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"Sir?" she repeats. "How soon do you want it to get there?"

I rub two fingers, hard, over my left eyebrow. The throbbing has become intense. "It doesn't matter," I say.

The clerk takes the package. The same shoebox that sat on my porch less than twenty-four hours ago; rewrapped in a brown paper bag, sealed with clear packing tape, exactly as I had received it. But now addressed with a new name. The next name on Hannah Baker's list.

"Baker's dozen," I mumble. Then I feel disgusted for even noticing it.

"Excuse me?"

I shake my head. "How much is it?"

She places the box on a rubber pad, then punches a sequence on her keypad.

I set my cup of gas-station coffee on the counter and glance at the screen. I pull a few bills from my wallet, dig some coins out of my pocket, and place my money on the counter.

"I don't think the coffee's kicked in yet," she says. "You're missing a dollar."

I hand over the extra dollar, then rub the sleep from my eyes. The coffee's lukewarm when I take a sip, making it harder to gulp down. But I need to wake up somehow.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's best to get through the day half-asleep. Maybe that's the only way to get through today.

"It should arrive at this address tomorrow," she says. "Maybe the day after tomorrow." Then she drops the box into a cart behind her.

I should have waited till after school. I should have given Jenny one final day of peace.

Though she doesn't deserve it.

When she gets home tomorrow, or the next day, she'll find a package on her doorstep. Or if her mom or dad or someone else gets there first, maybe she'll find it on her bed. And she'll be excited. I was excited. A package with no return address? Did they forget, or was it intentional? Maybe from a secret admirer?

"Do you want your receipt?" the clerk asks.

I shake my head.

A small printer clicks one out anyway. I watch her tear the slip across the serrated plastic and drop it into a wastebasket.

There's only one post office in town. I wonder if the same clerk helped the other people on the list, those who got this package before me. Did they keep their receipts as sick souvenirs? Tuck them in their underwear drawers? Pin them up on corkboards?

I almost ask for my receipt back. I almost say, "I'm sorry, can I have it after all?" As a reminder.

But if I wanted a reminder, I could've made copies of the tapes or saved the map. But I never want to hear those tapes again, though her voice will never leave my head. And the houses, the streets, and the high school will always be there to remind me.

It's out of my control now. The package is on its way. I leave the post office without the receipt.

Deep behind my left eyebrow, my head is still pounding. Every swallow tastes sour, and the closer I get to school, the closer I come to collapsing.

I want to collapse. I want to fall on the sidewalk right there and drag myself into the ivy. Because just beyond the ivy the sidewalk curves, following the outside of the school parking lot. It cuts through the front lawn and into the main building. It leads through the front doors and turns into a hallway, which meanders between rows of lockers

and classrooms on both sides, finally entering the always-open door to first period.

At the front of the room, facing the students, will be the desk of Mr. Porter. He'll be the last to receive a package with no return address. And in the middle of the room, one desk to the left, will be the desk of Hannah Baker.

Empty.

YESTERDAY
ONE HOUR AFTER SCHOOL

A shoebox-sized package is propped against the front door at an angle. Our front door has a tiny slot to shove mail through, but anything thicker than a bar of soap gets left outside. A hurried scribble on the wrapping addresses the package to Clay Jensen, so I pick it up and head inside.

I take the package into the kitchen and set it on the counter. I slide open the junk drawer and pull out a pair of scissors. Then I run a scissor blade around the package and lift off its top. Inside the shoebox is a rolled-up tube of bubble-wrap. I unroll that and discover seven loose audiotapes.

Each tape has a dark blue number painted in the upper right-hand corner, possibly with nail polish. Each side has

its own number. One and two on the first tape, three and four on the next, five and six, and so on. The last tape has a thirteen on one side, but nothing on the back.

Who would send me a shoebox full of audiotapes? No one listens to tapes anymore. Do I even have a way to play them?

The garage! The stereo on the workbench. My dad bought it at a yard sale for almost nothing. It's old, so he doesn't care if it gets coated with sawdust or splattered with paint. And best of all, it plays tapes.

I drag a stool in front of the workbench, drop my backpack to the floor, then sit down. I press Eject on the player. A plastic door eases open and I slide in the first tape.

CASSETTE 1: SIDE A

▶

Hello, boys and girls. Hannah Baker here. Live and in stereo.

I don't believe it.

No return engagements. No encore. And this time, absolutely no requests.

No. I can't believe it. Hannah Baker killed herself.

I hope you're ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why.

