

SYNOPSIS: Brynn is a sixteen-year-old living in the rural town of Minton, Pennsylvania. Born with spina bifida, a birth defect that makes her use crutches, she was raised by her late mother's brother, Jeremy. He is the town's funeral director, a job that has cultivated a morbid curiosity within Brynn. After working a shift at Jeremy's workplace, Brynn comes home and finds his limp body. He has overdosed on opioids and is now in a coma. At first, Brynn refuses to believe the secret her uncle has been keeping. But after he wakes up, he confirms her worst suspicions. Because the coma impacted his speech and motor skills, Jeremy doesn't want Brynn to be burdened by taking care of him. He calls his friend and someone he knows Brynn finds interesting, Cassandra, to watch over Brynn as he goes to rehab. Brynn is defiant and suspicious, but eventually agrees. As a medical examiner who services rural counties in Western Pennsylvania, Cassandra lives out of her van for ease of commuting between autopsies. This has always intrigued Brynn, but the first autopsy Cassandra brings her on is an opioid overdose case, which sends Brynn into a panic where she shuts herself off. While initially rude to Cassandra, the two slowly get on better terms as they travel around. When Christmas rolls about, they visit Jeremy's rehab center as a surprise. However, he is not there, nor has he ever been. The location of his phone says he is in Philadelphia, which is also Cassandra's hometown. Brynn is once again upset at Jeremy's lies and wants to find him, but Cassandra is apprehensive. At first, she blames it on the distance, but it becomes clear that she has a messy past that she has been trying to escape. Under her mask of niceness, Cassandra has been hiding her emotionally manipulative ex-husband and strict, immigrant parents who ostracize her for the divorce. After promising to solely look for Jeremy, Cassandra agrees to drive there. They grow even closer as Cassandra shows Brynn her childhood. However, through that, Cassandra accidentally slips that Brynn's mother, May, might not actually be dead. May had been addicted to opioids during her

pregnancy, possibly causing Brynn's birth defect, and fled town after Brynn was born. Her current situation is unknown. Shocked and upset, Brynn is compelled to search for May as well, but they remain focused on Jeremy. In the end, they find him in an unsavory part of town, with the puzzle partly solved. Jeremy helps with the rest, revealing that he has been selling his prescription opioids to pay off Brynn's spina bifida hospitalization fees, but his buyer recently overdosed. Not sure what to do, and more in debt than ever, he went to Philadelphia to sell to the buyers of his buyer, which failed. He also might've seen May but is unsure. Brynn and Cassandra force him onto the van, where he promises to go to rehab for good, and they all return to Minton.

Unzipped (Excerpt)

The messy medicine cabinet from the night of the overdose was still there. Even though Brynn was cleaning the entire house for Uncle Jeremy's return, she saved the kitchen for the end. Overturned orange pill bottles littered the tiled ground, and the scene she had discovered six days ago suddenly made so much sense. As she lined each bottle back up, she absentmindedly checked the labels. Most of them were for her own myriad of spina bifida-related health conditions, but there was one bottle of Oxycodone filled for a Marcus Alastair. She exhaled quietly. There had to be a simple explanation for the apparent stranger's medication, although she didn't like the one her brain was concocting.

Brynn arrived at the hospital fifteen minutes early. Just two forms to fill out, then Jeremy was free to leave the building he had spent the last week in. His gait was still a little slow and tentative from the coma, but Brynn made sure to keep an eye on him as they walked to the car. After a quick drive, they were in front of the one-story, beige house that they called home. She opened the front door with a grandiose flourish.

"Flowers? Chickadee, you didn't have to," Jeremy said, greeted by fresh roses on the coffee table.

"How else am I going to welcome you home?" Brynn walked over to the kitchen, grabbing a quart of lemon ice cream from the freezer. After scooping two bowls, she reached for the spoons, but the bottle of Oxycodone caught her eye first. Now might've been a time for celebration, but she needed answers too.

Solely leaning on her left crutch, Brynn used her right hand to carry one of the bowls to the living room. She repeated the process with the other bowl, then joined Jeremy on the couch.

He was making very deliberate movements to spoon the ice cream into his mouth, which ultimately became a room temperature soup before he finished. They were both silent; only the occasional clang of metal against ceramic could be heard.

