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PATTY BLOUNT

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*For my mom, Marie Moreno (1941–2012),
who first showed me the magic that lives in books*

CHAPTER

Starting Again...Again

A punch to the jaw wasn't how I imagined starting my first day at another new school, but fate had a warped sense of humor.

As a big jock pinned a skinny nerd to the dusty hood of a Civic, I wondered how I, a guy famous for *causing* a tragedy, was now the only person around to prevent one. I scanned the parking lot, but it was deserted except for the two guys locked in a tense clinch and me. If I'd left a minute later or gotten stuck at one more traffic light, I could have been just another kid on the cafeteria line, hearing the buzz. "Hey, did you hear about the fight in the parking lot this morning?" Instead, I was the skinny kid's only hope.

Can you say "ironic"? an annoying voice asked in my mind. *Suppose you plan to swoop in and save this kid or something.*

On a rising tide of panic, I realized I had no other choice. The skinny kid looked ready to pee his pants.

The voice in my head snorted. *You're an idiot.*

I rolled my eyes but didn't bother saying anything out loud. Engaging the voice in conversation only amped up its determination to annoy the crap out of me.

You have two options, the voice said. Do something or do nothing.

Yeah. Thanks for that probing insight. With a loud sigh, I cursed my luck and the god who took such perverted delight in twisting it. I guess suffering the kind of trauma I had probably caused some mental health issues.

Probably?

Okay, I amended with an eye roll, definitely some mental health issues. As long as I didn't actually listen to a thing the voice told me to do, I wasn't technically crazy, right? I didn't need *help*, especially the kind that comes from a little white pill or, worse, a mandatory hospital stay. I had it under control.

Dude, be smart. You break up this fight, you're making an enemy, and you can't afford that, not if you want to keep your secret. Just ignore it.

For most people, the little voice in their heads was the voice of reason, a conscience or something. But mine was more like a mirror that reflected the things about me I wished nobody could ever see. He said to ignore it because he knew I'd want to more than anything else in the world.

Because he knew I *couldn't*.

"You're a loser, Dellerman! Always were, always will be."

Cruel words, words I'd heard—worse—words I'd used dozens of times struck the kid called Dellerman, making him flinch.

I grabbed the door handle.

Don't do it, man.

Save your breath. We both already knew that I would. I lived with one kid's blood on my hands. I couldn't handle one more.

The jock was built like some prehistoric caveman, all protruding facial bones and muscle. Lots of muscle. He hauled Dellerman off the Civic's hood by the kid's shirt and shook him. The tendons in Dellerman's thin neck popped into view as he struggled. I opened my car door, rehearsing how I'd tell my parents why we'd have to move *again* after what I was about to do.

You think saving this one is gonna make up for the one you killed?

The words pounded a stake through my heart. I shook it off with a don't-you-get-it laugh. I was hoping to save three, not one. Forgiveness was too much to ask for, and I understood that. But maybe a bit of mercy wasn't. If I did enough good things, maybe I wouldn't spend eternity barbecuing over an open pit in hell. Sure, I didn't want to see this Dellerman kid beaten up, but I also hoped to spare the caveman from the regrets that kicked my ass every damn day.

The caveman would probably not understand my decision to butt in. Okay, he *definitely* wouldn't understand. But eventually, everybody looks back on the stuff they used to do and winces. For most people, that regret doesn't set in until some milestone birthday, but for me, it happened when I was thirteen and a judge sentenced me to nine months in juvenile detention. I'd regretted a lot of stuff since then.

"I'm saving us all," I said, too loud. Captain Caveman spun at the sound of my voice as I shoved out of my car. He appraised me but didn't release Dellerman. He wasn't as tall as me; I knew he was considering his chances. He didn't know they weren't very good.

"Who the hell are you?"

I shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Just leave the kid alone and I'll leave you alone."

He taunted me with lips curled into a mocking grin and a bring-it-on wiggle of his fingers. "Oh, I'm not worried about *you*."

He should have been worried. If he had a brain, he'd have been terrified. According to the state of New Jersey, I was dangerous, a menace to the society it had removed me from for nearly a year.

He threw a punch that I easily blocked. I heard running footsteps behind me and spun. A security guard and a teacher were coming for us. I also saw something else.

A girl. Staring at me from the front seat of a black pickup.

Dude, duck. The warning came a second too late, which he'd probably planned.

The fist that connected with my face clinched it for me. God was bullied as a kid.

First rule of engagement: never turn your back on a threat.

I was on my hands and knees on the grassy median that divided the parking lot, my head thick and curdled from being sucker punched, but even that wasn't enough to silence the voice.

When I look inside me for the voice, I see me but yet...not *me*, not exactly. More like a version of me, the me I used to be at thirteen. All gangly limbs, big feet, and bad skin. I call him Kenny and try to keep him bound to a dark, empty corner of my mind. If I could find a way to gag him too, I'd be psyched. As hard as I fight to forgive myself for what I did to Liam Murphy, Kenny fights as hard to make sure I *can't*. I figure he's just one more part of God's Wrath Plan I'd put in motion five years earlier when I was thirteen.

"Shut up," I told him, out loud.

"What?"

~~That wasn't Kenny's voice. I forced my head up. My eyes blurred and finally focused on three worried faces, four if I counted the one that existed only in my mind. And I didn't.~~

Like I care.

I squinted up at the most beautiful girl I thought I'd ever seen. I was having trouble focusing on anything but her face.

"What happened?" the teacher had asked. My stomach pitched when I got a clear look at him. He wasn't a teacher. He was Mr. Morris, the freakin' principal. He was the reason I was at school so early. We had an appointment before first period.

Dude, Kenny chuckled. You're so doomed.

"Jeff Dean was going to beat up Brandon Dellerman, but this guy jumped out of his car, walked right up between them, and stopped them. Jeff hit him when he wasn't looking."

Her words somehow penetrated the thick swamp that still choked my thoughts. She saw me jump out of my car? She saw me step between them? If she saw all that, why the hell didn't *she* try to stop them? She was a girl. She would have been safe from the caveman, and I would still be the nameless new guy.

You don't know that for sure.

