

ROXY

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NEAL SHUSTERMAN
JARROD SHUSTERMAN

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Naloxone

I am no superhero. But I can save you from the one who claims to be.

I am no wizard. But I cast a spell that can bring back the dead.

Almost.

And never often enough.

I am, if nothing else, your final defense—your last hope when hope itself has spiraled into that singularity that crushes not just you, but everyone around you.

And so here we are, you and I. The scene is set. Never identical, yet always the same:

Today it's a room in a house on a street that was born when dreams were milky-white appliances and cars were like landlocked ships, too proud to ever be slung with seat belts.

This was once suburbia, but it was long ago consumed by a gelatinous urban tsunami. The neighborhood struggles and sometimes even thrives. But this street? This street is dead. It has been sacrificed for the greater good.

The trees on either side have already been taken down, their trunks turned into firewood, their limbs fed into a chipper. Most doors and windows have been stripped and salvaged, leaving the homes with the deadest of eyes and gaping, silent

mouths. Nearly a mile of this. And just beyond are bulldozers and rubble, and beyond that, towering concrete pillars reach skyward like the columns of an ancient temple.

Because a freeway is coming. A six-lane corridor that will cleave the neighborhood in half, right along this very street, in a brutal rite of passage called eminent domain.

When night falls, the doomed street is engulfed more completely than anywhere else in the city.

And there you are. In the fifth house on the left.

You're not from this part of town, but somehow you found this place, drawn by darkness so dense you can wrap it around yourself like a blanket.

Now flashlights illuminate a familiar tableau. One officer, two paramedics. And me.

A medic leans over you—presses a finger to your neck.

“Hard to find a pulse,” she says. “If it’s there, it’s weak.”

This room was once a bedroom. But there’s no bed, no dresser. All that remains is a warped desk and a broken chair that no one deemed worth saving. You lie on carpet mottled with mold that has left it looking like a wall-to-wall bruise. It is the very epicenter of abandoned hope.

“I can’t detect any breathing. Beginning CPR.”

Rats would complete the scene, but vector control has already been here with some of my more vicious cousins to kill the vermin. But they can’t get rid of the roaches no matter how hard they try. They are the victors of this world, the roaches. Truly undefeatable.

You, on the other hand, are defeated. How defeated is yet to be seen.

Thirty chest compressions, two rescue breaths. Repeat.

The other medic prepares me for what I've come to do, while the officer gives a description of you on his radio. They don't know who you are. I don't know who you are either—but soon you and I will be close. I will be inside you. A kind of intimacy neither of us wants but both of us need. It is, after all, my purpose. And you? You have no choice.

“Administering the naloxone.”

“Make sure you get the muscle.”

“I never miss.”

The needle plunges deep in your left thigh—and I surge forth into muscle tissue, searching for capillaries that will carry me to larger and larger vessels. And yes—you're still alive! I do hear your heartbeat! Slow, faint, but there!

I ride the long sluggish wave of your beat into the chambers of your heart, and out again, up and up toward your brain. Only there can I save you. I will rip you free of the hold they have over you.

They.

The *others*. Who care for you only as long as they have you locked in their embrace, as if you are nothing more than a child's tattered toy. They do not know love—only possession. They promise you deliverance and reward you . . . with this:

Thirty compressions, two breaths. And me.

It is you, and those like you, who gave them power, and continue to give them power day after day. Because who but you can generate current enough to feed the bright flashing lights of their eternal Party? How could you not see that the others—my brutal cousins—are the cancer at the core of

seduction? The void at the heart of your craving? They see themselves as gods, but in the end they are just like me. Nothing but chemicals. In complex combinations, perhaps, but still no more than tinctures, distillations, and petty pharma. Chemicals designed by nature, or by man, to tweak *your* chemicals.

If they live, it is only because you gave them life. As well as the license to end yours. And if they act in roles beyond their purpose, it is only because you placed them upon the stage to perform.

Thus the stage has been set. The audience cool and dispassionate—waiting to be entertained but too jaded to believe it ever will be.

But we must try, must we not?

And so here, between the chest compressions and the life-saving breaths, I will do my part, struggling to wrest your fate back from the capricious “gods.”

