

**THE
MASKED
TRUTH**

PROLOGUE If there's anything more tragic than spending your Saturday night babysitting, it's spending your Saturday night babysitting after canceling a date with the guy you've been dreaming about all year.

"Can't you find someone else?" I say when Shannon asks me to take the gig because her grandma's sick.

"You don't think I've tried? You aren't exactly at the top of my list these days, Riley."

I wince at that. *We had* been friends. Best friends. Then, last summer, her boyfriend got loaded and made a pass at me. I shut him down, of course, but I didn't tell her, and that was my mistake, because someone else had.

"You owe me," she says.

"Can you cancel?" I ask. I know the Porters—I used to babysit their daughter, Darla, when Shannon couldn't. "They'd understand—"

"Mr. Porter is getting an award. It's a huge deal."

I take a deep breath. "Fine."

I'm walking to the Porters' when my phone buzzes. *Where r u?*
I answer, *Don't ask.*

The phone rings. When I pick up, Lucia says, "I just got

a call from Micah. Seems he was shooting hoops with Travis when Shannon walked by . . . after you canceled with Travis to cover her babysitting gig. She said her grandma's just fine, and she doesn't know *why* you'd lie to him like that."

"What? No. That's—"

"Bullshit? Uh-huh. She totally set you up."

Before I can answer, I plow into a man walking around the corner. As I apologize, I notice the butt of a gun poking from under his jacket.

"Riley?" Lucia says.

I shake it off. I'm a cop's daughter; I know people legally carry concealed weapons all the time.

"Riley?"

"Sorry, I'm at the Porters' place. I'll call you back in a few, okay?"

"I can play Candy Land now!" Darla says as her mother tries to give me last-minute instructions while applying her makeup in the main-floor bathroom.

"Claire!" Mr. Porter calls from the living room. "We needed to leave five minutes ago."

"Only because you agreed to cocktails first . . . without telling me!" Mrs. Porter rolls her eyes at me. "Men. Sorry, Riley. Tonight's a bit of a disaster. First his sister got sick and couldn't take Darla. Then an important client asked him to predinner cocktails. We'll be at the Ritz all night. Our cell numbers are on the fridge."

"You're going out?" Darla says. "*Again?*"

"That's why Riley's here, sweetheart." Mrs. Porter offers a strained smile as her daughter hangs off her arm. "If we don't go out tonight, then you can't play Candy Land with Riley."

"I have an idea," I say to Darla. "How about we set up

the board, and then we'll phone your mom and she can play on the way to dinner?"

"That's a great idea," Mrs. Porter says. "You can move for me. And if I win, you can eat my ice cream."

"Ice cream?"

"Didn't I mention that? Riley will walk you down to the Scoop after dinner."

"But if I win, you have to watch me eat mine," I say. "I think I'll get bubblegum. You don't like bubblegum anymore, do you?"

She squeals, and I laugh and propel her out as Mr. Porter calls, "Claire!" Then he sees me and says, "Sorry for shouting."

"She's almost done," I say, smiling as Darla and I pass through the living room.

"What color do you want to be?" Darla asks.

"Purple."

"There is no purple, silly. There's . . ."

She rhymes them off, but I'm busy thinking I could text Travis an explanation as we set up the board . . . except that I left my cell phone downstairs. If I go down to get it, it'll seem as if I can't even wait for the Porters to leave before I start chatting with my friends and ignoring their kid.

I look at the pieces Darla holds out. "Green, then."

"Mommy will be yellow."

Darla hums as she lays out the board. I step toward the door. It's quiet down there, and while I doubt the Porters would leave before saying goodbye, they *are* in a hurry.

"I just need to grab something from downstairs," I say to Darla.

She nods and keeps humming, her attention on the board.

I walk into the hall. I'm at the top of the stairs when a sudden *whoosh* makes me jump.

"Really, Claire?" Mr. Porter sighs and then says, "Your hair must be dry by now," and I realize I'm hearing the blow-dryer from the downstairs bathroom.

Maybe if I just grab my backpack, it won't look suspicious. I start down the stairs.

"What the hell?" Mr. Porter says.

I freeze, but I'm only three steps down, too high for him to see.

"Who the hell—?"

A resounding smack. I stumble back. A thud follows, like something hitting the floor. I inch against the wall, and when I look through the railing I can see Mr. Porter's outstretched hand on the carpet. I back up one step and crouch, my heart thumping so hard I'm struggling to breathe.