True, I was forced to admit. But still. Breaking up fights before the first bell wasn't the best way to stay invisible.

The girl turned back to me and asked with a taunting grin, "You okay?"

Hatred, waves of it, rolled over me, pulling me under. She'd stood there, cool and blond and...and...fucking perfect, watching, just watching. She could have stopped it, could have helped. Instead she'd done nothing. Damn, she was beautiful, like ice in sunlight. Her eyes, a cold blue with black rims, mocked me from behind trendy wire frames. Gold hair spilled around her face, but there was nothing, nothing but the cold. I hated her, hated her down to my bone marrow for what she'd made me do, what she'd made me risk. Mostly, I hated her because she had no idea.

"I'm fine." I scrambled to my feet, my face hot.

"Mr. Ellison, I want you to go straight inside and see the nurse," the principal said. "Our appointment can wait until after."

Mr. Morris knew about my record. That's why he wanted to talk to me. There was no reason why that meeting couldn't take place. My head and face ached, but I'd live. I opened my mouth to tell him so, but he turned to the cold blond.

"Miss Murphy, show Mr. Ellison to the nurse's office and then come see me. I want to hear *exact* what went on here." The principal turned to address other students now gathering around to watch.

I groaned, but it wasn't at the bark of laughter from inside my head or Miss Murphy's huff of annoyance. It was her name. Of course, it would be Murphy. I turned my eyes to heaven and cursed again. I'd met a Murphy at every school I'd attended, just one more daily reminder of the kid I killed.

My face heated as Miss Murphy continued glaring.

"You're shaking." She put her hands on me, eyes narrowed, searching me up and down for signs of serious injury, but it wasn't concern I saw in her eyes.

It looked a lot like satisfaction.

Fuck this. Fuck *her*. As I shoved past, I got a good whiff of her, and my mind blanked on everything except how freakin' good she smelled. She smelled like the beach. Tropical fruit or something exotic. Like sunblock lotion. I loved the beach. Of all the things I'd missed during the months I'd spent in juvenile detention, summer on the water headed the list. Long Island had tons

beaches, another reason I was determined to not mess up this time. Holtsville was the fourth or fifth town we'd tried since I'd killed Liam Murphy.

I wanted to stay here.

Liam killed himself, Kenny corrected, and I sneered.

See, Kenny thinks he's playing me. A few minutes ago, he's making digs that I killed Liam and now it's "Liam killed himself." If I say "up," he says "down." That's what he does. Since the first night I spent locked up, he water-boards my soul. Relentlessly. I knew his game now, so I didn't reply. I couldn't. Not out loud anyway. I was having such a great first day of school; talking to myself would have made it just perfect. Come to think of it, ruining my first day at another new school was probably Kenny's plan all along.

Yeah. I live to serve.

"I'm fine." I shrugged. "Just got the breath knocked out of me."

Miss Murphy's eyebrows shot to her hairline. "Yeah, well, Jeff Dean will be telling a totally different story."

My vision reddened at her taunt. "Oh, I'm sure you'll set everybody straight, since you saw the whole damn thing." I heard her suck in air. Good. I guess nobody ever talked to Voyeur Barbie like that before. I scanned the parking lot's trimmed lawn, tree-lined borders, and rows of parking spots but saw no sign of the caveman. "What happened to him anyway?"

"Security hauled him inside while you were out." Brandon Dellerman answered with a jerk of his thumb toward the building.

I drew myself up to my full height, all six feet three inches of it. "I wasn't *out*. I was just, uh, catching my breath."

Miss Murphy's smirk warned me she didn't buy it.

"Come on. Nurse's office is this way."

Brandon put out an arm, tried to steady me. I took a step, stopped, waited for him to let go.

"Uh, you sure you're okay?"

I grinned down at him. He was like a foot shorter than me. Even if I wasn't okay, I doubted he could survive the 220-pound impact if I fell on him.

"I should be asking you that."

He let go of me, shrugged, turned red. "I'm okay. Thanks. For helping and stuff. I'm, uh, Brandon Dellerman."

"Yeah, hi. Daniel. Dan."

Liar.

Kenny, it's not a lie. That's my name now.

You keep telling yourself that, Danielle.

I ignored Kenny. I ignored Miss Murphy, but she was determined to obey the principal's order. As she led me down the first corridor, she shot me a look so cold I was willing to bet it could freeze a nuclear explosion mid-mushroom cloud and still have enough power left over for the fires of hell.

In my mind, Kenny gasped. I braced for his usual spiteful comment, but it never came. *That* was first—a profound moment in our history. Because Kenny exists purely to torment me, letting an opportunity go could only mean one thing. He had bigger, more painful retribution planned for later.

Inside the nurse's office, I was anxious to be rid of my escorts so I could talk to Kenny and manage the situation. "Well, we're here." I didn't bother to thank Miss Murphy and quickly turned to Brandon. "Brandon, watch your back. That Jeff Dean guy is dangerous."

The office looked the same as all of the other nurse's offices at all the other schools I'd attended.

Posters hung on every wall, warning me to “Drive Responsibly,” “Say No to Drugs,” and “Pause Think” before I acted. Another one said this was a “Bully-Free Zone.”

I paused to appreciate the irony.

Brandon ducked his head, shaking strands of greasy, colorless hair in front of his eyes, but I could see the fear in them and something else. Something that looked like defeat.

“If you want, I’ll give you a ride home after school. Just in case.”

Ah, ah, ah. Kenny waved a finger in my head. *Did you forget? You’re not allowed to be alone with kids, remember?*

I gritted my teeth and wished I could forget. Even for just a minute.

Brandon’s face paled, his acne standing out in sharp relief. “I’ll have my car tomorrow.”

I blinked. I figured Brandon for a freshman, but he was at least a junior if he had a car. “Offer good anytime.”

Brandon stared at me, his eyes awed. Nodded.

An older woman, like my mother’s age, maybe older, approached me wearing scrubs and glasses on the tip of her nose, carrying a folder in her hands. A name tag pinned to her shirt said she was Mrs. Rawlins. She tossed the folder to a desk, grabbed a square packet, and squinted at my jaw. “Dani Ellison? Wanna tell me what happened to your face?” She tore open the packet, dabbed a gauze pad on my chin, and a hot belt of pain lashed at me.