I am no superhero. I am no wizard. But I can save you. Although half of the time I don't. Too often I am too late. Victory and tragedy will forever fight for purchase on this stage.

And today the dimming footlights find tragedy.

Your heart begins to fibrillate. Then it seizes like a furious fist . . . and then releases. The wave is gone. I can't do my work if I can't get to your brain. Still, the medics keep working CPR, but it will not change the fact that you have surrendered your life in the bruised room of the rotting house, on the street that will soon be gone.

They tag your toe with the last name on your ID, and your first initial:

Ramey, I.

Then they wheel you out, and I have little left to do but settle in your veins—one more chemical to parse in the autopsy.

And I curse the others.

My soulless clan who brought you to the Party, then left you in this desolate place, where even those who tried to save you are too world-weary to shed a single tear.

If I had a voice, I swear to you I would tell your story. At least enough of it so that I might know who you are.

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Isaac, Ivy, and **the Infinite Loser**

TWO MONTHS EARLIER . . .

Ivy's got to be here somewhere, thinks Isaac Ramey as he pushes through the door of the cesspool looking for his sister. *No doubt about it; this is Ivy's kind of party.* The house reeks of puke, hormones, and beer, making Isaac wince as he wades through the living room. He's ankle-deep in deadbeats, burnouts, and druggies—all of whom are far too wasted to realize that freak-dancing to techno looks like faking a seizure to someone who's close to sober. Or worse, actually *having* a seizure while interpretive dancing—which would be a really sad way to die, because the audience would just slow clap while you writhe yourself into oblivion.

Isaac needs to stay on track. He searches through the muck and mire. A girl with a half-shaved head. A guy who clearly pissed himself. A seedy dude too old for this party, talking to a girl who's too young for it. Nothing Isaac didn't expect. And if this night is like any other Friday night, he'll find Ivy here. Ivy is a year older than Isaac, but more often than not, Isaac feels like her older brother.

It's not that he doesn't like parties. He's a junior, so he's been to plenty in his time, where things were going on that

his parents wouldn't want to know about. . . . But he doesn't go to *these* kinds of parties—his sister's kinds of parties. Where seedy things don't happen in back rooms but are in your face—the dismal and the desperate shoving their brains into a hydraulic press just to make themselves forget how finite they are.

He goes out to the backyard. It's overgrown and features an amoeba-shaped pool not large enough to do anything but float, or secretly urinate. Which might be why the water is clouded and green like a study in bioterrorism.

It isn't long before Isaac spots his sister—her Slurpee-blue hair is a dead giveaway. Ivy's by the pool with Craig, her infinite-loser boyfriend, who lives here. He's their parents' perfect nightmare: ratlike fingernails, competing tattoos, and a man-bun protruding from his head like a tumor.

"Ivy," Isaac calls out as he gets close. He has to call her name three times to get her attention. She takes a moment to hide her surprise at seeing him.

"Mom and Dad know you snuck out, and they're on the warpath."

"So they sent *you*?"

"They have no clue where you are, or even that I went out looking for you."

Ivy turns and is already marching away—her classic response to anything she doesn't like. Especially when she's been drinking. Isaac follows, grabbing her arm before she stumbles into an overgrown bush.

"If they get wind of this party and find you here like this, it'll be bad. You'll thank me tomorrow."

Suddenly Craig discovers enough brain cells to notice Isaac's presence.

"Hey, is this guy bothering you?" he asks Ivy.

"Shut up, Craig. He's my brother. You met, like, six times." Ivy turns back to Isaac. "I'm not some basket case; I don't need you to save me. So, go home and study, or whatever it is you do on Friday nights."

"Yeah," seconds Craig. "You heard her. She wants to party with me."

That's when Isaac sees the drug bag that Craig holds, dangling like a little scrotum full of god-knows-what. Just the sight of it ignites something primal within Isaac, taking over his body and making him swat the bag out of Craig's hand, sending it flying into the pool.

"Oops, my bad," Isaac says. He's not the kind of guy who looks for a fight, but some are worth starting.

"What the hell . . ." Craig's shock turns to fury, and he pounces on Isaac. They begin to grapple, and it quickly grows into a full-fledged fight. A zombie horde of the stoned gather to gawk, making it the center of the party's limited attention.

