

**FROM THE DEAD:**

**Augustine's Story**

FROM THE DEAD: AUGUSTINE'S STORY  
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## 1. *A Cinematic Experience*

Late Sunday night. Shady Ave.

To the average passerby, it must have looked suspicious. Perhaps a drug deal. A little money changing hands. A bit of small town shady business.

The weather hardly warranted the trench coat, and the way he kept one hand tucked beneath its layers as though holding something he couldn't be seen with—drugs, money, a weapon—didn't help matters any.

Then there was the other one, the one waiting for him near the curb watching him cross the quiet street. It was a toss-up—whether his feet or his eyes were more shifty. While wearing tension like a full body cast, he managed to fit the profile of the rebellious middle-class teen to a T. From the shoulder-length hair to the earrings and leather cord necklace, from the polo shirt to the bare feet in deck shoes, he was declaring his conformity to the non-conformists everywhere.

Personally, I thought he was okay. I liked him about as much as I liked anyone.

It really was too hot for the coat. I was sweating, which only increased my irritability.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“The theater.” Webster took hold of my shoulder and pointed with his flip phone. I gave his hand an irritated glance. “I swear I thought it was gonna kill me. The thing’s *huge*, Rib, gigantically, insanely *huuuuge*. It tore up the seats like they were bloody pillows or something!”

“You can’t say ‘bloody,’” I said, removing his hand. “You’re not European.”

“No? I thought I pulled it off.”

“You didn’t.”

He contemplated that for all of half-a-second. Then he said, “Man, this thing’s a friggin’ house with legs and fur. It’s *huuuuge*.” Webster stepped back and spread his hands wide to demonstrate just how huge this *huuuuge* thing was. I wished I could take his measurements literally—Webster’s reach was little over five feet from fingertip to fingertip and would, in all likelihood, never get any longer. At sixteen, a year younger than me, he already had bushy sideburns and a thick soul patch beneath his lower lip; I, however, rarely needed a razor except when a particularly obstinate package needed to be opened.

Webster dropped his arms but kept talking. “I was just cleaning up after the movie—being real careful to do a good job, too, man—when I thought I heard somethin’ outside the side door. It sounded like a—”

“Later, Webster. Right now just tell me what to expect when I go in.” If I let him, Webster would talk until Earth really was billions of years old.

“You’re going in there? You crazy?”

“If you didn’t want me to go in, why’d you call me?”

Webster blinked. “Uh, I don’t know. . . . I guess I thought, you know, everyone says you’re into this weird stuff, right? I’m mean, I’ve

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seen those weird books you get from the library, right? And it's not like I'm gonna call the cops and go, 'Hey, there's like this gigantic monster tearing up the Town Hall Theatre. I swear this ain't no crank call wanna come check it out?' . . . I didn't know what to do, so I thought of you, thought that if *that* thing is real, then maybe the stuff you're always reading is, too. Thought maybe you've learned some hocus pocus stuff and—"

"Hocus pocus," I repeated.

"Yeah, like, a little chanting and abracadabra—poof, it's gone."

"Of course you did."

"So . . . you're really going in there?"

"Yeah," I said, making a casual hand gesture. "It's nothing."

A deep, bone-vibrating roar drew our attention back toward the Town Hall Theatre. From across the street, I thought I saw the glass doors tremble in their casings. I hoped he was too distracted to notice me gulp. "Webster, I think it's time you went home."

"I'm going to lose my job," he moaned.

"No you're not. Go home."

"Man, I just got this gig, too. When they see the mess, they're going to fire me so fast—"

"*Webster!*"

He looked up at me. "What?"

"Go. Home."

He glanced at the theater again just as another roar ripped through the night, clearly aiding his decision along. "Uh, right. Good luck, Rib!" He gave my back a hard smack of encouragement before running off toward State Route 26, Lowville's main street.

I wondered how far he'd get before he remembered leaving his car in the parking lot around back.