“Jeff Dean,” Brandon answered for me.

The nurse frowned and nodded, requiring no further explanation. I guess I underestimated Dean’s reputation. My breath hissed past my lips when she rolled a brown-tipped cotton swab over my chin.

“This could use some stitches.”

No way. My eyes snapped to hers. “Steri-Strips are fine.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I take it you’ve seen your share of emergency rooms.”

Something like that.

“Your shirt’s all bloody. Why don’t you use that room to change into your gym shirt?” Mrs. Rawlins indicated the door behind her, where another poster warned me to wash my hands during flu season.

The scars. Jesus, the scars. I can’t take off my shirt. Shame congealed the blood in my veins.

“You two. Out. Get to class.” Mrs. Rawlins had to have noticed the horror on my face.

I knew without looking that the blond was gone. I didn’t smell the beach anymore, and I felt cold.

“Have a seat, Mr. Ellison.” Mrs. Rawlins indicated a row of chairs by her desk. “Let’s call your mom and have her pick you up.”

Oh, not a chance. I moved to a chair, taking my sweet time, and planned my next lie.

CHAPTER 2

Sure. Fine. Whatever

“Well, Mr. Ellison, you’ve had a hell of a first day so far, haven’t you?”

I resisted the great urge to roll my eyes. Mr. Morris was the king of understatement.

“What did Mrs. Rawlins say?”

“That I’m fine.” That was only partially a lie. Mrs. Rawlins’s exact words were “As long as you doesn’t get infected and you don’t have a concussion, you should be fine.” Whatever. She’d sent me on my way with homework and an ice pack.

He picked up the phone, raising thick caterpillar eyebrows. “Really? When I call to confirm that she’s going to say *fine*?”

Busted.

Oh, good. Kenny was back to normal. “Okay, okay. She thinks my face needs a few stitches, but she told her Steri-Strips were fine. Then she insisted I call my mother.”

“Did you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. This,” I said with a wave of my hand under my chin, “is nothing compared—” Abruptly, I shut up. I didn’t want to discuss my whole juvenile detention record.

The principal’s hand came up at that, and his eyes drilled through me. “Mr. Ellison, I know a little about your history.” He tapped the file folder open before him, and I squirmed. Was this guy a mind reader or something?

Doubt that. Kenny’s tone dripped with scorn.

“And I appreciate how Mrs. Rawlins must have embarrassed you, but we are required to notify your parents in a situation like this.”

I sighed. “Yes, sir.”

He regarded me over the thick folder spread on a cluttered desk. It reminded me of something my grandfather always says about cluttered desks being a sign of genius, and I choked on a laugh. The crumbs from a bagel or muffin sprinkled over memos marked with the school district’s logo told me what he’d done first that morning. A pile of bright blue wristbands tumbled out of a torn plastic bag on the corner. I wondered what cause blue represented lately. Steam curled from the Styrofoam coffee cup beside his phone, and a homemade pencil holder was close to bursting with the array of writing implements jammed inside it. Beside it, a Slinky toy sat abandoned and bored.

Mr. Morris was a hands-on principal. This would not be a good thing for me, and I let the dread spread.

He smiled, tight-lipped. “Your...ah...crime is a matter of public record, and you’re listed under both of your names.”

True.

“I can’t lie if I’m asked about your, ah, record. Which means I can’t guarantee your secret can be

kept.”

Also true.

“I advise you to not call attention to yourself. The less conspicuous you are, the less likely your secret will be discovered.”

I glared at him. “Mr. Morris, was I supposed to let that kid get beat up?”

Mr. Morris held up both hands. “Mr. Ellison, you’re not in any trouble. Julie Murphy and Brandon Dellerman told me what happened. How you stopped the fight. You did the right thing. I’ve given Jeffrey Dean in-school suspension for picking the fight.”

Julie. Her name was Julie. Pretty name. I still hated her. I frowned and blurted, “It wouldn’t have been a fight, sir. It would have been a bloodbath.” I’d seen hatred in Jeff’s eyes.

He held up a hand. “Agreed. I’m *glad* you were there this morning. Brandon would have been seriously injured had you not been there to look out for him. But I’m worried about *you*.”

My eyebrows shot into my hairline.

“You’ll need to look out for yourself. I can’t be everywhere, and you’ve made an enemy before classes even began.”

I nodded with a sigh. I suppose if the risk grew too dangerous, my family could always flee. Again.

“Okay, some other items.” He reached for a blue bracelet, tossed it to me. “I want you to wear this.”

I glanced at the slogan. *Stand Up to Bullying*. I grimaced, my jaw throbbing as I slipped the wristband over my hand.

“We’ve got a whole series of events planned to prevent school violence. I expect not only your cooperation but your enthusiastic support of these programs, seeing as you’re *reformed* now.”

Bro, I’m gonna kick his ass.

With a hand slapped to his shoulder, I kept Kenny pinned down. It’s the first test, Kenny. Do not make me fail it.

“Is that all, sir?”

“Almost. Mr. Walsh, our gym teacher, is anxious to meet you. He, ah, knows the truth. I thought it was prudent to keep him informed if you’re going to change in the locker room and shower and such.”

The shame burned too bright, and I couldn’t sit there for one more minute, listening to this bullshit. “I’m not a pervert, Mr. Morris.”

Dick, Kenny muttered. So much for carefully reviewing our case.

For once, Kenny and I agreed on something. At least Mr. Morris had the grace to blush.

“No, no, I understand that, but you know how it is. The board, the PTA, a lot of people are concerned that I’m letting a, ah, juvenile delinquent...into their school.”

I gripped the armrest of my chair and stared at my feet while Kenny raged inside me. I knew damn well Mr. Morris was going to say something else. I also knew he had no choice but to let me in. You can’t break the law and not learn a little something about it in the process. I was thirteen when I broke the law and had to endure a New Jersey court adjudication of delinquency—a legal term for saying you were found guilty. Even though I was a minor, my record is considered *protected*, not sealed, which is why my parents suggested changing our names. My parents also insisted I talk to the principal myself. I wasn’t sure if that was because the whole story had made the news or because Liam’s family kept threatening me. I agreed. Really, what choice did I have? I was willing to wear the blue bracelet for a chance to finish school, but come on! Locker room supervision?