Isaac, who's stronger, lands some blows, but Craig grabs a Solo cup of something 180 proof and hurls it in Isaac's eyes. Craig has a distinct advantage in that dirty moves are his superpower.

And now Craig is punching Isaac over and over again as Isaac fights the burn in his eyes. Hammerfists over his head, body shots. Whatever Craig can do to inflict damage before Isaac recovers his eyesight. Ivy tries to break it up, but Craig won't have it.

Finally Isaac regains enough of his bearings to deliver a shot to Craig's nose that may just break it, but before Craig's pain kicks in, he shoves Isaac with all his might, sending him flying to the ground.

In an instant Ivy is at Isaac's side, helping him stand. She looks up to Craig, who now rotates through every profanity he knows as he cradles his gushing nose.

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Ivy yells at Craig.

"He started it!" Craig yells back

But Ivy's not having it. "Just get the hell away from us!"

Craig turns his back far too easily, making it clear how little he actually cares. "Fine. Whatever. You and your family are psycho anyway." Then he goes over to the pool and stands there gazing into the murky water, mourning the loss of his little plastic scrotum.

It isn't until Isaac's adrenaline fades that he realizes his ankle is hurting. No—it doesn't just hurt; it throbs. More than just a run-of-the-mill ankle twist, this is a bone-deep ache. He can already sense that it isn't going away anytime soon. When his sister sees him limping and grimacing, she helps him through the side yard, and together they make their way to the street.

As they get to Isaac's old silver Sebring by the curb, Isaac leans against it, exhaling, realizing he'd been holding his breath most of the way. Then, as he opens the car door, he puts too much weight on his injured ankle and nearly goes down. His vision darkens from the pain, then clears again—but the pain only subsides the slightest bit. That's when he realizes that the simple task of getting home is no longer so simple.

"I can't drive home with my ankle like this. . . ."

“Uh—that’s why you have two feet.”

Isaac considers it, but shakes his head. “I drive right-footed. I don’t even know if I can use my left.”

“Fine. I’ll drive.” She puts out her hands for the keys, but Isaac knows better than to let her have them.

“No. You’re drunk. Or worse.”

She glares at him. “Not worse.”

“No? Looked like it was about to get that way.”

“Don’t you dare lecture me!”

Isaac backs off. He knows that was out of line. “I’ll get an Uber,” he says. “I can pick up my car tomorrow.”

The app says their ride is three minutes away, which, as always, means ten. They watch people come and go from the house. Neighbors peer angrily out of windows. One comes to his porch and begins yelling at Isaac and Ivy, as if waiting by the curb makes them the official ambassadors of the party.

“If this doesn’t stop, I’m calling the police!”

“Be my guest, moron,” says Ivy, and Isaac raps her to shut her up. Their Uber can’t get here fast enough.

Finally, it arrives, and they slip in the back, Isaac putting too much weight on his foot again and grunting from the pain.

“You didn’t save me, you know,” Ivy tells him as they head off. “I would have left on my own. Eventually.”

Isaac nods, choosing to believe her but wishing it came without effort.

Now they sit there in awkward silence, their dynamic going back to normal.

Ivy smirks. “The look on Craig’s face when you tossed his stash was classic. Like you took a dump in his Froot Loops.”

Isaac, even through the pain, can't help but smile, too. Ivy leans over, rests her head on Isaac's shoulder, and closes her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says. And he can tell she means it. Although neither of them is sure what it is she's sorry for.

Ivy truly believes she would have left on her own. Even though she's never left a party before they released the proverbial hounds and threw everyone out. Believing something that you know is not true is *Ivy's* superpower.

When they arrive home, she decides to walk in the door ahead of Isaac. She turns on the light, fully expecting to find their parents waiting for them in the dark. That's how things work in this house. It's a three-stage progression. Stage one: her parents explode after realizing she snuck out the window. Stage two: they blame each other's parenting fails for seven to twelve minutes. Stage three: an hour of solitary brooding, where her father will retreat to his computer, while her mom invents household tasks that don't actually exist, like alphabetizing kitchen spices or pairing other people's socks. Stage five: at least one of them will sit in the living room in the dark, monitoring every sound from outside and each passing headlight until Ivy comes home.

