

the
unbecoming
of
mara
dyer

"THE INTRIGUE
AND ROMANCE
WILL INESCAPABLY
DRAW YOU IN."

—CASSANDRA CLARE,

#1 *New York Times* bestselling

author of *The Mortal Instruments* series

M I C H E L L E H O D K I N

MAJIA DYER doesn't think life
can get any stranger than waking up
in a hospital with no memory of how she got
there. It can.

She believes there must be more to the
accident she can't remember that killed
her friends and left her mysteriously unharmed.
There is.

She doesn't believe that after everything she's
been through, she can fall in love.
She's wrong.

Michelle Hodkin grew up in
Florida, went to college in New York, and studied law
in Michigan. When she isn't writing, she can usually be
found prying strange objects from the jaws of one of her
three pets. This is her first novel. You can visit her online
at michellehodkin.com.



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"the unbecoming of mara dyer strikes a rare balance of darkly funny, deliciously creepy, and genuinely thoughtful. One minute I was laughing out loud, and the next, I was so scared I wanted to turn on all the lights and hide under the covers. Michelle Hodkin's talent and range are obvious, from her chilling descriptions to romantic scenes that almost crackled on the page.

I've never read anything quite like it."

—VERONICA ROTH, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DIVERGENT*

"A clever, captivating thriller, the unbecoming of mara dyer is perfect for those (like me) who like their heroes dark, their heroines dangerous, and their romances *seriously* twisted."

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"As spooky and twisty as it is lyrical and beautiful, the unbecoming of mara dyer grabbed me and wouldn't let go. Read this one with the lights on."

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MICHELLE HODKIN

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~~For Grandpa Bob, who filled my imagination with stories, for Janie, who made all the other kids jealous; and for my mother, who loves me too much.~~

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~~My name is not Mara Dyer, but my lawyer told me I had to choose something.~~ a pseudonym. a nom
plume, for all of us studying for the SATs. I know that having a fake name is strange, but trust me—
it's the most normal thing about my life right now. Even telling you this much probably isn't smart.
But without my big mouth, no one would know that a seventeen-year-old who likes Death Cab for
Cutie was responsible for the murders. No one would know that somewhere out there is a B student
with a body count. And it's important that you know, so you're not next.

Rachel's birthday was the beginning. This is what I remember.

"Mara Dyer"

New York City

Date

BEFORE

Laurelton, Rhode Island

THE ORNATE SCRIPT ON THE BOARD TWISTED in the candlelight, making the letters and numbers dance in my head. They were jumbled and indistinct, like alphabet soup. When Claire pushed the heart-shaped piece into my hand, I startled. I wasn't normally so twitchy, and hoped Rachel wouldn't notice. The Ouija board was her favorite present that night, and Claire gave it to her. I got her a bracelet. She wasn't wearing it.

Kneeling on the carpet, I passed the piece to Rachel. Claire shook her head, oozing disdain. Rachel pushed down the piece.

"It's just a game, Mara." She smiled, her teeth looking even whiter in the dim light. Rachel and I had been best friends since preschool, and where she was dark and wild, I was pale and cautious. But less so when we were together. She made me feel bold. Usually.

"I don't have anything to ask dead people," I said to her. And at sixteen, we're too old for this, I didn't say.

"Ask whether Jude will ever like you back."

Claire's voice was innocent, but I knew better. My cheeks flamed, but I stifled the urge to snap at her and laughed it off. "Can I ask it for a car? Is this like a dead Santa scenario?"

"Actually, since it's my birthday, I'm going first." Rachel put her fingers on the piece. Claire and I followed her.

"Oh! Rachel, ask it how you're going to die."

Rachel squealed her assent, and I shot a dark look at Claire. Since moving here six months ago, she'd latched onto my best friend like a starving leech. Her twin missions in life were now to make me feel like the third wheel, and to torture me for my crush on her brother, Jude. I was equally sick of both.

"Remember not to push," Claire ordered me.

"Got it, thanks. Anything else?"

But Rachel interrupted us before we could descend into bickering. "How am I going to die?"

The three of us watched the board. My calves prickled from kneeling on Rachel's carpet for so long, and the backs of my knees felt clammy. Nothing happened.

Then something did. We looked at each other as the piece moved under our hands. It semi-circled the board, sailing past *A* through *K*, and crept past *L*.