Please.

After I counted to ten—twice—I looked up. “Mr. Morris, can I say something?” At his nod,

continued, “I was thirteen years old when I did what I did. But I didn’t rape anybody. I didn’t peer u girls’ skirts. I didn’t sell pictures to pedophiles, and I sure as hell didn’t want anybody to *die*.”

Dude. Kenny let out a low whistle. *You tell him.*

“Life has been hell for my whole family, and changing my name seems to be helping. I promi you I’m not about to screw that up.”

Mr. Morris’s eyes darted around his desk. “Yes. Well. Good. That’s, uh, good. See that you kee that promise, Mr. Ellison. You’d better get moving. The bell’s about to ring.”

I pressed the ice pack Mrs. Rawlins gave me to my jaw and fled, the principal’s words replaying my head: “You’ve made an enemy.”

True. But Brandon Dellerman was the first friend I’d made since my release from juvie.

I might like it here.

Yeah. Me too.

My eyes snapped to Kenny’s, but he’d retreated deep into the corner of my mind, where he’d set u his own room. I heard him flip on his stereo and mashed my teeth together.

He knows how much I hate rap.

I strode through the corridors, shoes squeaking on the fresh wax coating over the linoleum. The scho was packed with hundreds of kids who avoided me like I was infected with something contagiou This was a good thing.

Kenny’s fury did an effective job of masking the pain on my chin. I found my locker, dumped m bag inside, and kept only a three-subject notebook. According to my schedule, my first class wasn homeroom but public speaking, an elective I had for only the first half of the school year.

I found the classroom, skidded to a stop when I saw Jeff Dean sitting in the first seat near th window.

Oh my God, seriously? You really are cursed.

Curious looks bounced from him to me and then stayed glued on me when I folded myself into a available seat at the back of the room just as the second bell rang. Great. Word had already gotte around. I didn’t make eye contact with anybody. Kenny moaned in my mind, and I flinched.

Come on, man, public speaking? What were you thinking?

It sounded fun at the time. But now the thought of standing up and speaking in front of all the strangers had me sweating.

Someone could recognize us. New York is next door to New Jersey, you know.

Kenny had a point. It had been five years, but news of my detention in New Jersey could certain have reached eastern Long Island, which was another reason for the name change. My heart pounde and I tried to control it with deep breathing when it hit me.

Her scent.

Julie Murphy smelled like some exotic tropical place—it was full out the most amazing thing I’ ever smelled. I looked up, leaned in, and breathed deeply before I remembered I hated her.

“Hey. Doesn’t look so bad.” She took the seat beside me, dropped an enormous purse to the floo and jerked her chin at the ice pack I had pressed to my face. “Chin up.” She grinned at her own joke.

There was a long pause while I stared, trying to make sense out of Julie Murphy’s Barbie Do looks and steely heart. I expected a great smile. I found full lips pulled into a mocking grin instead. I expected clear blue eyes that twinkled. I found ice blue eyes staring back at me, hard, bored, and disinterested. There was a deep line between her eyebrows, and I wondered how many hours

frowning it had taken to carve that into someone so young.

I managed to string together two words. "I'll live."

Kenny chortled in my mind, and I wished I could kick him physically instead of just mentally. *Yeah. Public speaking. Now I get it.*

Her shoulders lifted in a careless shrug. "Oh well. Maybe next time."

I shot her a dirty look. If that was supposed to be funny, I didn't get the joke. Before I could preface the issue, she'd turned her head away from me to greet some girls who'd sat in the next row.

Dude, you pissed her off. Apologize.

Hell no. She should apologize to me. You know what? Forget it and just go back to where you came from.

I come from you.

I gripped my head, wondering if Kenny would ooze out of my ears if I squeezed it hard enough. The teacher arrived and shut the door with a firm click.

"Okay, settle down, people."

He had a big voice, deep and resonant—totally unexpected from the compact body that made him look younger than he was.

"I'm Mr. Williams. This is my tenth year teaching this course, so you guys are an anniversary for me, I guess." His grin was corny. I heard the girls sitting beside Julie Murphy snicker.

"You know my name, but I don't know any of yours, so let's go around the room, shall we? Name and the reason why you decided to take my course. Let's start...here." He indicated the window side of the room, eliciting groans from the six students who occupied those desks. But a sharp knock on the door bought them a few more minutes. Mr. Williams opened the door, took a slip of paper from a student's aide, and shook his head with a frown. "Really, Mr. Dean? The term has hardly begun and yet you're already expected in the ISS classroom."

The class seemed to gasp in unison as Jeff collected his stuff, glaring at me on his way to the door. I sank lower in my seat when all eyes turned to me.

"Okay, okay, show's over. I believe this row was to go first." The students in the row near the window moaned again.

My poor heart pounded again. Everyone would remember me now that they'd seen Jeff's glare of death aimed my way. What would I say? How much could I safely divulge? I rehearsed and revised and repeated and suddenly realized I'd missed the first ten students. Mr. Williams was up to the trio of girls beside Julie. The curly-haired brunette was Lisa, the girl with the ponytail behind her was Morgan, and the cheerleader-type behind her was Ashley.

Finally, it was *her* turn.

"I'm, uh, Julie Murphy, and I'm here because I want to be, like, a psychologist or, um, something like that."

Then it was my turn. "Um. Yeah." What the hell's my name today? Shit. "I'm, um, I'm Daniel Ellison. I'm taking this class because I want to be a lawyer."

My knees bounced under the desk. Two dozen pairs of eyes burned into me and panic choked me.

"What happened to your face?" Mr. Williams asked.

The morning's events played back in my mind, and my temper surged.

"That asshole took a cheap shot." I jerked my thumb toward the door.

The class let out a collective oh. Mr. Williams shook his head. "There are plenty of alternatives to the word *asshole*, Mr. Ellison. Should I make you write them all down?"