What? No!

I'm not saying which tape brings you into the story. But fear not, if you received this lovely little box, your name will pop up . . . I promise.

Now, why would a dead girl lie?

Hey! That sounds like a joke. Why would a dead girl lie? Answer: Because she can't stand up.

Is this some kind of twisted suicide note?

Go ahead. Laugh.

Oh well. I thought it was funny.

Before Hannah died, she recorded a bunch of tapes. Why?

The rules are pretty simple. There are only two. Rule number one: You listen. Number two: You pass it on. Hopefully, neither one will be easy for you.

"What's that you're playing?"

"Mom!"

I scramble for the stereo, hitting several buttons all at once.



"Mom, you scared me," I say. "It's nothing. A school project."

My go-to answer for anything. Staying out late? School project. Need extra money? School project. And now, the tapes of a girl. A girl who, two weeks ago, swallowed a handful of pills.

School project.

"Can I listen?" she asks.

"It's not mine," I say. I scrape the toe of my shoe against the concrete floor. "I'm helping a friend. It's for history. It's boring."

"Well, that's nice of you," she says. She leans over my shoulder and lifts a dusty rag, one of my old cloth diapers, to remove a tape measure hidden underneath. Then she kisses my forehead. "I'll leave you in peace."

I wait till the door clicks shut, then I place a finger over the Play button. My fingers, my hands, my arms, my neck, everything feels hollow. Not enough strength to press a single button on a stereo.

I pick up the cloth diaper and drape it over the shoebox to hide it from my eyes. I wish I'd never seen that box or the seven tapes inside it. Hitting Play that first time was easy. A piece of cake. I had no idea what I was about to hear.

But this time, it's one of the most frightening things I've ever done.

I turn the volume down and press Play.

▶

. . . one: You listen. Number two: You pass it on. Hopefully, neither one will be easy for you.

When you're done listening to all thirteen sides—because there are thirteen sides to every story—rewind the tapes, put them back in the box, and pass them on to whoever follows your little tale. And you, lucky number thirteen, you can take the tapes straight to hell. Depending on your religion, maybe I'll see you there.

In case you're tempted to break the rules, understand that

I did make a copy of these tapes. Those copies will be released in a very public manner if this package doesn't make it through all of you.

This was not a spur-of-the-moment decision.

Do not take me for granted . . . again.

No. There's no way she could think that.

You are being watched.

II

My stomach squeezes in on itself, ready to make me throw up if I let it. Nearby, a plastic bucket sits upside-down on a footstool. In two strides, if I need to, I can reach the handle and flip it over.

I hardly knew Hannah Baker. I mean, I wanted to. I wanted to know her more than I had the chance. Over the summer, we worked together at the movie theater. And not long ago, at a party, we made out. But we never had the chance to get closer. And not once did I take her for granted. Not once.

These tapes shouldn't be here. Not with me. It has to be a mistake.

Or a terrible joke.

I pull the trash can across the floor. Although I checked it once already, I check the wrapping again. A return address has got to be here somewhere. Maybe I'm just overlooking it.

Hannah Baker's suicide tapes are getting passed around.

Someone made a copy and sent them to me as a joke. Tomorrow at school, someone will laugh when they see me, or they'll smirk and look away. And then I'll know.

And then? What will I do then?

I don't know.

▶

I almost forgot. If you're on my list, you should've received a map.

I let the wrapping fall back in the trash.

I'm on the list.

A few weeks ago, just days before Hannah took the pills, someone slipped an envelope through the vent of my locker. The outside of the envelope said: SAVE THIS—YOU'LL NEED IT in red felt-tip marker. Inside was a folded up map of the city. About a dozen red stars marked different areas around town.

In elementary school, we used those same chamber of commerce maps to learn about north, south, east, and west. Tiny blue numbers scattered around the map matched up with business names listed in the margins.

I kept Hannah's map in my backpack. I meant to show it around school to see if anyone else got one. To see if anyone knew what it meant. But over time, it slid beneath my textbooks and notebooks and I forgot all about it.

Till now.

Throughout the tapes, I'll be mentioning several spots around our beloved city for you to visit. I can't force you to go there, but if you'd like a little more insight, just head for the stars. Or, if you'd like, just throw the maps away and I'll never know.

As Hannah speaks through the dusty speakers, I feel the weight of my backpack pressing against my leg. Inside, crushed somewhere at the bottom, is her map.

Or maybe I will. I'm not actually sure how this whole dead thing works. Who knows, maybe I'm standing behind you right now.

