

DELETED SCENE: Ryan totals his car

In its early drafts, FOLLOWING CHELSEA was written with alternating points of view—the story was told by both Anna (the “leading lady”) and Ryan (Chelsea’s grieving boyfriend).

Ryan didn’t cope well after Chelsea died. He suffered panic attacks, and at times he was totally unhinged and reckless. Here’s a deleted scene from Ryan’s point of view. It takes place about a month after Chelsea died.

Totalled. An absolute write-off. Ryan surveys the remnants of his Mustang GT. The roof is crushed, both side windows gone. From the one working headlight, a beam shoots into the silent forest until it slams into a fir tree. He rolled once, maybe twice, after his tires grabbed the rut at the edge of the road. Never saw the rut. It’s hard to see the road at all when you’re bawling your f***ing eyes out.

He ducks back into the car. Feels around in bits of glass until his hand closes over his cell phone on the floor in the back. Climbs up to the road and hits a button on the phone. It works. Car’s destroyed, but the stupid phone still works. He punches in 9-1-1 and tries to explain to the operator which of the myriad criss-crossing logging roads he thinks he’s on, then sinks onto the dusty gravel. Watches bats flit between treetops. Turns to peer into the darkness when something rustles leaves and snaps twigs nearby. Waits an eternity before he hears sirens, and another before he sees the flashing lights.

He’s fine. He told the operator he didn’t need an ambulance. Judging by his car he should be dead, or at least maimed, but he’s fine. Would maybe have a bruise from the seatbelt. That’s it. Bloody airbag didn’t even fire, and he’s still kicking.

When he forced the driver door open and crawled out onto the underbrush, one thing became clear: death had something against him. *I’ll take your loved ones, but there’s no way I’m claiming you.* The Grim Reaper could be a real a**hole.

He gets up. Thinks about waving his arms as the vehicles approach, but doesn’t. A patrol car and an ambulance drive past him, stop, then back up and cut their engines. Ryan fishes his wallet from his back pocket. Hands his license to the cop before he asks for it.

“You Dr. Sutherland’s kid?” The cop passes his license back. Ryan nods. “Had anything to drink tonight, Ryan?”

“No.”

“How fast were you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are you doing way out here?”

He shrugs. What *was* he doing way out here? “Nothing.”

The paramedic leads him to the back of the ambulance. Peers into his eyes with a light. Wraps a blood pressure cuff around his arm.

“You’re lucky, kid,” he says.

Right. Luckiest guy alive.

The paramedic checks for broken bones, for blood, for whatever should be there after a high-speed rollover. “We’ll take you in to get checked, just to be safe.”

Dr. Chan examines him at the hospital. It’s a pointless waste of time, but Ryan puts up with the questions and the pokes and prods anyway, just to keep everyone happy. Hears again how lucky he is. It’s not until he takes the cup of water a nurse offers that he realizes his hands are shaking.

The Mustang was a birthday present from his parents. That, or a pre-emptive bribe. *See how responsible we think you are? Now don’t you dare let us down.* They’d probably been counting on the Mustang Effect lasting more than a few months. Probably hoped Ryan would at least make it through the summer, maybe even through twelfth grade, before they needed to dip into their vault of parental wisdom again. They clearly hadn’t figured on Ryan screwing up his entire life before the summer even began.

And they wouldn’t have figured on this, either.

Ryan’s dad pushes through the double doors and glances around the curtained-off sections of the Emergency Room. His eyes meet Ryan’s. Ryan raises a hand in greeting. Moves to hop off the gurney but stops when his dad turns away. Watches Dr. Chan and his father talk about him beside the nurses’ station.

His dad strides back across the room, pausing to glare at Ryan and jerk his head in the direction of the exit. Doesn't say a word until they're pulling out of the parking lot.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Nice. Thanks for caring.

“By morning, the whole town will have heard about this.”

Ryan tunes out the lecture. Peers through the side window at the darkened homes of his neighbors. Wonders how everyone can sleep while chaos rages so damn loudly. Feels a wave rising. His heart pounding. The air vanishing.

Why is there no air? Where the f*** is the air? He needs to breathe. Tries. Tries again. Tries harder. *Come on!*

His dad's voice. Distant. Foggy. “Relax, Ryan. Breathe.” A hand on his shoulder. “Nice and easy. Relax.”

The dashboard comes into focus. He rests his head in his hands. Feels the sweat on his forehead. Waits for his heart to quit racing.

The car isn't moving. They're stopped in the middle of the deserted street.

“You're going to have to pull it together, Ryan.”

Pull it together. If he could pull it together, he wouldn't be racing down logging roads at two in the morning, trying to outrun his nightmares. As if that were possible. The Mustang was fast, but not that fast.