Kenny doubled over, giggling.

“No, sir. Sorry,” I mumbled.

And then he looked to the guy sitting behind me.

“Paul Oliva. No freakin’ idea.”

The class erupted, and I was forgotten...by everyone *except* Julie Murphy, judging by the way she kept looking at me.

I liked Mr. Williams, liked the class even though I was terrified of speaking in public, and like Lisa and Paul. Morgan and Ashley, on the other hand, were nothing but airheads, an observation I shared with Paul twenty minutes after our speech class ended when we met in the locker room to change for gym. He let out a loud laugh at that.

“Hey, all we have to do is look at them. I can handle that much.” Paul whipped his shirt over his head, stuffed it in his locker. “Can you imagine how their speech project is gonna go? It won’t matter what topic they pick. Every speech they make will sound like it aired on the CW.” He let his wrists dangle, fluttered his eyelids, and spoke with a falsetto. “Health care is, like, really important and stuff? So, we all have to, like, you know, really pull together and just, like, do it, for real, you know?” When he pretended to toss imaginary long hair over his shoulder, I clutched my sides, laughing so hard it hurt.

The bell rang.

“Shit. We’re gonna be late.”

When Paul looked pointedly at the shirt I was still wearing, I paled. I wasn’t taking off my shirt in front of anybody. “Meet you up there.” I angled my body into my locker, dropped my pants.

“Okay.”

Thank God. I watched him head down the row of lockers and turn the corner.

Dude, you know you can’t get away with this for long, right?

Yes, Kenny, I’m aware. I let my head fall against a locker with a sigh. I tugged on my shorts, stuffed my jeans into the locker, finally pulled my shirt over my head, and heard a loud gasp.

I spun, smacking an elbow against my locker door, found Paul back in the main aisle, his face frozen in shock, blue eyes bulging.

“What the fu—”

“Forget it,” I warned, tugging my gym shirt over my head to hide the scars that crossed my torso like a relief map.

“What happened to you?”

“I said forget it.” I slammed my locker and left him there, mouth still gaping.

The day ended. Finally. Fortunately, it appeared I had no more classes with the temper-challenged Jeck Dean. I did, however, have two periods in common with Julie Murphy. Speech class and lunch. I even had one class with Brandon—calculus. I was pretty good at math, but Brandon ran circles around me. Math was my final period, so I reminded Brandon again I’d be happy to drive him home.

“Nice.” His face lit up when he saw my car, and I beamed.

“Yeah, thanks. It’s new.” My parents surprised me with the blue Ford Edge on my eighteenth birthday in April. I was a year older than my classmates—yet another secret I was trying to keep hidden. I put the car in gear, headed west out of the parking lot.

He lifted a shoulder, huffed out half a laugh. “My mom said I could drive her minivan to school once a week. Stay on sixteen until you hit Blue Point Road, then turn left. My dad’s got the cool car. Mustang.”

My eyebrows lifted as I stopped for a light. “Sweet. Does he let you drive it?”

~~“Only with him in it, so taking it to school is probably not gonna happen.”~~

I laughed. “Yeah, probably not.” I saw Blue Point Road and got into the left turn lane. “This it?”

“Yeah. Go right on Circle Court. My house is that beige one with the red shutters.”

I pulled to the curb, hit the button to unlock the doors, and waited while he collected his books.

“So, um, thanks for, you know, everything.”

“Yeah, no problem. See you tomorrow.”

I waited for Brandon to unlock his front door before I pulled a three-point turn. I had to wait for the school bus belching to a stop midway down the street. A glimpse of blond hair had my stomach flipping. Julie Murphy, hauling the biggest purse I’d ever seen over one shoulder, left the bus and headed up the walk of the house next to Brandon’s, a mirror replica in gray. My nose twitched. I remembered how good she smelled. I tracked every motion, every toss of her hair, every move of those long legs. She must have felt my eyes on her because she suddenly turned and glared right at me before she disappeared inside.

Weird.

Probably nothing, I assured Kenny, wishing I believed it.

“There. How’s that?”

“Um. Pretty good actually. It doesn’t hurt as much anymore.”

And it didn’t. When you’re wounded, a mother’s touch held magic. Before my sentence, I hated when my mother kissed me good night. Bandaged my knees. Ruffled my hair. I thought I was way too old, too cool. When I was in juvie, I missed all that mushy mom stuff, so now I allowed myself a moment to sink into it. I gingerly touched her handiwork—the fresh bandage over the swelling in my jaw.

My mother ruffled my hair, and I grinned, a stab of love piercing my heart. “Don’t look so surprised, Dan. There are lots of things I’m good at, you know.”

Another stab of pain. Every time she called me by that name, it hurt. But we’d agreed.

I hissed in a breath and touched my chin. It really did feel better. Over my eighteen years, I’d given my mother plenty of opportunities to hone her first-aid skills while I learned to operate the huge body I’d developed. Walking with size fourteen feet while the rest of you was still puny wasn’t as easy as it sounded. I often wondered why she still bothered after I ruined this family. I’d let her down, but she never turned her back on me. She’d fought like a demon to have me transferred to a safer detention center and petitioned the courts to reduce my sentence. I knew I didn’t deserve her, but damn it, I was glad I had her.

“Danny. Look at me.”

Gray eyes, eyes I’d inherited, stared up at me. There were lines around them now. Lines I’d put there.

“I love you, always will.”

My eyes slid shut when Kenny’s voice spoke louder.

No. She won’t.

“What you did doesn’t change that,” she said.

Yeah. It does.

“When you’re hurt, I’ll always take care of you.”

No, she won’t. She can’t. Because she doesn’t know.

Her arms came around me and squeezed. Mom didn't know about Kenny. If she did, she'd be lobbying to get me a bed in a mental hospital. The court-appointed therapist I was forced to see once a week didn't know either.

Nobody knew. Nobody could ever know that I saw, heard, and talked to a version of myself, frozen forever at thirteen.

Yeah, but I know.