Once Webster rounded the corner, I checked the street for traffic. All was clear. I withdrew a sheathed katana from under my coat and jaywalked across. Upon reaching the front of the theater, I passed through a set of doors marked with little rectangles of red tape to keep people from running into the glass.

The Town Hall Theatre was a locally owned movie hall boasting just one big screen. Much of the building's atmosphere stemmed from its pre-motion picture days as an opera house, and despite some necessary modernizing, the old-fashioned interior still displayed a simple beauty from another time.

Ceiling lights the color of sulfur created shadows around the snack counter to my left, where the posted prices also appeared as from another age—candy for less than a dollar, who'd have thought it still possible? I briefly considered helping myself to some leftover popcorn; the smell tempted me, but the putrid fumes emanating from the direction of the movie hall quickly soured my stomach. The ongoing destruction sounded vicious now that I was inside, and I hadn't been mistaken when I'd seen the front doors tremble. The entire building periodically shook from the crazed roar of whatever occupied the central chamber.

A small corner room to my right displayed framed posters of Coming Attractions. Velvet ropes threaded through golden stands divided the room into two aisles, one for the coming, one for the going. Maroon walls, dark red carpet, dim lighting—I loved this place. It had style.

Left-handed, I drew the katana in direct violation of Japanese tradition. Then I crossed between the perpetually open, darkly stained doors of the corner room and edged toward the theater, sticking tight to the wall.

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I eased my head around the threshold, wanting to glimpse Webster's monster before committing myself. Three short partitions, separated only by the aisles, obstructed my view of the theater chamber but did nothing to hide the extent of the damage.

An hour ago the old opera house's central chamber had been a pleasantly quaint movie theater—murals depicting Native Americans painted high on the walls, long beautiful curtains hanging to either side of the big screen, smaller versions covering the emergency exits, a high, curved ceiling, gently sloping aisles—but no longer. Now the walls were scarred with numerous gouges. In some places the tracks led all the way up to the ceiling, while others ended where chunks of plaster had broken free. Row upon row of seats had been mutilated, the fabric shredded and the metal frames twisted. One of the exit signs dangled from loose wiring near the leftmost exit where it gave off the occasional spark, and, near it, the movie screen lay like a fallen sail over the deck of a ship.

Poor Webster. My pretend optimism had backfired once again. His job was indeed good-as-gone.

Dust particles and cushion stuffing clouded the air throughout the room, dimming the already dull yellow light. As I scanned the area for Webster's monster, I tried to resist the urge to sneeze. And failed. Twice.

I guessed I'd lost the element of surprise, but still I saw nothing and nothing revealed itself after the sneezes; the odor I'd noticed earlier, however, remained. My intuition assured me that the beast remained with it.

Tension prickled its way up my spine. It's touch was ice. Before fear could dig deeper, I took a step into the open.

"Where are you?" I demanded.

I hadn't expected an answer, but I got one. Not five feet in front of me I heard a rumble. It sounded like rocks wrapped in velvet being ground together. It came from behind the five-foot partition.

I licked my lips as I edged closer. It was impossible to move silently with the plaster from the walls and ceiling strewn everywhere. Still, I did what I could, sliding my lead foot over the floor to sweep away the smaller pieces while avoiding the bigger chunks altogether.

Steadily, I encroached on the divider. My ears hunted for any trace of noise without success. The stench was overpowering; it threatened to make my eyes water.

*Come on, growl, one more time. Even a little one.*

I wanted something to home in on, some confirmation of its exact location. Just because I hadn't heard it move didn't mean it hadn't.

Slowly, I inched the hardwood sheath out over the partition. It shook minutely with nerves. For several seconds I waited, breath shallow but silent through pursed lips. Nothing happened. Did that mean it was safe to look? I wasn't convinced. I didn't want my reasonably attractive face mauled because it belonged to an idiot—that would be a disservice to a world full of pretty girls—so I wiggled the sheath, then waved it back and forth, all to no avail.

An image of a piranhaesque creature invaded my mind. It waited on the other side of the barrier with a toothy grin, biding its time until the stupid boy dipped his head in the fish bowl.