Since Isaac got her fairly early, it hasn't reached the darkened room stage yet. Instead, her father steps out from the kitchen. He's already built up plenty of potential energy, and the look in his eyes tells Ivy it's about to go kinetic.

"Good evening, *Father*," Ivy says, trying to sound ironic and light, but instead it comes off as snarky. Well, the sooner she gets him yelling, the sooner this can be over.

Her mother comes out from the bathroom. Ah—so it’s an ambush. The only family member missing is Grandma, who’s been living with them for the past year. She’s wise enough not to embroil herself in the drama.

“Care to explain yourself?” Ivy’s mother asks her, but looks to Isaac instead. He’s an easier read than she is.

Ivy prepares to respond, but before she has the chance, Isaac blurts out, “I was on my way back from Shelby’s and figured I’d grab Ivy from the movies.”

It’s not an unbelievable lie. That is, if Ivy weren’t wobbling, still majorly buzzed. She wonders if they saw the Uber drop them off. Oh, the rabbit hole of explanations ahead.

Isaac tries to hide his limp as he crosses the room, but almost trips. Their father is there to support him. “You okay?”

“I . . . twisted my ankle at practice this afternoon. It’s nothing.” But if there’s anything that Ivy has learned, it’s that parents always know when you’re lying. Even if you’re just lying to yourself.

And so to prove his ankle is a non-issue, Isaac walks on it again, and he almost goes down. Ivy silently wonders if her boyfriend’s redeeming parts come anywhere close to outweighing his unredeeming ones.

“That looks pretty bad . . .,” their father says.

“I’m fine, Dad,” Isaac says with just enough exasperation. “I’ll go ice it, okay?”

Then their mother zeroes in on Isaac’s forehead. “Is that blood?”

And although part of Ivy is glad that the interrogation has been turned entirely to Isaac, it also pisses her off that her

brother's boo-boos have completely blasted Ivy out of her parents' minds.

"I went to a party," Ivy says without flinching. "Isaac came to bring me home. He's like that because he beat up Craig."

If she was going to tell the truth, she might as well make Isaac look good in the process and give their father the satisfaction of knowing that Craig not only got beaten up but by his son, no less.

And now the negative attention has turned back to Ivy. Their mother starts haranguing Ivy about broken promises and patterns of bad behavior until she exhausts herself and shakes her head woefully. It's the expression Ivy hates the most. That *you-disappointed-us-again-and-guess-what? We're-not-even-surprised* look.

"Ivy, I honestly don't know what we're going to do with you," she says.

"Why do you have to do anything? Why can't you just, for once, leave me alone?"

But they can't. She knows they can't. This is, after all, their job.

Then her father drops the boom. "We're making an appointment for you to see Dr. Torres."

"No!" says Ivy. "I am not a child—I will not go to a kiddie shrink!" Ivy would much rather choose her own humiliation than swallow theirs. Dr. Torres has a mural with Winnie-the-Pooh in a pharmacist's robe.

"Well, you're going to see someone. All this self-medicating isn't doing you any favors."

Self-medicating. Ivy wonders when drinking with your

friends became clinical. Ivy hates the idea of having to go see some sweater-vested pencil-neck “professional” with a cheaply framed diploma. But what if it’s the only way to avoid harder action? She knows a kid who knows a kid who got dragged out of their home in the middle of the night and taken to one of those forced labor camps for unruly teens. Would her parents do something like that to her? At this point in her life, she has no idea.

Isaac has slipped away from the scene. She hears him in the kitchen getting ice, but their fridge has a sadistic ice dispenser that hurls ice everywhere but where you want it to go. She finds Isaac kneeling in pain, trying to pick ice up off the floor. She helps him gather the remaining cubes and put them into a Ziploc.

“Shoulda used crushed,” she said. “Or a bag of frozen peas.”

“Crushed would be a bigger mess, and peas would be a waste of food—and you know how Mom is about wasted anything lately.”

“Yeah,” says Ivy. “Especially wasted me.”

She hopes it might bring a smile from Isaac, but it doesn’t. Maybe he’s just in too much pain. “They’ll get over it by morning,” he says. “They just needed to vent.”

Maybe so. But Ivy’s not sure she’ll be over it. And that doesn’t just mean the hangover.