It settled on *M*.

“Murder?” Claire’s voice was soaked with excitement. She was so sketchy. What did Rachel see in her?

The piece glided in the wrong direction. Away from *U* and *R*.

Landing on *A*.

Rachel looked confused. “Matches?”

“Mauling?” Claire asked. “Maybe you start a forest fire and get eaten by Smokey the Bear?” Rachel laughed, briefly dissolving the panic that had slithered into my stomach. When we first sat down to play, I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes at Claire’s melodramatics. Now, not so much.

The piece zigzagged across the board, cutting her laughter short.

R.

We were silent. Our eyes didn’t leave the board as the piece jerked back to the beginning.

To *A*.

Then stopped.

We waited for the piece to point out the next letter, but it remained still. After three minutes, Rachel and Claire withdrew their hands. I felt them watching me.

“It wants you to ask something,” Rachel said softly.

“If by ‘it’ you mean Claire, I’m sure that’s true.” I stood up, shaking and nauseous. I was done.

“I didn’t push it,” Claire said, wide-eyed as she looked at Rachel, then at me.

“Pinky swear?” I asked, with sarcasm.

“Why not,” Claire answered, with malice. She stood and walked closer to me. Too close. Her green eyes were dangerous. “I didn’t push it,” she said again. “It wants *you* to play.”

Rachel grabbed my hand and pulled herself up off the floor. She looked straight at Claire. “I believe you,” she said, “but let’s do something else?”

“Like what?” Claire’s voice was flat, and I stared right back at her, unflinching. Here we go.

“We can watch *The Blair Witch Project*.” Claire’s favorite, naturally. “How about it?” Rachel’s voice was tentative, but firm.

I tore my eyes away from Claire’s and nodded, managing a smile. Claire did the same. Rachel relaxed but I didn’t. For her sake, though, I tried to swallow my anger and unease as we settled in to watch the

movie. Rachel popped in the DVD and blew out the candles.

Six months later, they were both dead.

AFTER

Rhode Island Hospital Providence, Rhode Island

I OPENED MY EYES. A PERSISTENT MACHINE BEEPED rhythmically to my left. I looked to my right. Another machine hissed beside the bedside table. My head ached and I was disoriented. My eyes struggled to interpret the positions of the hands on the clock hanging next to the bathroom door. I heard voices outside my room. I sat up in the hospital bed, the thin pillows crinkling underneath me as I shifted to try and hear. Something tickled the skin under my nose. A tube. I tried to move my hands to pull it away but when I looked at them, there were other tubes. Attached to needles. Protruding from my skin. I felt a tugging tightness as I moved my hands and my stomach slithered into my toes.

“Get them out,” I whispered to the air. I could see where the sharp steel entered my veins. My breath shortened and a scream rose in my throat.

“Get them out,” I said, louder this time.

“What?” asked a small voice, whose source I couldn’t see.

“Get them out!” I screamed.

Bodies crowded the room; I could make out my father’s face, frantic and paler than usual. “Calm down, Mara.”

And then I saw my little brother, Joseph, wide-eyed and scared. Dark spots blotted out the faces of everyone else, and then all I could see were the forest of needles and tubes, and felt that tight sensation against my dry skin. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak. But I could still move. I clawed at my arm with one hand and ripped out the first tube. The pain was violent. It gave me something to hold on to.

“Just breathe. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. They weren’t listening to me, and they needed to get them out. I tried to tell them but the darkness grew, swallowing the room.

“Mara?”

I blinked, but saw nothing. The beeping and hissing had stopped.

“Don’t fight it, sweetie.”

My eyelids fluttered at the sound of my mother’s voice. She leaned over me, adjusting one of the pillows, and a sheet of black hair fell over her almond skin. I tried to move, to get out of her way, but could barely hold my head up. I glimpsed two dour-faced nurses behind her. One of them had a red welt on her cheek.

“What’s wrong with me?” I whispered hoarsely. My lips felt like paper.

My mother brushed a sweaty strand of hair from my face. “They gave you something to help you relax.”

I breathed in. The tube under my nose was gone. And the ones from my hands, too. They were replaced by gauzy white bandages wrapped around my skin. Spots of red bled through. Something released itself from my chest and a deep sigh shuddered from my lips. The room shifted into focus, now that the needles were out.