Angling the katana along my line of sight, I gave the partition a rap with the empty sheath, ready to spear whatever popped up.

It happened too fast. I had no chance.

A blur shot up and yanked me forward, slamming my chest into the barrier. The sheath exploded with a *crunch!* and tore free from my grasp. There were a few smaller snaps as my hand went numb.

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I managed a half-hearted stab before I backpedaled, tucking my injured hand against my body as though it were a broken wing. My body bumped a wall. I swept the room for movement, working my eyes and sword in unison. Where my breathing had been shallow and fast before, it now came and went in gusts of excited energy.

I risked a glance at my hand. The last two fingers of my right hand hung at a grotesque angle. The scabbard must have broken them when it was wrenched away. I felt a bizarre flash of relief—I'd half expected to see bleeding stumps where fingers should have been. Broken bones I could handle.

I slid along the wall until I could see down one of the aisles.

She padded out from between two rows of chairs near the fallen movie screen, her head lowered between her shoulder blades. Webster had gotten her size about right. On all fours, her shoulders were wider than my own and as high as my waist. She was a chocolate bulldog with the worst case of mange I'd ever seen. Clumps of fur were missing all over her body, oozing sores covered her skin, and rotten flesh hung from her like pictures I'd seen of survivors of the Hiroshima bombing.

Pain and insanity filled the beast's eyes in equal measure. Malice was a close runner-up.

Webster had also been right to call her a monster. Unnaturally forceful vocal abilities and claw marks on the ceiling aside, a normal dog this sick shouldn't even be able to stand. That being said, it would be a shame to kill her when I should have just called a vet.

I took a step toward her.

The beast's lips peeled back in a snarl, revealing rot-blackened teeth. Saliva, darkened by bleeding gums, dripped onto the carpet from both corners of her mouth. Strange how I got the impression she didn't like me.

In blatant disregard of my hurt feelings, I took a second step forward.

She snorted in warning and made a quick two-step in my direction. Her lips peeled back further. A steady rumbling rose from inside her throat, putting me more on edge.

“You’re not so big,” I told her.

That’s when she decided to stand upright. Barefoot, I top out at 6’2”. In hiking boot like I now wore, I stood over 6’3” (6’4” if you counted to the peak of my artfully disheveled blonde hair). The monster’s eyes glowered at me from nearly a foot above mine. Her shoulders were hunched like a lineman’s while she pawed the air, spreading and closing seriously clawed forelegs. Bulging muscles, supported by a network of standout green-blue veins, formed her underbelly and looked as hard and gray as granite. A line of drool bobbed from her black lips, keeping time with her bellowing breaths.

My shoulders sagged. “Right.”

The dog dropped her forelegs onto an end chair and clamped her teeth over the backrest. The metal screeched in painful protest. With no apparent effort, she tore a manhole-sized piece of shrapnel from the chair. Her head whipped in my direction as she let fly.

Disbelief slowed my reaction enough that all I managed was a small side-step. The missile missed me by an inch. My coat wasn’t so lucky. It billowed open as I moved and was stapled to the wall.

I tried to tug the piece of metal free, but it was buried too deeply in the wall and the pain in my broken fingers flared up too much to ignore. I didn’t dare let go of the katana to make a second attempt with my good hand.

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When I glanced over my shoulder, the beast was no longer there. It didn't take a rocket scientist to predict where she had gone. The surprise was in how fast she got there.

As I spun away from the wall, I slashed through the leather coat and dropped into a backward roll. The dog was already in mid-leap. She flew over me; I cut at her heels but missed. She landed ten feet away, sinking claws into the carpet and peeling it back as she slid, trying to pivot.

I ran. Her frustrated bark followed—if you could call it that. It left me feeling shell-shocked and wondering if my ears would leak blood, but it didn't slow my sprint for the exit niche to the right of the movie screen.

Partway down the aisles, I glanced back and saw her rounding the partition. She was just too bloody fast!