“I was looking through the medicine cabinet,” Brynn finally said. She had wanted to wait longer, as to not overwhelm the man who was grasping his spoon like a toddler, but finishing her own bowl of ice cream left her with the desire to fill the silence.

Jeremy nodded, unconcerned.

“Who’s Marcus Alastair?” she asked.

Upon the name drop, Jeremy stopped eating. He slowly placed his bowl on the coffee table.

“Oh, him? That’s um...” He leaned forward and started tapping on the table rapidly with his index finger, wearing the same pained expression that Brynn was getting used to seeing, whether she liked it or not.

“Sorry, it’s okay. Brynn put a reassuring, but slightly tense, hand on his shoulder. “We can try a different question. Can I ask about the...?”

He nodded.

“How did it happen?” At the hospital, Brynn had tried to keep Jeremy’s spirits up by steering clear of the incident, but they were home now. Plus, she had just given ice cream to the man, so it was fair game.

There was a moment of pensive staring into space before he answered. “I guess I had, I had built up a...” His voice trailed off, getting lost in the words that he couldn’t find.

“Tolerance?”

“Tolerance, thanks. I didn’t realize how many pills I took.” His words seemed stilted and calculated, but Brynn tried blaming it on his mental state.

“And all of the pills were from the doctor, legally?”

“Yes,” he said slowly.

“Jeremy?”

He looked down, interested in his fidgeting fingers.

As much as Brynn wanted to, she had watched too many news stories to let the blissful ignorance overtake her. “Can you tell me that you’ve never taken anything illegal?” The words were a little more forceful this time.

Silence.

“Look, I just want to know the truth. I don’t care what you did, but—”

“No.” Jeremy’s voice was barely a whisper.

“What?”

“There are...there are things I haven’t told you. I don’t know how to say this, but it’s better to keep it that way.” Jeremy looked up to meet Brynn’s eyes, his own watering. “I’m trying to protect you. Things are...c...complicated, have been for a while.”

Brynn took a deep breath. “How long has this...”

“It’s been a while.”

The two sat in an uncomfortable silence. As much as Brynn wanted to reassure Jeremy, to tell him that everything was alright and that she forgave him, she didn’t know if she could convince someone with words she didn’t fully believe.

“Why’d you lied to me?” she finally asked, the bitter words forcing their way out through her clenched teeth.

“You’re upset, I know. I should have dealt with it all long ago, but I was lying to myself too. Thought I could handle it.”

“I just, I don’t know. How? Why? You could’ve gotten yourself killed! Then what, huh?”

“Brynn, I regret my ac...ctions, okay? I want to give you answers, but you’ll just have to trust me that it’s better this way.”

“Trust you? Ah, that’s real funny, coming from the addict.”

Jeremy flinched at the word. “I haven’t changed.”

“Sure.”

More silence, but Jeremy broke it first.

“I’ll try to g...get help, but I think I need to be by myself for a while,” he said. “Things might get ugly, and I just, I... don’t want you to see me like that.”

“So you want me to just sit here idly hoping you don’t OD again?”

“No, that’s the last thing I want. It’s winter break right? I’ll find someone to look after you.”

Brynn just stared at him, eyebrows furrowed. She opened her mouth to speak, but a light bulb went off in Jeremy’s mind first. “You know what?” he continued. “I’ll call Cassandra. You’ve always wanted to see what she does, and I’m sure she’ll have n...no problem with you tagging along for a bit.”

Under normal circumstances, Brynn would have had to suppress the urge to smile. Under normal circumstances, anywhere outside of Minton, Pennsylvania would be amazing, especially if she got to shadow Cassandra, a close friend of Jeremy’s who happened to hold Brynn’s dream job: being a medical examiner. However, the past ten minutes had been full of Jeremy withholding the truth, and she couldn’t help but sense some sort of ulterior motive.

Brynn exhaled quickly. “I’m sorry, but I’m not leaving,” she said, her words cold and firm. “I just got you back, to this house, to some semblance of normalcy, and you can’t just push me out of it like that.”

“What normalcy Brynn? You just f...found out that your uncle has been hopped up on opioids for the last eight years—”

“Eight?”

“You said you, you wanted answers. There’s one. Anyways, sorry to burst...b..burst your bubble, but this is who I am.” Jeremy raised his voice, yelling now. “It’s not some magic trick where I can just snap a finger and instantly get to your definition of better.”