I looked at my father, sitting at the far wall, looking helpless. “What happened?” I asked hazily.

“You were in an accident, honey,” my mother answered. My father met my eyes, but he didn’t say anything. Mom was running this show.

My thoughts swam. An accident. When?

“Is the other driver—” I started, but couldn’t finish.

“Not a car accident, Mara.” My mother’s voice was calm. Steady. It was her psychologist voice, I realized. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

More than waking up in a hospital room, or seeing tubes attached to my skin—more than anything else—that question unnerved me. I stared at her closely for the first time. Her eyes were shadowed, and her nails, usually perfectly manicured, were ragged.

“What day is it?” I asked quietly.

“What day do you think it is?” My mother loved answering questions with questions.

I rubbed my hands over my face. My skin seemed to whisper on contact. “Wednesday?”

My mother looked at me carefully. “Sunday.”

Sunday. I looked away from her, my eyes roaming the hospital room instead. I hadn’t noticed the flowers before, but they were everywhere. A vase of yellow roses were right beside my bed. Rachel’s favorite. A box of my things from the house sat in a chair next to the bed; an old cloth doll my grandmother had left to me when I was a baby lounged inside, resting its limp arm around the rim.

“What do you remember, Mara?”

“I had a history test Wednesday. I drove home from school and...”

I rifled through my thoughts, my memories. Me, walking into our house. Grabbing a cereal bar from the kitchen. Walking to my bedroom on the first floor, dropping my bag and taking out Sophocles’ *Three Theban Plays*. Writing. Then drawing in my sketchbook. Then...nothing.

A slow, creeping fear wound its way around my belly. “That’s it,” I told her, looking up at her face.

A muscle above my mother's eyelid twitched. "You were at The Tamerlane—" she started.

Oh, God.

"The building collapsed. Someone reported it at about three a.m. Thursday. When the police arrived, they heard you."

My father cleared his throat. "You were screaming."

My mother shot him a look before turning back to me. "The way the building fell, you were buried in a pocket of air, in the basement, but you were unconscious when they reached you. You might have fainted from dehydration, but it's possible that something fell and knocked you out. You do have a few bruises," she said, pushing aside my hair.

I looked past her, and saw her torso reflected in a mirror above the sink. I wondered what "a few bruises" looked like when a building fell on your head.

I pushed myself up. The silent nurses stiffened. They were acting more like guards.

My joints protested as I craned my head over the bed rails to see. My mother looked in the mirror with me. She was right; a bluish shadow blossomed over my right cheekbone. I pushed my dark hair back to see the extent of it, but that was it. Otherwise I looked—normal. Normal for me, and normal, period. My gaze shifted to my mother. We were so different. I had none of her exquisite Indian features; not her perfect oval face or her lacquer-black hair. Instead, my father's patrician nose and jaw were reflected in my own. And except for the one bruise, I did not look like a building had collapsed on me at all. I narrowed my eyes at my reflection, then leaned back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling.

"The doctors said you're going to be fine." My mother smiled faintly. "You can come home tonight, even, if you feel well enough."

I lowered my gaze to the nurses. "Why are they here?" I asked my mother, staring straight at them. They were creeping me out.

"They've been taking care of you since Wednesday," she said. She nodded at the nurse with the welt on her cheek. "This is Carmella," she said, then indicated the other nurse. "And this is Linda."

Carmella, the nurse with the welt on her cheek, smiled, but it wasn't warm. "You have some right hook."

My forehead crumpled. I looked at my mother.

"You panicked when you woke up before, and they had to be here when you woke up just in case you were...still disoriented."

"Happens all the time," Carmella said. "And if you're feeling like yourself now, we can go."

I nodded, my throat dry. "Thank you. I'm sorry."

“No problem, sweetie,” she said. Her words sounded fake. Linda hadn’t said a word the whole time.

“Let us know if you need anything.” They turned and walked synchronously out of the room, leaving me and my family alone.

I was glad they were gone. And then I realized that my reaction to them was probably not normal. I needed to focus on something else. My eyes swept the room, and finally landed on the bedside table, on the roses. They were fresh, unwilted. I wondered when Rachel brought them.

“Did she visit?”

My mother’s face darkened. “Who?”

“Rachel.”