Without slowing I altered my course. I leapt onto the nearest armrest and cut a diagonal line across the seats, hopping from one armrest to the next, praying that she'd have more difficulty keeping up this way. It took all of my concentration to avoid falling, especially when random sections of seats would wiggle, having loosened or lost the screws connecting them to the floor over the years.

One long stride covered half the distance from the last row of seats to the curtained exit niche. When I reached the curtain, I turned.

The dog had gotten stuck only a few rows in. Her paws scrambled for purchase, creating more horrible sounds as her claws scratched and tore through the metal. After a few seconds' struggle, she found enough purchase to push off and eventually work her way back to the aisle. There, she paused, perhaps to consider the easiest killing route. She ended up spinning away, circling the partition again, and

coming down the outside aisle rather than risk getting tangled up in the fallen movie screen.

Twenty feet away from me, she stopped. There was a large chunk of broken plaster on the floor between us. Tracks led about a dozen feet up the wall to where there was a hole of missing plaster.

“I wish I’d seen that,” I told her.

She sprang across the gap between us, hitting the wall between the fallen plaster and its hole and kicking off toward me. She would have crashed down on me had I remained where I’d been, but I was already diving beneath the curtained exit.

Before I could roll to my feet, though, the monster reached the exit nook. The curtain rod tore free from the threshold and came down over the beast’s head as it landed over me.

I raised the tip of the katana a split-second before we collided and rammed the point into her abdomen. Her stench was atrocious, gag-worthy, especially once her blood started flowing over my hands and chest. I felt her shudder as I twisted the sword in place. With a furious shake of her head, she freed herself of the curtain. Hate-filled black eyes locked on me and widened. Before she could dip her head to bite, I used every ounce of strength to flip the beast onto her side, employing the katana as a lever.

I got kicked for my efforts, which I suppose worked out better than getting my head nipped off, but when I landed on the first row of theater seats ten feet from where I’d been, it was hard to see the good in the exchange. As I worked my way upright, I could only hope that I had slowed her down some, too.

The first thing I saw when I turned back toward the exit niche were her dark eyes narrowed into slits. The beast was studying me. Carefully. Cautiously.

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Well, I was probably looking at her the same way. It seemed we had earned a grudging respect from one another; the only difference being that time was on my side. I wasn't the one profusely bleeding. I wondered how much longer the demon inside could hold her together with such an injury.

Keeping the beast in sight, I used a nearby seat cushion to wipe my blade clean. Blood was a corrosive agent to steel, and this creature's blood might be more corrosive than most. I couldn't afford to have my sword's effectiveness compromised.

That done, I sidled over to the open space near the front of the room, trampling the movie screen underfoot. The beast padded out of the exit niche. She watched me from the corner of her eye. Her tail swept back and forth, hovering just above the ground.

"Care to tell me why you're here?"

She gave me a better view of her teeth and gums.

"Pretty."

The beast continued to circle slowly near the far aisle. She made a *chuffing* noise pass through her nose.

I think she was laughing at me.

Then, abruptly, the monstrosity changed course. Her claws dug in, pivoting then pouncing with such force that she left gouges in the concrete.

Though not entirely unexpected, I couldn't believe the speed with which she moved. Even waiting for the attack, knowing it would come and watching for it, I couldn't react fast enough.

She came in low this time, not allowing me to get beneath her again. I only had time to level the katana against her charge, forcing her to swat the blade aside or impale herself. I had hoped she'd get tangled in the screen, but it just shredded beneath her like rice paper.

Her forepaw nearly swiped the sword from my hand.

I hung on as she bowled me over, coming closer than I liked with her snapping jaws. The smell of death and decay washed over me again. Frantically I tried to roll sideways and back to my feet, but the beast didn't relent. I only had one foot under me before she shouldered into me and knocked me down again.

Claws extended like retractable blades, the monster tried to disembowel me as it followed. I made an awkward slash with the katana and sheared off half a forepaw, but then she pinned me with what was left of the foreleg—my stomach knotted just to keep the pressure from crushing my insides. It hurt. She was exerting a great deal of force and I could barely draw breath.

