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*What Could Have Been*

He was supposed to be home for dinner that evening. It had been six months since he last saw his parents, and he was so excited to tell them about all the new friends he made. He wanted to let them know how well he was doing in his classes, and how he should have trusted them when they said it was all going to be okay. He wanted to tell them about his newfound interests and hobbies. Above all, he desperately wanted to hug both of them to let them know everything was going to be okay—until it wasn't. Five seconds. Five seconds is all it took to have all of that stripped from him, and he was left with nothing.

The radio was turned to a comfortable volume, there was a beautiful red and orange hue in the distance as the sun was setting, and the roads were virtually empty. He had been on the highway for two hours now and he was anxious to finally see his family. He was almost impatient at this point. Earlier that morning, a surprising text from his parents told him that his brother was flying in to visit him as well. The thought of seeing his brother for the first time in over a year makes his palms suddenly feel glued to the steering wheel with anxious sweat. He just wants to be home. More than anything.

Glancing over at his phone, which now reads thirty-eight minutes to arrival, he sees a text from his friend back at school. He wonders if it's about the exam they took the other day—the one that drained him mentally and would determine if he would pass the class or not. He knew he could just check the text when he got home, and that it might even be about something completely unrelated, but he *needed* to know if he passed or not. His focus shifted from the road, he opened his text messages, and clicked on the conversation with his friend. Scanning the

message, he found it to be no surprise that it was regarding the test. His mind was carefully processing the words when—as if the power in his whole world suddenly went out—everything went dark.

It was the kind of dark people experience when their eyes close to the sudden feeling of becoming immersed in water, or after plunging into a deep sleep and dreams propel them away from reality. Only this time, there was no coming back. He had made a seemingly insignificant choice that ended up changing the entire course of his life. Everything that his future held disappeared in a split second.

The red hue of the disappearing sun changed to a starry night lit up by the glimmer of the moon, and the atmosphere of fresh evening air turned sad and smoke-filled. Two fingers pressed on his neck by the paramedic confirms the devastation. No pulse, and no life. It all vanished because of a test score. The questions to answer: Did that test score matter more than seeing his parents for the first time in six months? Did it matter more than being with his brother for the first time in over a year? Did it matter more than living out the rest of his life?

He was so close to being home.

To being safe and in the welcoming arms of his family.

To being able to tell them all about his life so far at his new school.

To avoiding this tragedy.

Yet, the five-second decision to look at his phone instead of the road cost him more than that. It cost him his life. The agonizing pain that his family and friends will experience is impossible to describe. Yet, the worst part of the whole story is that he wanted to do one thing: *arrive alive*.