

I stared at the picture of my brother underneath the headline.

Local boy's body found in park after suspected of being buried at least a month.

This wasn't possible. My brother couldn't possibly be dead. I had seen him two weeks ago. My parents made him come home to stay with me for Christmas break while they went to Jamaica. I know I didn't want to believe this, but another reason why it bothered me some much was because of the letter I had found this morning. I had woken up to find a white envelope with my name on it written in my brother's perfect handwriting taped to the mirror on the back of my bedroom door. When I opened it I was shocked by what it had said.

Jessica,

I'm not really sure how to tell you this so I'm just going come out and say it. I'm running away from home. Don't tell mom, she'll figure out I'm not coming home in a different way. I'll be 18 in a month so I'm practically an adult and I'm sick of all of mom and dad's rules. I want to make a name for myself and there's no way I can do it living here in Monroe. I'm not going to tell you where I'm going, only that it's not too far away and it's with on old friend. I'm not taking anything with me besides the \$300 I got for Christmas and my birthday and my lucky baseball cap. I'm going to need to come back in a few weeks to retrieve more of my things and your going to have to help me so mom and dad don't see me. I'll mail you that information later. I'm really going to miss you Jessica. I'm going to miss having our pumpkin carving contests and I'm going to miss our annual family camp out. But more importantly, I'm going to miss spending every day with the best sister in the world. I hope

you are not mad that I'm leaving you and I want you to know that I will always love you

no matter where we both are in the crazy world.

Your brother,

Eric

This was crazy but I didn't really have time to think about that right now, I had to get ready for school. I set the newspaper down and walked over to the fridge and took out the eggs. I made myself some scrambled eggs and sat down to eat. While I ate I couldn't take my eyes off the picture of my supposedly dead brother in the newspaper. A million thoughts swirled through my mind as to how this could be possible.

My thoughts were interrupted by my mom coming downstairs humming some tune she had heard on the radio the other day. She was in her favorite pink and white striped robe that dad had given her before he left for Iraq. I also saw our new puppy Ellie walking right behind her. We got Ellie last month and my mom adores her. She takes her everywhere. I think it helps take her mind off of dad being gone. She sat down at the table across from me and grabbed the newspaper. I watched her face as she read the headline. Her usual early morning perkiness faded until her face was so white it looked like she had just seen a ghost.

"Mom?" I asked her.

Silence was all I got in response. She got up from the table, dropped the newspaper, and walked back upstairs. I felt really bad for my mom. First dad and now Eric. I thought about the letter. How could my brother have written me a letter when he was supposed to be dead? Either someone was pretending to be my brother or my brother really wasn't dead. I really hoped it was the second one.

The next few days of school were a blur. I couldn't stop thinking about Eric. I had tests in math, English and social studies that I'm sure I failed. During my presentation on slavery in American History, I forgot everything I was going to

say. I got called down to the office during lunch one day. I figured they had figured out that it was me who wrote some stuff on the walls in the girls bathroom. I was planning what my excuse would be as I rounded the last corner into the hall where the main office was. I had a pretty good story set in my head but when I stepped into the office, everything instantly slipped from my mind.

My mother was sitting in a chair with a dog crate next to her. She half-smiled at me and motioned for me to take the seat next to her. I sat down and asked her why she was here.

“Your principal called and asked me to come in to speak with him about your recent behavior,” my mom said.

“Oh ok,” was all I could say. I took my iPod out of my pocket, unwrapped the headphones and listened to music until Mrs. Harrison called us into the principal’s office.

“Hello Mr. Brown. How are you today?” my mother asked.

“I’m good, how about yourself?” replied Mr. Brown.

“Oh I’m not too bad. Why have you called us here today?”

“I need to speak with you about Jessica. Lately some of her teachers have said she’s not really participating in any class activities and has failed every test she’s taken,” he said. He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out my tests from the past week, all with a big red F on the top of the page.

My mother looked at the papers and then at me, a disappointed look on her face. I instantly felt a giant wave of guilt. I’d been trying so hard lately to make sure not to upset my mother. She has gone through a lot in the last few months and I’m sure my failing grades aren’t making it any better.

I put down my head and played with a loose string on my jacket while my mother and Mr. Brown discussed how I could make up the tests. I felt like I was sitting there for hours before my mother started to rise from her chair.

“Thank you for coming in Mrs. Monroe. Sorry for any inconveniences,” said Mr. Brown.

My mother responded with a half smile. She picked up the dog carrier and walked out of his office without saying another word. I followed her in silence,

looking at the tile pattern in the floor, making sure to only step on every other tile. I was so concentrated on the floor that I didn't notice my mother had stopped until I ran right into her.