As she raised her other forepaw with clear intent, I rammed the sword up through her jaw. Her strike never came. Her body stiffened briefly before going limp and toppling onto its side.

I didn't move. I was content to just lie there, breathing hard, glad to be alive.

## 2. Shovel Walking

After returning the katana to my car, I buried the dog's carcass in a residential garden. It was slow going, as tired as I was and nursing broken fingers, but it had to be done. Afterward, I headed back to the parking lot behind the Town Hall Theatre, wearily dragging the shovel along, thankful that no one had seen—

“Rib?”

I froze like Bambi in headlights. I've had a lot of practice being caught red-handed and acting innocent, but, man, for some reason I could never pull it off around one person. And I could recognize that individual's contemptuous tone like I'd recognize my own mother's voice—okay, in may case that statement's not an accurate analogy, but in most cases the comparison works. Hopefully most people have shared a closer relationship with their mothers than I.

“Joni,” I croaked, “you're out late.”

She was behind me. I didn't turn around.

“And unlike me, I'm sure you're up to no good. What's the shovel for?”

“Oh that? . . . Nothing.” *Well, that was convincing.*

“Just out walking your shovel?”

The obvious reference to dog walking was a bit unnerving. For a moment, I had this insane idea that she knew exactly what I'd been up to. I'd read somewhere that demons can't read minds, but girls on the

other hand . . .

“Uh, *nooo*,” I said, injecting as much scorn as I could.

“Why won’t you look at me? Guilty conscience?”

“Or appropriately fearful of Medusa’s spell?”

“Am I that repulsive to you?” she asked flatly. Before I could think of something to get me out of that mess, she said, “Good! I hope I am, because I wouldn’t want someone as despicable as you thinking anything positive about me. When I see you, I can taste bile in my throat.”

I couldn’t feel the shovel in my hand or even the pain from my injuries any longer. They were overshadowed. My throat constricted. I didn’t trust myself to speak or turn. My eyes bored holes into the sidewalk but I wasn’t seeing that either.

Joni Redman had every right to hate me. *I still hated me for what I had done.*

Needing to be away, I resumed my walk. Joni must have remained where she had stepped out behind me; her voice sounded more distant when she asked, “What happened to your coat? Goodness, Rib, what *have* you been up to?”

*Please, just let me go, Joni. Just leave me alone.*

But she never could leave well enough alone. I heard her quick steps to catch up before I felt her grab my wrist.

Finally I spun, snapping harshly, “Go away, Joni!”

She had my wrist trapped. She raised her other hand as if she were going to touch my broken fingers. “What happened to your hand? . . . And what is that *smell*? It’s *awful*.”

I jerked my hand from her grip, igniting a fresh burst of pain but not caring. “Mind your own business. For once in your life, just get lost, will you?”

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Joni studied my fingers for a moment then took in my unkempt appearance with one measured sweep of her eyes. Finished, she stared back at me.

*God, why'd You have to make her look like that.*

Big eyes the color of brown sugar regarded me from within her smooth oval face. As she considered what to make of my current state of disrepair, she absently swept a few locks of dark brown hair behind her ear.

I couldn't hold the fierceness in my gaze any better than I could deceive her. I was the first to break eye contact, turning my head to look out over the dark street. Nothing short of knocking her out would get me away from her now, and I wasn't quite prepared for that yet. All I could do was ride this out, wait until her curiosity was either satisfied or had given in.

"They're broken," she said.

"Thank you for the diagnosis, doc."

"You need to see one. I think a couple of the bones need to be set. How'd this happen?"

Times like these I wished I still believed in the morality of a good lie. Instead, I said nothing.

"Rib. How did this happen?"

The stars were out tonight. *Was that the Big or Little Dipper?* Those constellations confused me constantly. Orion's belt was the only one I could repeatedly recognize.