His words hung in the air, heavy.

“But you want it to be,” Brynn whispered at last.

“What?”

“You want it to be a magic trick. I leave, I come back, and voila, you’re better. Then it’s like nothing ever happened. That’s what it is isn’t it?”

“M...maybe? I told you I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Yeah, you’re starting to sound like a broken record, but I still don’t buy it.”

“Please, Brynn, just two weeks?”

Jeremy reached a hand out to gently touch Brynn’s arm, but she shouldered it away. “I can help you pack if you—”

“No.” Brynn disappeared into her room, slamming the door in finality. It didn’t produce as satisfying a sound as she had wanted though. At last, she was alone, and could mull through her thoughts without a constant barrage of excuses. Flopping onto her bed, she let everything Jeremy had said swirl around in her mind, but nothing was painting a cohesive picture.

Regardless, she didn't concede enough to start packing. Maybe a mental break would help, but as she scrolled through her phone, a large clang from the kitchen interrupted her Instagram feed. She listened, but there was only silence. A tingling smidge of worry ran through her stomach, but eventually a faint mutter of expletives followed.

"You alright?" Brynn yelled through the closed door.

"Yup. I'm as right as rain," Jeremy replied, although his voice seemed strained and hesitant.

Brynn scrambled out of her room. From the hallway, she could hear the rapid splashing of water. A wall of oregano hit her nostrils as she entered the kitchen, immediately noticing the hundreds of cooked spaghetti noodles squiggled along the ground and an overturned stock pot. Jeremy was hunched over the sink, frantically splashing water on his arm.

"Holy crap, what happened?" Brynn asked.

"Oh, nothing," Jeremy looked up, surprised. He quickly turned off the water.

"Well obviously it's not nothing. Lemme see." Brynn carefully made her way over to the sink, trying to avoid the minefield of fallen carbs. However, it was near impossible, and the leftover pasta water soaked into her socks as she squished her way through. Once next to Jeremy, she could see a bright red rash beginning to develop on his right forearm. It was shiny and blistering slightly, although the former could have been from the deluge he was pouring on top of it.

"This is not nothing." Brynn said, grabbing Jeremy's arm. She immediately headed over to the medicine cabinet, rummaging around for some ointment. The tube she procured hadn't been touched in years, but regardless, she squeezed a large dollop of white cream into her palm, then gingerly applied it to his arm.

“I was trying, I was trying to m...make some spaghetti,” Jeremy said as Brynn looked up from the arm expectantly.

“Well I can see that genius,” she said, then lowered her voice. “Was this because of the, y’know?”

Jeremy hesitated, then nodded. “I know what I want to do, but I just...” he said frustrated, waving his hand.

“Can’t, yeah. Well, I’ll clean it up, then you can—”

“No, let me do it.”

“It’s fine.”

“Is it really?” Jeremy’s pained eyes tried to make contact with Brynn’s, but she was avoiding his gaze, instead looking at the laminate counter. “I know what y...you’re thinking. That this whole...” Jeremy searched for the word, then resigned to just gesturing at his head. “This whole...situation is my fault to begin with.”

“No it’s—” Brynn started to say, but Jeremy’s bitter glance unearthed the little nugget of truth. “I don’t know. Maybe? I just don’t like seeing you struggling like this.”

“I know. I’m sorry chickadee.” He paused, swallowing. “Also, I called Cassandra. She said she could come by tomorrow and—”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Brynn sighed. “I don’t...never mind. Do you really think this will help you?”

“I’m hoping,” Jeremy turned away, walking over the roll of paper towels by the stove and grabbing aggressive handfuls. Then, he returned to the fallen pasta and knelt down, carefully trying to wipe it up. Brynn used her crutches to nudge the trash can closer, and together, the two silently transferred the soaking globs of noodle-towel into the black, plastic container. When all

trace of the wreckage was gone, aside from the slight dent on the pot, Brynn found two cans of bean soup and spoons from the pantry. She was about to slide them over to Jeremy, but realized it was safer for her to wield the can opener.

The next ten minutes were filled with the soft scraping of metal against metal as they both focused on their cold soup. Brynn finished first, but she walked straight past her room and made beeline for Jeremy's instead.

“Hey, what’re you doing?” he asked.

“I need a bag. Those are important for packing, right?”