When I peer down, I see Mr. Porter's face. His mouth is bloody and he's wiping it as he sits up.

"You want money?" he says. "There isn't more than a hundred bucks, but you can take my credit cards."

The rest is drowned out by the sound of the hair dryer, still running. A door creaks behind me. It's Darla, stepping from the bedroom, her mouth opening as she sees me.

I fly up those stairs so fast I'm sure I'll be heard. I push Darla back into the room and close the door.

"The game's ready," she says, and I realize she didn't hear anything.

"Go ahead and start. I-I'll be right there."

I need to get to a phone. Is there one in her parents' room? Do they still *have* a landline?

And how long am I going to stand here wondering while a robbery unfolds below?

Robbery. Oh God, there's a robbery, and the Porters are

down there and I have Darla and I need to— I need to do something, anything.

I hurry back to Darla and drop to a crouch. “I’m going to step out and talk to your dad. You need to stay here. Start your turn. Youngest goes first, right? Now wait right—”

The hair dryer stops.

I have to warn Mrs. Porter.

A shriek from downstairs. A half-stifled yelp of shock has Darla’s head jerking up, her eyes going wide.

“Did you hear that bird? It sounds strange, huh?” My words tumble out fast and shaky I’m not even sure she understands. “Stay right here while I—”

A shot.

I bolt up from my crouch so fast I nearly fall over. Did I just hear—? No, I couldn’t have. It’s a robbery. Just a robbery.

“Riley . . . ?” Fear licks through Darla’s voice, and I know she heard the same thing.

“It’s—it’s just a car,” I blurt, barely able to get the words out. “Backfiring. But . . . but . . . we’re going to play a new game, Darla. Y-your mom’s coming up in a few minutes to say goodbye and we’re going to hide. How’s that?”

The fear evaporates as she lets out the first note of a squeal. I slap one trembling hand over her mouth. “Shhh. Don’t give it away. Now get under the bed.”

“But that’s the first place she’ll—”

“We don’t want to worry her. Just surprise her. Come on.”

I prod her to the bed. Then I hurry to shut the door. Below, I hear Mrs. Porter’s muffled sobs.

I need to do something.

“Riley?” Darla pokes her head from under the bed.

I quickly shut the door and run back to her.

I’m overreacting. Cop’s kid—we do that. It’s a simple armed robbery.

Simple armed robbery? At the thought, this weird burbling laugh sticks in my gut.

Yes, armed robbery is bad, but that's all this is. The thief wants something. He fired a shot to scare them. That's all. He wants debit cards or credit cards or jewelry, and they'll give it to him. They're smart. They aren't arguing.

Just a robbery.

That's it, that's it, that's it.

I crawl under the bed and strain to listen. I can still hear Mrs. Porter, her words now too faint to make out, but her tone tells me she's begging.

Why don't I hear Mr. Porter?

That shot.

No, they've knocked him out. That's all. Knocked him—
A second shot. And Mrs. Porter stops begging.

CHAPTER 1 *If there's anything more tragic than spending your Saturday night babysitting, it's spending your Saturday night babysitting after canceling a date with the guy you've been dreaming about all year.*

How many times have those lines gone through my head in the past four months? How many nights have I lain in bed, thinking them? Stood in front of a mirror, thinking them?

You stupid, stupid girl. You had no idea what tragedy is.

Tragedy isn't a ruined Saturday night. It isn't a missed date. It's lying under your bed with the babysitter and listening to two shots, and then following your babysitter into the hall and seeing your parents at the bottom of the stairs, covered in blood. Tragedy is spending your life trying to understand how that could have happened, how you could have been under the bed, giggling, with your babysitter, while your parents were murdered. And your babysitter did nothing about it.

Hell is being the girl who did nothing, who has to live with that guilt. Worse, having to live as a hero, listen to people tell me how brave I was and how I saved that little girl, and all I want to do is shake them and say, "I hid under the freaking bed!"

It doesn't matter if my mother and my friends and my priest and the police and two therapists have told me I did

the right thing. It doesn't even matter if my older sister Sloane says it, rolling her eyes with "God, Riley, you are such a martyr. Would you rather have been shot? Like Dad?"

Any other time Sloane brought up our father's death that casually I might have taken a swing at her for it. Maybe that's what she wanted. To smack me out of my paralysis. It didn't matter. I heard her say it, and I walked away.