"Stop ignoring me. Were you fighting again?" I glanced at her but shouldn't have. Joni's eyes widened, as though suddenly realizing the truth. "You *were* fighting, *weren't* you." I was an accusation, not a question. "How could you, after what happened—!"

"Do you really think I could possibly forget?" I shot back. Even

aware that our rising voices must be waking the whole neighborhood, I couldn't stop. Fury poured out of me, unrestrained. "You think I could ever forget what happened? I live with that every day of my life, even without your constant reminders. But I can't go back in time. I can't change what happened. If I could change things, if I could have taken her place, I *bloody well would have!*"

My chest rose and fell rapidly. From the corner of my vision, I found my index finger pointing emphatically down, no longer holding to the shovel. At some point in my outburst, I must have slammed it against the sidewalk—the blade and handle were no longer a singular item. Only splintered wood remained where the two pieces had once been bonded together. The pieces were several feet apart; the handle rested partly on the sidewalk and partly on a residential lawn, while the blade rocketed gently, balanced precariously on the curb.

Joni had retreated a couple of steps. Quietly, she said, "This is exactly what's gone wrong with you. Ever since your parents died, you've been angry at the world. You don't even try to control it. How many more people will you hurt before you stop?"

I decided I'd taken enough of this for one night. Snatching up the shovel parts, I turned on her and walked away, no longer concerned why she was out this late. I just needed to be somewhere else, somewhere I couldn't feel her and her endless judgement. Joni would never forgive me. She would never see past who I had been or what I had done.

This time she didn't follow. I reached my car and tossed the broken shovel into the trunk. Then I slipped behind the wheel, backed out of the parking space behind the Bateman (once a hotel, now mostly an apartment complex), slammed the GT into gear and shot onto State Street, leaving expensive amounts of rubber in wake of my passing.

### 3. *Pain*

I doused the headlights and cut the engine a few hundred yards from the Tomen's driveway. Two years ago my biological parents died, but I had been living with Todd and Emily Tomen long before that. Sheriff Todd and his wife were the only real parents I've ever known.

Our home was roughly three miles outside the village of Lowville, which put us in the midst of farm country. We had a modest house—three levels including the basement—and a two-stall garage at the end of a short blacktop driveway just big enough to justify the basketball hoop over the garage.

The Mustang GT was Todd's prized possession. He'd personally restored it in his off hours; it's how he unwound after work. Thankfully he never checked the mileage, otherwise I'd be busted and possibly imprisoned for my nightly excursions.

I coasted into the left stall and parked, sore and weary and glad to be home.

I clicked on the overhead light. It had hurt every time I'd shifted gears. Joni was probably right—the way my right pinky and ring finger were hanging, crooked and bent where there didn't used to be knuckles—they were going to need a bit of straightening. I wasn't relishing the prospect, but I figured it would be better to take care of them in the car where any noise escaping my lips would be muted.

At first I could hardly touch them. Man, they hurt. But after

some relaxing exercises, I'd calmed enough to block out the pain. I took my broken ring finger in my opposite hand. Then, all at once before I lost my nerve, I squeezed and pulled the bones back into alignment. Without pausing, and through blurry vision, I took hold of my pinky and repeated the process.

A tear slid down my cheek as I cradled the injured appendage against my chest. Resting my head against the steering wheel, I realized I was shaking. So much for blocking out the pain.

You might think I'd be used to it by now. I've known enough of it.

But pain is always painful. Pain hurts. Sometimes I can fool myself, sometimes I can hide from it or cover it in sarcasm, but however I bury it, it always breaks through my walls. Eventually I have to confront it, because when I don't, it just grows more persistent until I have no choice and it is all I can see.

I closed my eyes. Maybe I would rest here for a minute or two. . . . Just a minute . . .