I don't know *why* or *how* Kenny came to be. I think he's always been there...part of me. But his first appearance *outside* of my head happened when I got jumped in juvie. I thought I was delirious. Until he pointed out my attackers' weaknesses and I got away, bloodied and concussed, but got away. I don't know why he saved me. He hates me. He gets perverse thrills from kicking me when I'm already down. He won't go away. He continues to torment me, and I've been out of juvie for years.

Torment you? I'm a gift.

Yeah? Can I exchange you for something that fits?

Okay, I'm a blessing.

You're a fucking curse. A loud sigh leaked from my lips, and my mother pulled away.

"Tell me about the rest of your day. How did it go with the new name?"

"It was good." The note of incredulity in my voice did not slip past my sharp mother unnoticed.

"You're surprised?"

"Yeah. It's...well, almost too good, I guess. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, you know?"

Mom snapped the first-aid kit closed and stuffed it back inside its home in one of the kitchen cabinets.

She loved this room. When we moved here, the expression on her face when she saw the huge, sunshine-yellow kitchen with the glass-front cabinets, U-shaped granite countertops, and six-burner stove was like a kid's in a candy store.

Or a kid's on his first day out of juvenile detention.

When she reached over to stir the vat of spaghetti sauce simmering on the stove, I grabbed some plates and started setting the table on the far side of the long room, anticipating the meal ahead. Garlic, oregano, sausage, and meatballs. My stomach let out a rumble. Spaghetti in juvie was a gelatinous mass covered with something closer to ketchup than *gravy*, as my grandfather called it.

My mother tore off a hunk of Italian bread, dipped it into the pot, and handed it to me, holding her hand under it to catch the drips. I devoured it in a single bite, scorching my tongue and throat. I shut my eyes and moaned. God, that was good.

"After word got out about the fight, the kids mostly avoided me, nothing new there," I said when I could talk. My mother was stirring the sauce again. "But there's this girl—"

The spoon clattered to the stove.

"A girl? What girl? Is she pretty?" Mom grinned and waggled her eyebrows, then leaned across the gleaming counter to hang on every one of my words. I laughed, even though my face got hot.

"No, Mom, it's nothing like that. She, um. Well, she's how this happened." I indicated my bandaged hand. "She saw everything but didn't do anything. She just *watched*." The fury washed over me just as I remembered how she recited everything that had happened with complete indifference.

My mother just kept grinning. "Give her a chance. Maybe she's just shy."

Yeah. Sure.

My mother was one of those irritating glass-half-full people. Always thought everything was going to work out for the best. I shook my head and put flatware beside the plates I'd arranged.

"Hey. You're short a place setting."

I clenched my jaw, flinching at the pain it induced. “Mom, you know he won’t—”

“Daniel.”

Murderer.

Shut up! I screamed silently.

“He’ll come around. Just give it time.”

Time? I snorted out a laugh. “Mom, it’s been years. Pop’s not getting any younger and neither am I.” I turned away. I couldn’t talk about this anymore.

“Danny, honey.” She put out a hand to stop me, but I shrugged it off. “Danny. Wait.”

I ignored her, stalked out of the kitchen, but Mom could be stubborn when she had to be. She chased me through the dining room we hardly ever used, into the family room, and out to the foyer where abstract Pier One art hung in place of family photos. Those were all upstairs, where no one could see them and figure out we were a family of liars. I had one foot on the steps that led to the second floor when she shouted. “Damn it, *Kenny*. I said wait.”

I froze for a moment, one foot still raised. Then I whirled to stare at my mother, stunned. It was against the rules, my parents’ rules. We’d agreed never to use my real name. I wasn’t *Kenny* anymore. That name belonged to the voice in my head. And to my grandfather because I was named after him. Now I was Daniel Ellison, a name I chose because Daniel meant *God is my judge* and Ellison came from the prayer, *Kyrie Eleison*.

Lord, have mercy.

Kind of unrealistic, expecting anyone to show me mercy after what I did, but like I said, it was my parents’ idea. After people found out who I was and what I had done...well, it was another reason why we had moved a bunch of times.

“I know your grandfather’s hurting you, and I don’t know why, I swear. He doesn’t talk much to me either. But he lives here too, and he is always welcome at the dinner table, no matter who isn’t talking to who.” She climbed two steps so she could look me in the eye, put her hands on my shoulders, and squeezed. “He’ll come around. I promise you he will. Just keep the door open, okay?” Her hand moved to my cheek. “For me? Please.”

Sudden stinging behind my eyes compelled me to squeeze them shut. I nodded. How could I not do whatever she asked of me after all I’d done?

“Oh God. What’s wrong? What happened?”

My father was home, his face a study in terror.

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine, hon.” Mom hurried to him, put a soothing hand to his chest. “Danny had a so-so day.”

When she pointed to my bandaged chin, his eyes popped, so I walked back down the steps and returned to the kitchen to start the story from the beginning.

CHAPTER 3

It's Official: My Life Sucks

The next day, the sun was hot enough to pull heat waves off the asphalt. I followed the road that snaked into the parking lot, trapped behind a lost parent confused by the drop-off procedure. I found a spot near the same grassy median where I face-planted yesterday, finally noticing the decent proper this school had. Plenty of parking, places to walk without risking life and limb, air-conditioned classrooms. This school even had a pool. I thought about the high school I would have attended back home in New Jersey. That building dated back to the seventies. No air-conditioning. No pool. This place was so much better, and I was glad to—

Abruptly sick, I killed the engine, scanning the lot for trouble. It was a habit now, born during my stay at the Monmouth County Detention Center, and it had saved my neck more than once.

Kenny's loud sigh echoed in my head. *Dude. Nobody's looking to get the jump on you. You're safe.*

I snorted out a laugh. Yeah, right. Safe.

Hey, I told you to stay out of that fight. Don't blame me if the whole new identity thing falls apart.

Yep. That you did. I acknowledged with a tight frown. How could a voice in my own head know so little about me? Better question, why did I care what a voice in my head thought? All I knew was that I couldn't live with any more guilt. It was like I swallowed a slow-moving poison that was killing me one cell at a time. You'd think the voice that knew what I was thinking would know that or something.

Boohoo.

Why are you here, Kenny? I'm not in juvie anymore. I don't need you.

I lumbered out of the car and aimed the key chain remote to lock it.

