he ever touched social media again to see his impact. But thinking about Zoe, he supposed it didn't *all* have to be something to avoid.

The gloomy weather out felt fitting, and he hoped the rain wouldn't be too inconvenient on the walk home. April showers brought May flowers though, didn't they? He glanced at his phone, the screen still cracked from fall after fall, the battery likely nearly dead with how little he used and charged it. Heidi called him, and so did his manager, sometimes. That was pretty much it, though his therapist would advise him that trying to hide from the reminders of the past would only make him more vulnerable to them.

Maybe he could visit Jared and Connor, like Zoe was doing. He never had, truthfully — the wounds were too fresh. Having to see Jared's gravestone would've been too much for him to handle, especially if he was to find it bare. The world thought of him as some deranged violent freak, and Evan was one of the only few who could confidently say he knew better. He wasn't the kind of guy to like getting flowers, but Evan could figure something out.

Maybe he could ask Alana. He wasn't sure if she still used the same phone number, but he could log in to Facebook to try and hunt her down. He didn't know if she'd even want that, but the worst thing that could happen was her saying no. That little bit of closure would probably make him feel better anyway. They could schedule something — like those evening hangouts they had last year, except without the stress of the Connor Project hanging over their heads.

That would be nice.

Chapter End Notes

And that's it! That's I'm Here! I seriously can't overstate how much it's meant to me that people got invested in this fic, it's the longest thing I've ever written and so not my usual kind of writing (...format wise, anyway, all of my fics are pretty grim and edgy lol) but seeing people leave comments and talk about it and leave kudos and hits has just made me SO happy!!! I reread every comment obsessively, they warm my heart. It's been a very very fun two weeks!

As a treat, I've made little reference images for the cast of this fic, for fanart purposes (if you draw fanart i WILL cry) or just for imagination purposes:

<https://bandtrees.tumblr.com/post/623455201708425216/to-celebrate-finishing-im-here-my-deh-horror>

Thanks again for sticking around! Like I said I definitely wanna do more with this AU (even if probably not fics as I think this is decently self-contained) so it won't be the end, but still, it's been a ton of fun <3 Very creepy fun.

And a hello to anyone who's just read it in one sitting, go get some water or snacks or something. XD

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!