

DEAD PERFECT

P.G. SHRIVER

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DEDICATION

For anyone who never has been, but someday will be,
in love for eternity

And for everyone who already is

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CHAPTER 1

MEL

My eyes had squeezed shut during the spin; I pried them open.

Shooting pain brought a flash of blinks.

I should have kept them closed, because now I'll always have *that* image of my mother embedded in my mind.

A web of red crisscrossed her face.

I recalled one of my science teachers explaining that blood wasn't red until it was introduced to oxygen.

The thick, sticky, warm feeling of my mother's body juice where it touched my cheek nauseated me.

What really concerned me, right before my world went dark, wasn't the blood. I could tolerate seeing blood. It was the proximity of my body to my mother's. No worries about my own dripping, broken, scentless nose filled my thoughts. Since I was a child, I couldn't stand being this close to my mother; whenever she touched me, my skin crawled.

A painful shift of my pupils showed me that her eyes moved beneath lightly closed lids. She inhaled, exhaled; I felt it on my chin over the pain. So, she was only unconscious. I could live with that. She had spent most of our quality time that way.

Still, tiny bugs swept across my skin.

I felt like one of those olives in the jar, the

green ones that she sometimes put in her martinis, our bodies squeezed so tightly a fork couldn't pull us free.

The biting odor of her vodka breath seeped into my open mouth. Instinctively, the taste crinkled my nose. A small cry of pain escaped my lips.

Too late to change my mind, the pain assailed me.

The last mental picture before darkness descended on me was Mom and I swimming around in a giant martini glass, pinned together by a toothpick. I think a chuckle even crept up my throat.

Darkness.

CHAPTER 2

When light fought back the gray behind my lids, my eyes opened to ceiling tiles, bright lights and floating heads speaking an incoherent language. I couldn't move my head. People hovered. Darkness crept at the edge of my vision, weaving in and around the talking heads; I let it consume them and take me back to oblivion.

The prickling of light speckled my shaded lids again, so I worked the heaviness out of the thick blinds and forced them open. My head moved freely this time. Ugly green walls, pale yellow light, and that ceiling full of tiles told me I was in a hospital room, not to mention the antiseptic smell.

No pain pierced when I blinked or crinkled or moved.

Thank you pain meds.

No doctors or nurses or family bordered my bed.

This certainly couldn't be how Sleeping Beauty felt after her prince awakened her, and she slept much longer than I had. Of course, something crucial to that plan was missing: my prince.

Muffled voices drifted in from the hallway through the sliver of opening in my door. When I focused my attention on them, I could hear the speech as clear as if it were happening next to my bed.

"No... no... the mother's right here in this room. No... she didn't make it. No... "

My ear drums closed. "What? My mother's dead?" I mouthed. They were talking about *my* mother. A whirlpool of emotions twisted my heart.

The part of me that loved her wanted to let loose a scream of mourning.

The part of me that hated her wanted to plant my feet on the bed and jump up and down.

I read somewhere drunk drivers in most cases survived car accidents, while their passengers died.

I became aware of a warm, dampness sliding down my cheek as the pieces of the morning I ended up here sifted through my memory:

"Mother! Slow down! The school's only eight blocks away!" Tidy white houses with manicured lawns, leaving trees, and various street signs blurred the corner of my vision as my words of warning rushed out in one breath.

"I'm not worried about you being late! I can't be late!" she shot the stupid look at me. I hate when she does that! The raised brows, the head jerk in my direction, and the half snarl really made me feel the way she intended. Anger burst forth followed by a hot lava of words.

"Well... if you wouldn't stay up so late drink..." as angry as her stupid look made me, I stopped the flow.

I was so tired of fighting all the time!

Just keep your mouth shut until you get to school! Then you can complain to your best friends.

"What are you saying Miss-Know-It-All? I'm a drunk?" she turned her twisted, angry face towards me.

Her olive tinted iris' spewed pimento veins toward the corners and met mine, the wrinkles around them slightly smoothing. Below those bloodshot eyes, dark circles formed, small half moons of abuse. She looked so old.