He was suddenly standing right there, blocking my way.

Yeah, you do. He jerked his chin over my shoulder.

I followed his gaze, saw Julie talking to Jeff a few rows down beside the same tricked-out black pickup truck. My teeth clenched. What the hell did she see in this guy? Okay, so he was popular and on the football team. And he was good looking, if the way all the girls' eyes tracked his every move was any indication.

Heh. Like lookin' in a mirror.

I do not look like that.

Whatever you say, man.

Julie was mad; I saw the crease in her forehead from here. She put a hand on Jeff's chest, said something I couldn't hear, and my hands clenched. She shook her head and turned to walk away, but Jeff grabbed her arm, swung her back around with a loud "Hey! I'm not done!"

I sprinted toward them before Julie's hair resettled.

Bad idea, dude! Kenny shouted in my head, but I tuned him out.

"Let go of me." She twisted out of his grasp, gave him a little shove that did nothing but enrage

Jeff more.

“Shut your mouth and listen to me.” He grabbed her again.

“Get your hands off me!”

I was already there, prying him off Julie and pinning him to the hood of the black truck. He broke my hold, spun to face me, but my other hand was already fisted. I cocked it back, made sure he saw. “She said take your hands off her.”

“New guy.” Jeff pushed the words through teeth clenched tight enough to leave impressions in metal. “You hot for me or something? Every time I turn around, you’re in my face.”

I scoffed, ignored his feeble attempt to rile me. “Maybe that’s because your face is always where it shouldn’t be.”

He shook my hand off. “My face? You’re the one stickin’ his nose into my business. Back off c—”

“Or what? Huh, Dean? What do you think you’re gonna do?” I smiled the kind of cold grin I’d perfected in detention, the kind of smile that confused my opponents, and God knew I had a lot of practice over the years.

“I said I was sorry, Jeff,” Julie said. “Please. Just let it go.”

He glanced from her to me, his body still angled toward mine. With one last glare at Julie, he stood down, stepped away, and flung up his hands. “Okay, fine. I’ll stay out of it if you do me a favor. Don’t get between me and Brandon anymore. And you,” he said and punched a finger at me. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I wasn’t intimidated. *Intimidating* was six kids in men’s bodies glaring at you in the common area of a juvenile hall while the guards’ backs were turned. I wasn’t afraid. *Afraid* was six kids in men’s bodies coming for you in the dark. Jeff was about as tough as a loaf of white bread. He stalked off, shooting glares over his shoulder every few feet. I held my stance until he was out of sight.

“You okay?” I asked Julie, who stared at me with a mixture of fear and surprise etched on her face.

“Perfect,” she said with a big fake grin after she stared for a whole minute. She readjusted the huge bag on her shoulder and took a step toward the school building. “I had it, you know. You didn’t need to—”

“Butt in?” I snapped, my voice tight.

Her eyes darted to mine, hurt, then shifted away. She had on different glasses today, and the frames really called attention to her eyes.

Oh, hell.

I walked away, then walked back. “Look, I’m sorry.” A quick glance at her face told me she was confused. Confused was better than hurt. I could work with confused. “I just don’t get what you see in that guy.”

You and me both, man.

“Wait.” She put her hand on my arm, and my arm twitched. “You think...me and Jeff...oh God, no!”

“You’re not seeing him? You’re not his girlfriend?” My stomach tightened at the thought. Could maybe that was just Kenny.

She wrinkled her face. “No. What made you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I got it from you watching him while he got ready to tear the limbs off Brandon? Yeah. That had to be it.” I took off walking again.

Back the hell off, man. Kenny warned me with a light love tap to my head that made me stumble

step.

Julie caught up to me. “We dated for like a month back in freshman year. Now he’s with my friend Colleen. He drives me to school once in a while because he lives around the block. So, uh, where the hell did you come from? When Jeff stopped me, I looked around for help and didn’t see a soul.”

That stopped me in mid-stride. I whirled to confront her. “Let me get this straight. Jeff goes after Brandon and that was just fine. But when Jeff comes after you, you expect someone to help you? Haven’t I got this right?”

She met my gaze, her face carefully arranged to look neutral, but I caught the muscle twitching under her jaw. “Look, you’re new here. You don’t know the whole story with Jeff and Brandon, okay?”

“What, and you do?”

“Yes. And unlike you, I don’t think Jeff is entirely wrong here. Also unlike you, I mind my own business. Except for yesterday.”

“I’ll remember that next time I see him hassling you,” I snapped and strode off, but she was right behind me.

“Hey, wait!” Her tug on my arm barely penetrated my anger. “I appreciate what you did. But you don’t know Jeff. I do. He’s got some problems. He’ll deal with them. I know how to handle him, so just stay out of this, okay?”

I stared at her for a good thirty seconds, processing her words. Was Jeff really that bad? Whatever. I wiped sweaty hands down my jeans. Crap, I left my phone in my car. I started walking in the opposite direction, Julie on my heels.

“Nice.” She jerked her head toward my car, looking up at me from under her eyelashes. I spent a thought-scattering minute wondering if that was how she looked when she was kissed. “I’m curious. What was it doing in front of my house yesterday? Did you follow me home or something?”

I jerked, slammed my head on the doorframe as I reached in for my phone. I hoped she didn’t notice my knees buckle. “I’m not a stalker, Julie. I didn’t follow you. All I did was take Brandon Dellerman home. I don’t hurt women, so you don’t have to be afraid of me.”

“Jeez, obsess much?” Her mocking grin widened. “I was just asking.”

“I gotta go.” I locked the car again.

“So, go,” she mouthed with exaggerated slowness. With a flip of her hair, she walked away, and when I closed my eyes, I swore I was on the beach.

Hmm. Weird. I thought she was his girlfriend.

Yeah, it was weird. Maybe they’re not over each other. No. Don’t even go there.

Why not, man? She likes us.

Kenny. Give it a rest. I don’t like her.

Really?

I stared at him, my jaw hanging. You—you like her, don’t you? That explained a lot.

Kenny wouldn’t look at me and kept walking. I hurried to catch up and pressed him again. Come on, admit it. You like her.