I lean forward, propping my elbows on the workbench. I let my face fall into my hands and I slide my fingers back into unexpectedly damp hair.

I'm sorry. That wasn't fair.

Ready, Mr. Foley?

Justin Foley. A senior. He was Hannah's first kiss.

But why do I know that?

Justin, honey, you were my very first kiss. My very first hand to hold. But you were nothing more than an average guy. And I don't say that to be mean—I don't. There was just something about you that made me need to be your girlfriend. To this day I don't know exactly what that was. But it was there . . . and it was amazingly strong.

You don't know this, but two years ago when I was a freshman and you were a sophomore, I used to follow you

around. For sixth period, I worked in the attendance office, so I knew every one of your classes. I even photocopied your schedule, which I'm sure I still have here somewhere. And when they go through my belongings, they'll probably toss it away thinking a freshman crush has no relevance. But does it?

For me, yes, it does. I went back as far as you to find an introduction to my story. And this really is where it begins.

So where am I on this list, among these stories? Second? Third? Does it get worse as it goes along? She said lucky number thirteen could take the tapes to hell.

When you reach the end of these tapes, Justin, I hope you'll understand your role in all of this. Because it may seem like a small role now, but it matters. In the end, everything matters.

Betrayal. It's one of the worst feelings.

I know you didn't mean to let me down. In fact, most of you listening probably had no idea what you were doing—what you were truly doing.

What was I doing, Hannah? Because I honestly have no idea. That night, if it's the night I'm thinking of, was just as strange for me as it was for you. Maybe more so, since I still have no idea what the hell happened.

Our first red star can be found at C-4. Take your finger over to C and drop it down to 4. That's right, like Battleship. When you're done with this tape, you should go

there. We only lived in that house a short while, the summer before my freshman year, but it's where we lived when we first came to town.

And it's where I first saw you, Justin. Maybe you'll remember. You were in love with my friend Kat. School was still two months away, and Kat was the only person I knew because she lived right next door. She told me you were all over her the previous year. Not literally all over her—just staring and accidentally bumping into her in the halls.

I mean, those were accidents, right?

Kat told me that at the end-of-school dance, you finally found the nerve to do more than stare and bump into her. The two of you danced every slow song together. And soon, she told me, she was going to let you kiss her. The very first kiss of her life. What an honor!

The stories must be bad. Really bad. That's the only reason the tapes are passing on from one person to the next. Out of fear.

Why would you want to mail out a bunch of tapes blaming you in a suicide? You wouldn't. But Hannah wants us, those of us on the list, to hear what she has to say. And we'll do what she says, passing the tapes on, if only to keep them away from people not on the list.

"The list." It sounds like a secret club. An exclusive club.

And for some reason, I'm in it.

I wanted to see what you looked like, Justin, so we called

you from my house and told you to come over. We called from my house because Kat didn't want you to know where she lived . . . well, not yet . . . even though her house was right next door.

You were playing ball—I don't know if it was basketball, baseball, or what—but you couldn't come over until later. So we waited.

Basketball. A lot of us played that summer, hoping to make the JV team as freshmen. Justin, only a sophomore, had a spot waiting for him on varsity. So a lot of us played ball with him in hopes of picking up skills over the summer. And some of us did.

While some of us, unfortunately, did not.

We sat in my front bay window, talking for hours, when all of a sudden you and one of your friends—hi, Zach!—came walking up the street.

Zach? Zach Dempsey? The only time I've seen Zach with Hannah, even momentarily, was the night I first met her.

Two streets meet in front of my old house like an upside-down T, *so you were walking up the middle of the road toward us.*

II

Wait. Wait. I need to think.

I pick at a speck of dry orange paint on the workbench. Why am I listening to this? I mean, why put myself through

this? Why not just pop the tape out of the stereo and throw the entire box of them in the trash?

I swallow hard. Tears sting at the corners of my eyes.

Because it's Hannah's voice. A voice I thought I'd never hear again. I can't throw that away.

And because of the rules. I look at the shoebox hidden beneath the cloth diaper. Hannah said she made a copy of each of these tapes. But *what if she didn't? Maybe if the* tapes stop, if I don't pass them on, that's it. It's over. Nothing happens.

But what if there's something on these tapes that could hurt me? What if it's not a trick? Then a second set of tapes will be released. That's what she said. And everyone will hear what's on them.

The spot of paint flakes off like a scab.

Who's willing to test her bluff?