"Sorry mom," I apologized.

"Oh uh it's fine," she said, her voice sounding distant.

"Are you ok mom? You seem a little upset," I asked.

"It's nothing," she replied instantly. "You better get going to class, wouldn't want you getting in any more trouble"

I walked through the empty halls to my next class, listening to the pat of my shoes on the tile floors. I walk into science class , hand my teacher the late slip the Ms. Harrison handed me on the way out of the main office, and take my seat. Science is useless. I don't pay attention at all and when my teacher Mr. Rogersen calls on my to answer a question about global warming, I just say something about needing to buy more dog food.

The rest of the day was no different. When I got home I flop onto the couch and notice something strange. The house was dead silent. Usually the TV is on with some weird movie my mother is watching and popcorn is being popped in the microwave, but right now it silent. I searched the entire house and found it empty. I went into the kitchen and made myself a snack when there was a knock on our front door. I opened the door to find an envelope with my name written on it in that perfect handwriting. I quickly picked it up and brought it inside.

I ripped it open and this it what it said,

Jessica,

I miss you. I wish I could come home but I can't. I'm going to need your help now getting some of my stuff. Please make sure mom isn't home when you do this so she doesn't get worried. Go into my room and take my old baseball bag in my closet and fill it with a few shirts from the top drawer of my dresser and some shorts from the second. Then go downstairs to the front door and open it, a man will be there, hand him the bag. I'm sorry I can't be there to see you but this is just the way things have to be right now.

*Your Brother,
Eric*

I put the letter back in the envelope and ran upstairs to my brother's room. I stood in the doorway for a minute taking in all the memories this room holds. The posters from all the concerts we went to together, his trophies from all the pie eating contests he used to compete in at the fairs, and his collection of baseball hats from all the teams he played on hung on the walls. No one had been in his room since the picture in the newspaper and I wasn't sure I wanted to yet.

I finally got the courage to and went to his closet and got his baseball bag. I filled it with the shirts and shorts like he had asked and then went downstairs. I was skeptical that a man would just be on our doorstep but I went to the door anyway. As my brother had said, a man was on our porch. Well I think it was a man. I couldn't see his face at all. He was wearing all black and had the hood from his sweatshirt over his face. He held out his hands for the bag and I reluctantly gave it to him. He left without a word.

I received more letters like this one for the next few weeks from my brother and I did everything they told me. I was starting to think that someone was just pretending to be my brother to get his stuff until I got one that changed my mind.

It was late March and I had just got home from school when I found the all too familiar envelope with my name on it taped to front door. I took it down and went inside. I didn't have to check to see if my mom was home anymore. She had gotten a job at a place that watches dogs while people are on vacation. She said she only took the job because she got to spend all day with Ellie and got paid for it.

I opened the letter and had to read it three times to convince myself it was true. My brother was alive.

Jessica,

Read this letter very carefully. I need one final favor from you. Tell mom that you

are going to sleep over at a friend's house and pack a bag that can last you a night. Come to Bayview Park by the mall in half an hour. Go to the play structure and wait by the slide. Come alone and make sure mom believes your story. I know you may not believe this is really me but you have to trust me and come to the meeting spot.

*Your Brother,
Eric*

I ran up to my room, grabbed a small duffel bag out of my closet and packed it quickly. I ran back downstairs, wrote a quick note to my mom about where I would be spending the night and headed to Bayview Park. When I got there I went to the the meeting spot and waiting for someone to show up. I figured it would be the same man all dressed in black so when I turned around and came face to face with my brother I let out a faint scream.

"Hey quiet down. I don't want anyone seeing me," said Eric.

It felt so good to hear his voice again. I gave him a huge hug and we stood like this for a few minutes before he pulled back and smiled.

"I missed you," I said. My voice suddenly sounding weak.

"I missed you too," he said. "Now come with me. The whole reason I asked you to come was to see someone."

As I followed him to a car he explained how he had been staying with a friend in town that ran the major newspaper in town and had run the article as a favor. He also told me that he had been the person who had come to the door every time but he didn't want to reveal himself yet. We stopped in front of a car that had blacked out windows. He opened the passenger side door and my jaw dropped. The person sitting in front of me was the last person I every thought I would see. I was looking at my dad. The dad that was supposed to be fighting in Iraq. He looked a little beat up but it was definitely my dad.

"Hi Jessica," he said. "I really missed you."

I couldn't control my emotions at that point and fell into his arms crying.

"I missed you too dad," I said through tears.