He turned on me as we walked through the main doors. *I’m not telling you anything. You’ll just use it to hurt me. You always do.*

I...I don’t. I don’t hurt you. I just want you to leave me alone.

You don’t get it, genius. I can’t.

Oh, I get it, Kenny. Nine months in juvie wasn’t enough. Getting carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey wasn’t enough. Watching Mom and Dad ostracized and harassed wasn’t enough.

Too upset to think straight, I continued out loud. “You’re here to haunt me for the rest of my

fucking life. I get it. Believe me, I get it, so just answer the damn question already. People are staring at me. “Do you like her or not?” A chubby girl shut her locker and looked at me funny. I held up my cell phone and touched an ear hidden by too-long hair, hoping she’d believe I had a Bluetooth.

I did not.

The terms of my reduced sentence stipulated my cell phone had no online access. No texting. No web surfing. No pictures. I’m pretty sure I was the only guy in America who used his cell phone only to make calls.

The bell rang, and Kenny ran to his corner, slammed the door without answering me. I could hear him, muttering, shuffling around. I pounded on the door, demanding a response, but he was silent.

Looks like Julie was going to be a problem.

A big one.

First period. I was nearly late. I had to stop at my locker and regroup after my encounter with Julie. What the hell was between her and Jeff? She seemed like an okay girl when she wasn’t intentionally pissing me off. What was she doing with him?

Dude, you heard her. They’re not dating.

Yeah, I’d heard her. So if they weren’t dating, what was that argument about? I dropped my backpack and slid behind my desk, trying to ignore the biting pain in my chin that was somehow worse today than yesterday. Jeff was already in his seat near the window, and Julie was already in the seat beside mine. I cursed under my breath when the desk shifted a few inches, the screech making me clench my jaw, ratcheting the pain up to maximum. Julie’s head swiveled to me, the line between her eyebrows flashing once while I cradled my head, watching her from under my lashes.

Her black plastic glasses caught my eye again. As my gaze traveled over her curves, I realized the glasses matched her outfit—tight black pants ending high on her calves, with a skimpy white T-shirt that revealed glimpses of a smooth belly if she moved in just the right way. My mouth fell open. Black-and-white sandals showed off a toe ring. She looked up at me from under a curtain of gold hair, blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

Busted.

Kenny laughed when my face got hot.

“That looks a lot worse than it did yesterday.”

I glared. “Feels worse too.”

She made a face. “Aw. Poor little you.”

It sounded like she was making fun of me. I swore if she told me to keep my chin up again, I would have to extend a finger.

Kenny choked. *Oh, please. Like Saint Daniel even has a middle finger.*

Okay, maybe I wouldn’t, but I would really want to. Kenny was about to retort, but luckily, the teacher walked in at that moment.

“Okay, people, settle down. Settle down.” Mr. Williams hurried to the head of the class. “Starting here, everybody count off one to four and then repeat. Go.”

He tapped the guy sitting to my right, who dutifully said “One.”

By the time the count went up one aisle and down the next, I was a three.

“Okay, grab your gear and stand up. I want the ones over here by the door, twos here in this row, threes in the back of the room, and fours by the window. Move.”

Desks screeched on linoleum. Laughing and chattering, we mixed. I noted with a mix of interest

and annoyance that Julie was also a three.

~~We settled in the back of the room and watched, amused, as Paul Oliva and Lisa McKenna traded their spots with the two girls in our group and made their way to us. The girls joined the other half their clique at the window and squealed. At the same time.~~

I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah. Tell me about it.” Paul caught me and nodded. “I figured they’d be dead weight anyway.”

I laughed. No doubt he was right.

My eyes roamed, looking for something that made this classroom different from myriad others I’ve been in since I got out of juvie. The same chalkboards, the same desks, the same sounds and smells. Another Murphy.

This Murphy was staring at me.

“What?” I challenged her.

Her eyes narrowed, and she shrugged. “Nothing. You just look familiar.”

Irrational panic exploded in me, and I had to run.

Easy! This time, Kenny pinned me in my seat. *Don’t be an idiot.*

With every ounce of strength I had, I stayed put. He was right. Damn it, I hated it when Kenny was right. My father constantly reminded me to stop acting like a guilty man, which was hard to do when a *murderer* is branded over your heart like Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*.

I’d killed a child—not with a gun or a knife or my hands but with words and technology. There were no degrees of guilt. You’re either guilty or you’re not—and I am.

Julie stared at me as Mr. Williams again called for our attention, but my mind was still spinning. Maybe she’d recognized me. Maybe she was related to the same Murphys. Oh God. Maybe her brother was Liam. How could I find out without divulging that I was the one who’d killed him? I was pretty sure Liam had no sisters. The only relatives ever in court were his parents. Hell, I didn’t even know his name until after I...until *after*, when it was all over the news. No. No, it couldn’t be true. I’d gone to a school with hundreds of other kids in a New Jersey beach town, and it was there where I’d teased and taunted little Liam. If he had a sister, what would she be doing in a school in a town a hundred miles away? No, I was being paranoid, that’s all. The odds were just too great to imagine.

Maybe, but that’s just the kind of luck you have.

True that.

I kept sneaking glances at her. She didn’t look familiar. Just as I breathed in relief, Kenny hit me with this: *Think about it, genius. All the memories, the heartbreak. They probably moved away to escape it all, start over. You know, like you did.*

I cursed Kenny out loud, but nobody noticed. I hadn’t thought about that. Of course, that was likely. I needed to stay far away from Julie until I could be sure. My parents would know about Liam’s family. They’d had to file a restraining order against his father.

“Okay, guys, here’s the plan. Working in teams of four, you’ll reach into this hat, pick a bill Congress is considering passing, research it, and then present your stance on it—pro or con. The goal is to win support for your position, so even though you are working in quads, you will present to the entire class with the goal of winning their votes.” Mr. Williams approached our group. “Miss Murphy, any idea why this assignment is a good idea?”

Julie’s eyes popped. “Uh. No.”

Mr. Williams turned to Paul. “Mr. Oliva?”

Paul shrugged.

“Mr. Ellison?”

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