Behind that haggard face, I saw it.

Through the driver's side window, it barreled toward us.

The glance over my shoulder confirmed that my mother had just sped through a two way stop.

The impact of the dump truck careened my nose into my mother's shoulder.

The first rotation of the car cracked my head into the passenger window.

The car spun.

My brain swam against it.

The spinning seemed to go on forever.

Nausea filled my empty stomach.

Wordlessly, I begged the car to stop.

Finally, a telephone pole drew the car to it like a magnet and smashed us to a stop. Because the dump truck clobbered the left side, and the telephone pole bent the right side, I was closer to my mother than I had been in years, closer than I ever wanted to be.

The hospital no longer had a reason to hold me hostage. I turned eighteen in December, so there was no need to seek out social services or my addict father to sign me out, not like they could find him.

I watched through the open door of the room as a doctor plucked my chart, flipped to the last page, signed off, and then I left. As I had learned in Driver's Ed, the car insurance picked up the hospital tab.

While I exited, the hospital doors opened to a pregnant woman in a wheel chair, her husband in a panic beside her, and I slipped by them... alone. The image of the new family made me cry, their happiness evident. How very different from the day I was born, I assured myself.

A black Hearst awaited me. I ducked into the gloomy silence filling the front seat; the funeral home driver glanced in the mirror at my mother's body tucked away in a black bag in the back. His dark hair and somber features fit the role. I wondered what Ruthie would do if she met him.

The driver shivered.

He must be new to the job. For some deeply satisfying reason, that thought made me smile.

Why would you work for a funeral home if you freaked out over dead bodies?

The funeral home loomed before us, and the driver pulled up under the archway where two guys met us to remove the black bag in the back.

I don't remember talking about the preparations. The funeral home's morbidity brought battle to my heart; my tears lost. Certain the receptionist didn't understand my lack of emotion during this tragic event, I smiled broadly at her on my way out the door; her expression didn't change. *What a horrible place to work*, I thought, unless you could creep out

the new people.

The driver dropped me off at home on his way back to the hospital; no body filled the space in the back this time. I assured him I could walk the three blocks home, but he wouldn't listen. As the Hearst rolled to a stop in front of my house, I opened the door. The car hadn't stopped completely and I flinched awaiting Mom's slap. She must have loved me to an extent if she didn't want me falling out of a moving vehicle to get squished by the tires, yet not, if she would risk my life by drinking and driving.

There was no slap.

The driver pulled two potted plants from the back and placed them on the porch, then silently walked away. I thanked him for the ride, but he just shook his head. Those people were always so quiet. I couldn't understand that. I mean, you're not going to scare the dead by talking loudly, right?

Respect, I guessed.

Sadness swept over me as his solemn figure drove away in the black vehicle. I would have taken a cab, but I had no choice. I didn't have any money. There never was any money in the house. It always went to booze. Even the Bank of Mel, where safety deposit boxes held socks and underwear, was broke. No matter what clever place I hid babysitting money, or birthday money, the magic house chewed it, swallowed it and spit it back out into a new full glass bottle, capped it, and left it on the counter for Mom. I was slightly curious that Grandma and Grandpa hadn't picked me up, but then, that's why they

call it "estranged."

Dawning crashed like that dump truck into my mind: I had no money at all! How was I going to live and finish my senior year?

I couldn't drop out; I was so close to finishing. I was at the top of the class! I had worked so hard to escape to college and live my own life away from my mother! Now what?

During my lonely years in middle school, I would have jumped at the chance to walk away from school and never return, but then school had been a bullied struggle. It was always difficult for people my age to accept me. Since we moved here, though, last summer, and I started attending Parkville High, I had actually made friends I could talk to on my level without being judged. They understood me, spoke my language. We seldom had disagreements.

We were our own little clique this year, although each of us was very different from the others, and all of us would have accepted anyone else into our little group. Everywhere we went, we had a blast! A devious smile crossed my lips as I recalled last weekend at the mall... guy watching.

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