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*"Hey, guys, look! If it ain't the loner!"*

*Terrific, I thought, lowering the book to my chest and looking up. My fifteen-year-old self was stretched out between two narrow rows of bookshelves, my feet propped on the second tier, my book bag doubling as a pillow. I had been counting on a little peace and quiet. Now they won't even leave me alone in the library.*

*"What's up, Rib? Doin' a little extra-cricklar reading?"*

*It was Homecoming Day and apparently the quarterback and entire offensive line shared my ninth period study hall. They sported their jerseys like pre-Thanksgiving Day turkeys, strutting around with their chests out, unaware that dinnertime approached.*

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*“Yeah, some extra-cricklar reading. Now, if you don’t mind . . .”*

*“What’s the matter, Rib? Don’t you want some cool kids to hang with?” Sonny gave my boot a kick, smiling stupidly. I didn’t see what girls saw in him. Sure, he’s a specimen of brute strength and good looks, but really, you can’t dress up dumb.*

*I looked forward to few things at school. My last period study hall was one of them and it annoyed me to lose it. I didn’t bother curbing my response. “Why, Sonny? You need someone to teach you to read? I mean, I am good and all, but I’m no miracle worker.”*

*“Oh . . . oh, you didn’t.”*

*“Oh . . . oh, I did. And as far as comebacks go—”*

*Finding the banter too challenging, Sonny grabbed a book and chucked it at me. I managed to deflect it with a forearm. As he reached for more ammunition, I hopped to my feet. “Too bad your receivers aren’t this close. You might actually complete a pass or two.” Then I covered my head as more books followed, his buddies joining in this time.*

*“Augustine, what are you doing?” the librarian called, horrified by the sound of flying books. The problem with being known as a habitual prankster—everyone just assumes you’re the one up to no good.*

*“Rib spilled his books, Mrs. Donaldson,” one of the varsity players said, as the librarian rounded her desk. “He’s clumsy.”*

*Mrs. Donaldson peeked around the wall of red shoulders. “Look at this mess. Those poor books, Augustine! Pick them up, right this instant!”*

*I didn’t bother to argue. Denial would have only earned me a lecture. I went about cleaning up the mess and kept my grumbling to a minimum. Mrs. Donaldson disappeared as I returned the first volumes*

*to their shelves and the varsity club moved off after her, promising to find me later.*

*I could hardly wait.*

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Some part of me was aware that I was dreaming, reliving past events as I always did in my sleep, but it didn't change the feel of things as they happened. If anything, it made things worse. I knew what was coming and, no matter how many times I relived the day, I could never change it.

Back then I was . . . someone else.

How I wished to return to those days and undo so many things.

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*I used to be cool. In fact, I used to be the in crowd, not just one of them. Maybe that's why they hated me so much now.*

*The football team and I shared a special bond. We had enjoyed a falling out after I'd lost my "cool" status and repaid a few slights with some underappreciated pranks—hard candy in the showerheads, glue and dye in the shampoo, itching powder in the jockstraps, laxatives in the anonymously donated "spirit cookies" and cellophane on the toilets, a few thousand ants deposited in various lockers, and, my personal favorite, a football frozen in a block of ice mysteriously placed in Sonny's locked locker.*

*Perhaps it would have been wiser not to do it all in one day. Still, no one ever proved it was me. I, as it would happen, had several rock-solid alibis while a few cheerleaders found rather damaging evidence in their lockers. But they knew who was guilty—my reputation for practical jokes was widespread, and some of the girls I'd randomly chosen (mostly at random) to take the blame were obviously incapable of accomplishing my feats of brilliance.*

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*Enter the football team's desire to see my head on a pike (or yard marker—you know, whatever's handy).*

*That was a month ago. So far I had managed to keep my head attached, though there had been a few close calls and a good deal of threats. But I refused to bow down to them. I trusted my ability to take care of numero uno.*

*The appearance of Sonny and his goons in my study hall, however, did create an interesting complexity to the situation. I hung around the library for an extra ten minutes, giving them time to depart. But they waited. And when I headed for my locker, they stayed nearby as I collected my things.*

*“Don't you have places to be?” I asked without looking up. “Like somewhere that's not here?”*