My father made a strange noise and even my mother, my practiced, perfect mother, looked uncomfortable.

“No,” my mother said. “Those are from her parents.”

Something about the way she said it made me shiver. “So she didn’t visit,” I said softly.

“No.”

I was cold, so cold, but I had started to sweat. “Did she call?”

“No, Mara.”

Her answer made me want to scream. I held out my arm instead. “Give me your phone. I want to call her.”

My mother tried to smile and failed miserably. “Let’s talk about this later, okay? You need to rest.”

“I want to call her now.” My voice was close to cracking. I was close to cracking.

My father could tell. “She was with you, Mara. Claire and Jude, too,” he said.

No.

Something tightened around my chest and I could barely find the breath to speak. “Are they in the hospital?” I asked, because I had to, even though I knew the answer just looking at my parents’ faces.

“They didn’t make it,” my mother said slowly.

This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be happening. Something slimy and horrible began to rise in my throat.

“How? How did they die?” I managed to ask.

“The building collapsed,” my mother said calmly.

“How?”

“It was an old building, Mara. You know that.”

I couldn't speak. Of course I knew. When my father moved home to Rhode Island after law school, he'd represented the family of a boy who had been trapped inside the building. A boy who died. Dani was forbidden from going there, not that my perfect older brother ever would. Not that *I* ever would.

But for some reason, I had. With Rachel, Claire, and Jude.

With Rachel. *Rachel*.

I had a sudden image of Rachel walking boldly into kindergarten, holding my hand. Of Rachel turning out the lights in her bedroom and telling me her secrets, after she had listened to mine. There was no time to even process the words “Claire and Jude, too,” because the word “Rachel” filled my mind. I felt a hot tear slide down my cheek.

“What if—what if she was just trapped, too?” I asked.

“Honey, no. They searched. They found—” My mother stopped.

“What?” I demanded, my voice shrill. “What did they find?”

She considered me. Studied me. She said nothing.

“Tell me,” I said, a knife's edge in my voice. “I want to know.”

“They found...remains,” she said vaguely. “They're gone, Mara. They didn't make it.”

Remains. Pieces, she meant. A wave of nausea rocked my stomach. I wanted to gag. I stared hard at the yellow roses from Rachel's mother instead, then squeezed my eyes shut and searched for a memory, any memory, of that night. Why we went. What we were doing there. What killed them.

“I want to know everything that happened.”

“Mara—”

I recognized her placating tone and my fingers curled into fists around my sheets. She was trying to protect me but she was torturing me instead.

“You have to tell me,” I begged, my throat filled with ash.

My mother looked at me with glassy eyes and a heart-broken face. “I would if I could, Mara. But you're the only one who knows.”

Laurelton Memorial Cemetery, Rhode Island

THE SUN REFLECTED OFF THE POLISHED mahogany of Rachel's coffin, blinding me. I stared, letting the light sear my corneas, hoping the tears would come. I should cry. But I couldn't.

Everyone else could, though, and did. People she never even spoke to, people she didn't even like. Everyone from school was there, claiming a piece of her. Everyone except Claire and Jude. Their memorial service was that afternoon.

It was a gray and white day, a biting New England winter day. One of my last.

The wind blew, lashing my curls against my cheeks. A handful of mourners separated me from my parents, silhouettes of black against the colorless, unbroken sky. I hunched into my coat and wrapped it tighter around my body, shielding myself from my mother's unblinking stare. She'd been watching my reactions since they released me from the hospital; she was the first to reach me that night when my screaming woke the neighbors, and she was the one who caught me crying in my closet the next day. But it was only after she found me two days later, dazed and blinking and clutching a shard of a broken mirror in my bloody hand, that she insisted on getting me help.

What I got was a diagnosis. Post-traumatic stress disorder, the psychologist said. Nightmares and visual hallucinations were my new normal, apparently, and something about my behavior in the psychologist's office made him recommend a long-term care facility.

I couldn't let that happen. I recommended moving instead.

I remembered the way my mother's eyes narrowed when I brought it up a few days after the disastrous appointment. So wary. So *cautious*, like I was a bomb under her bed.

"I really think it will help," I said, not believing that at all. But I had been nightmare-free for two nights, and the mirror episode I didn't remember was apparently the only one. The psychologist was overreacting, just like my mother.