After Lucia and I became friends, she admitted she used to cut. I'd been supportive and I'd tried to understand, but I couldn't really. Now I do, because the impulse to feel something, *anything*, is so incredible that there are times I dig my nails into my palms hard enough to draw blood. It doesn't help.

"Riley?" Mom says. "We're here, baby."

I look out to see a huge windowless building.

"Well, that's not just a little creepy," Sloane mutters from the backseat.

I look at the building, a hulking solid box, like a prison, and I should want to run. Tell Mom I've changed my mind, that I don't need this therapy weekend.

I'm fine, Mom. Really. See? Big smile. Everything's fine.

Except it isn't fine, and the surest proof of that is that when I look at this building—with a steel front door and not a single window—I don't want to run away. I want to run *to* it, race inside and slam the door behind me and lock the world out.

"It's a renovated warehouse," Mom says to Sloane. "They're remodeling it into offices, and in the meantime the builder lets community groups use it. Riley's therapist says the lack of windows is a good thing. It'll keep the kids focused. And of course, they'll be allowed out for fresh air and walks."

My sister's gaze sweeps the city block, past more brick boxes—warehouses and industrial buildings, already dark

on a Friday evening, some permanently dark, judging by the boarded and broken windows.

“It’s an awesome neighborhood for walking,” Sloane says. “Great scenery. Probably plenty of friendly muggers and cheerful drunks.” She looks at me. “Did you pack your fencing saber?”

Mom sighs. “The kids won’t take their walks here, of course. There’s a park where they’ll go for two hours each morning.”

“To use the playground equipment? Or will they lock them in the dog park and make them run laps?”

Mom sighs deeper.

Sloane mouths to me, “Tell her you don’t want to do this.”

“It’s fine,” I say.

Sloane rolls her eyes and slumps into her seat.

Mom looks at me and says, “If you don’t like it, baby, you don’t have to stay.”

“It’s only for the weekend, Mom. I’ll survive.”

She grips the steering wheel tighter. “I know. I just . . . I wish . . .” *I wish your father were here.* That’s what she wants to say. Because as much as we love each other, she doesn’t get me the way Dad did. But he’s been gone eighteen months now. Killed in the line of duty. A hero. Just like his daughter.

I inhale sharply. *No self-pity, Riley. Chin up. Mom doesn’t deserve your shit.*

I reach deep inside and pull out the part of me she *does* deserve. The old Riley. She’s still there, and I can drag her out as needed, like when I’m fencing, and I can reach deep inside myself and pull out another girl, one who’s more aggressive, a girl who fights to win.

A different Riley for every occasion. Right now Mom needs the cheerful one, so I pluck her out and dust her off and smile over at my mother and say, “Are we still on for next weekend?”

“You don’t need to go to New York with me. I know you hate fashion shows.”

“But I love Broadway musicals, and that’s the deal, right? I watch your gorgeous designs paraded down the runway, and you sit through *The Lion King* for the fifth time.”

“Then we’ll go shopping,” Sloane says. “Now that you’re skinny, Riley, it’ll be much easier to find you stuff.”

“Sloane!” Mom says, twisting to glare at her.

“She lost weight. That’s good, right?”

“Your sister lost weight because she can’t eat. That is *not* good!”

“Mom . . .” I say.

“And she did not *need* to lose weight. She was a size *ten*.”

I get out while Mom lights into Sloane. An old argument and not one I need right now. Mom and Sloane are both five foot two and size two. I take after my dad. When my height started shooting up in middle school, Mom dreamed that someday I’d model her designs. I do have the height now, but as my grandma says, my figure is better suited to babies than a runway strut.

I grab my bag out of the trunk. Mom catches up with me. “You know I don’t think that, right, baby? I didn’t *want* you losing weight. I want you to be healthy. In every way, I want you to be healthy.”

“I know, Mom.” I give her a one-armed hug as we walk. “So . . . New York. Where are we staying?”

I have to pass the metal detecting wand test before I can enter the building. They say that’s standard practice these days, but I’m sure it also has something to do with the fact this is a group therapy weekend for kids with problems. They don’t want us bringing in anything sharp—for our own safety and everyone else’s.

“I’d ask you about a cell phone,” Aimee says as she scans my bag, “but I know if we told you not to bring one, you wouldn’t have.”

It’s meant to be a compliment, but at seventeen no one likes to be reminded what a rule-follower she is. I’d be tempted to smuggle a phone in if that wouldn’t just make me feel petty and immature.