*As if invited, the jersey-clad gang came over to stand around me, fencing me in. “Not today, Rib,” Sonny said. “Game isn't 'til tonight, so we thought we'd make a sophomore feel a little more welcome with the older high school crowd.”*

*“Sonny, you're a sophomore.” I straightened and faced him, leaving my books on the floor. Only a few other sophomores stood tall enough to go eye-to-eye with Sonny, but they would have backed down whereas I felt the situation called for further taunting. “So you can understand this, I'll confine myself to one syllable words. . . . Get lost, or else.”*

*Sonny glanced around, and that's when I noticed—too late—the lack of activity in the hall. His left hand bunched up my tee-shirt as he slammed me against the open locker door. The ridges dug into my back. He brought his right forefinger up and tapped me on the nose.*

*“Someone needs to be more appreciative.”*

*I considered biting off his finger then and there, which probably wouldn't have even affected his passing ability. “Don't do that. I don't know where that's been.”*

*“Boy, you really must have a death wish.” He looked truly perplexed.*

*I wanted to respond again, but my lips seemed to compress of their own accord. Had the words hit a nerve? I didn't know what to make of this. It felt as though I'd been sucker punched.*

*And that suddenly seemed like a good idea. So I gave him everything I had, delivering an uppercut to his ribcage. My foot dug in, my hips pivoted, and my hand struck with the entire weight of my body behind it. The bigger two knuckles drove in deep. His ribs flexed and I felt something pop, and I knew at least one had broken. He crumpled holding his side, too startled to immediately cry out. Later, he'd be too busy trying to breathe.*

*It took a moment for Sonny's buddies to react. They were used to protecting him on the field, but usually their intimidating presence provided enough deterrence off the field. When they saw their leader drop, they stiffened with indecision.*

*I had to make the most of their surprise. I needed an exit strategy.*

*The smallest of the linemen crouched to my left, preparing for a tackle. About the time Sonny started to make unintelligible noises, I dropped low and swept my heel into the lineman's ankle, hoping to put him flat on his back. Unfortunately for him, he just stumbled and caught himself on the row of lockers. I adjusted by re-cocking my leg*

FROM THE DEAD

*and ramming my boot between the uprights.*

*I scrambled up and over him as he toppled, wishing he'd warn his jockstrap to school. One of his teammates managed to grab my collar, which slowed me until the fabric tore and slipped from his grasp. I regained my balance and flew down the hallway.*

*Mr. Conway, drawn out by the football players' shouts, stepped into the hall. He immediately jumped back to avoid a collision.*

*"Hey, stop that before you get someone killed!"*

*"Sorry!"*

*I turned the corner—*

*—and collided with Kristen Divine. Her head bounced off my chest and rebounded off the floor with a dull whack as she went down, her book bag landing in her lap. I did what I could not to trample her but somehow got twisted up in the bag's strap. When I fell, my knee cracked into the tiled floor before I could catch myself on hands and elbows.*

*I started to say something impolite to Kristen but bit off the words when I realized she wasn't getting up.*

*"Kristen?"*

*I shook her shoulder, gently at first, while nervously glancing back for the football team.*

*"Come on, Kristen. I gotta go."*

*Her eyes were open yet vacant.*

*This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be real. Mr. Conway's words rang in my ears like a sick prophecy.*

*I could have gotten away, but any desire to flee was gone. Horrified by Kristen's continued motionlessness, I made no effort to*

*protect myself. Hands violently wrenched me to my feet and hurled me against the wall. There, a varsity player held me in place while the pummeling began.*

*My eyes stayed locked on Kristen until one closed up and the other blurred too much to see.*

*Not once had she moved.*

*I could smell my own blood. I could taste it and feel it coating my teeth—a tangy metallic syrup.*

*Someone swept my legs out from under me as the hands holding me let go, toppling me onto my side.*

*Somewhere in the background other panicky voices joined Mr. Conway's insistent pleas to "Please, stop!"*

*No one was listening.*

*I absorbed a few more kicks before one landed against my temple and ended the pain, opening the floodgates to welcomed darkness.*