"Why do you think so?" My mother's voice was casual and even, but her nails were still bitten down to the beds.

I tried to recall the mostly one-sided conversation I'd had with the psychologist.

"She was always in this house—I can't look at anything without thinking about her. And if I go back to school, I'll see her there, too. But I want to go back to school. I need to. I need to think about something else."

"I'll talk to your father about it," she said, her eyes searching my face. I could see in every crease of her forehead, every tilt of her chin, that she didn't understand how her daughter could have gotten he

—how I could have snuck out of the house and ended up in the last place I should. She had asked me as much, but of course I had no answer.

I heard my brother's voice out of nowhere. "I think it's almost over," Daniel said.

My heartbeat slowed as I looked up at my older brother. And as he predicted, the priest then asked us all to bow our heads and pray.

I shifted uncomfortably, the brittle grass crunching under my boots, and glanced at my mother. We weren't religious and frankly, I wasn't sure what to do. If there was some protocol for how to behave at your best friend's funeral, I didn't get the memo. But my mother tilted her head, her short black hair falling against her perfect skin as she appraised me, examined me, to see what I'd choose. I looked away.

After an eternity of seconds, heads lifted as if eager for it to be over, and the crowd dissolved. Daniel stood beside me while my classmates took turns telling me how sorry they were, promising to stay in touch after the move. I hadn't been in school since the day of the accident, but some of them had come to visit me in the hospital. Probably just out of curiosity. No one asked me how it happened, and I was glad because I couldn't tell them. I still didn't know.

Squawking pierced the funeral's hushed atmosphere as hundreds of black birds flew overhead in a rush of beating wings. They settled on a cluster of leafless trees that overlooked the parking lot. Even the trees were wearing black.

I faced my brother. "Didn't you park under those crows?"

He nodded, and started walking to his car.

"Fabulous," I said as I followed him. "Now we're going to have to dodge crap from the whole flock."

"Murder."

I stopped. "What?"

Daniel turned around. "It's called a murder of crows. Not a flock. And yes, we're going to dodge avian fecal matter, unless you want to go with Mom and Dad?"

I smiled, relieved without knowing why. "Pass."

"Thought so."

Daniel waited for me and I was grateful for the escape. I glanced back to make sure my mother wasn't watching. But she was busy talking to Rachel's family, whom we'd known for years. It was too easy to forget that my parents were leaving everything behind too; my father's law practice, my mother's patients. And Joseph, though only twelve, accepted without much explanation that we were moving and agreed to leave his friends without complaint. When I thought about it, I knew I had won the family lottery. I made a mental note to behave more charitably toward my mother. After all, it wasn't her fault we were leaving.

It was mine.

EIGHT WEEKS LATER

Miami, Florida

YOU'RE KILLING ME, MARA."

"Give me a minute." I squinted at the spider that stood between me and my breakfast banana. She and I were working out an arrangement. "Let me do it, then. We're going to be late." Daniel was getting his panties in a bunch at the thought. Mr. Perfect was always punctual.

"No. You'll kill it."

"And?"

"And then it will be dead."

"And?"

"Just imagine it," I spoke, my eyes never leaving my arachnid opponent. "The spider family bereft of their matriarch. Her spider children waiting in their web, watching for Mother for days on end before they realize she's been murdered."

"She?"

"Yes." I tilted my head at the spider. "Her name is Roxanne." "Of course it is. Take Roxanne outside before she meets the Op-Ed section of Joseph's *Wall Street Journal*."

I paused. "Why is our brother getting the *Wall Street Journal*?"

"He thinks it's funny."

I smiled. It was. I turned to stare at Roxanne, who had sidestepped an inch or two in response to Daniel's threat. I held out the paper towel and reached for her, but recoiled involuntarily. For the past ten minutes, I'd been repeating this motion: reaching and withdrawing. I wanted to shepherd Roxanne to freedom, to deliver her from our kitchen and lead her to a land flowing with the blood of myriad flying insects. A land otherwise known as our backyard.

But it seemed I was not up to the task. I was still hungry, though, and wanted my banana. I reached for her again, my hand stuck in midair.

Daniel heaved a melodramatic sigh and stuck a cup in the microwave. He pressed a few buttons and the tray began revolving.

"You shouldn't stand in front of the microwave."

Daniel ignored me.

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