I say goodbye to Mom, and then Aimee takes me up to my room. She’s been my therapist for a month now. She’s in her late twenties and reminds me of Zooey Deschanel, with both the slightly off-kilter prettiness and the manic-pixie personality. I like her, even if I’m not sure how much good therapy is doing. She’s my second counselor since the incident. Third if you count my priest. I started in teen group at church, but, well . . . I got a little tired of hearing how God would fix me. I want to fix myself.

I leave my bag in my room. I’ll be sharing it with a girl I don’t know. This weekend is for kids from several local groups, and there’s only one guy from mine. I was supposed to get my own room, but then this other girl—Sandra—signed up at the last minute. The old me would have been happy at the prospect of meeting new people. Now I wish I could grab a sleeping bag and find a spot alone on the floor downstairs.

With Mom gone, there’s no need to keep wearing my “old Riley” mask. As my mood drops, I remind myself it isn’t like I had anything better to do this weekend. After the incident, there’d been no need to explain to Travis that Shannon had tricked me, though Lucia still made sure he knew. He’d come by our house that week with two volumes of *Transmetropolitan* because the first time we talked, it was about graphic novels. He paired the comics with a giant Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup because he’d noticed that was my candy of choice from the school vending machines. Can a guy get any sweeter than that? No.

Two weeks later, when he asked me out again, I nearly threw up. A date with Travis would forever be linked to that night. I can barely face him in school. Hell, I can barely go to school. My grades are tanking, and my teachers keep saying they'll adjust them "in light of what happened." I don't want them adjusted. I don't want a free pass. I just want to pull myself together.

So I'm here, doing a weekend therapy camp. I need to make the effort, like I need to make the effort to get up every morning. If I stop moving, I'll be stuck forever under that bed, listening to the footsteps of the man who killed the Porters and praying, *Please God, don't let him find us. Don't let him hurt Darla. Don't let him hurt me.*

Aimee sends me downstairs to find the main therapy room. Easier said than done. Whoever designed this place wasn't a fan of simplicity and order. It's a warren of halls. Like someone with bipolar disorder drew the blueprints during a manic episode: "We'll put a room here! And here! Oh, and we'll connect them here!" After four months in group therapy, I've learned a lot about mental illness. Sometimes I feel like an impostor. As if I'm taking valuable therapy time from kids with *real* problems.

I'm following the maze to the main room when I pause to consider two options.

"Left," a voice says. It's a guy around sixteen. He's an inch or so taller than me. Dark hair, slicked back. Dressed in a battered leather jacket, ripped jeans and filthy sneakers. The classic bad-boy look, ruined by the fact he's wearing an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt and two-hundred-dollar Air Jordans.

"Aaron," he says, extending a hand.

"Riley."

His lips twitch. "You don't look like a Riley."

Four months ago I would have asked what a Riley looks

like. Now I can't work up the energy. I only shrug and mumble.

"Sorry," he says. "Didn't mean to be . . . whatever. It's just that I heard there was a Maria here, so when I saw you, I figured you were her."

He means because I'm Hispanic. Again, the old Riley would have had a comeback. Instead, I hear one— "And why would you think that?" —spoken in a British accent, heavy with sarcasm.

I turn. It's Max—Aimee's other patient. About six feet tall. Lean. Denim jacket. Jeans. Doc Martens. Dark blond hair worn long enough that he can tie it back, though today it's hanging loose.

Aaron says, "I'm not trying to be a jerk. I just meant it's weird her parents gave her an Irish name when she's Mexican."

"Are you Jewish?" Max asks.

"What? No. Why?"

"Then it's weird your parents gave you a Jewish name."

Aaron opens his mouth to answer, settles for a glare and stalks down the hall.

Max looks at me, eyebrows arched. "I don't even get a thank-you?"

"If I wanted to snark at him, I would have."

"Oh, you wanted to. You've just lost your footing, Riley." He winks. "Or should it be Ril-ia?"

I don't know Max well. No one in our group does. The rest of us have to sit in the semicircle and talk, while he stays in the back and rarely offers a word beyond a sarcastic comment. I have no idea what he's there for. I'm not even convinced his accent is real. All I know is that I have to vomit out every last anxiety and fear and self-hating thought in my head, and he gets to listen to it and give nothing in return.

“Why are you here?” I say. “You don’t contribute anything.”

“I contribute my devastating wit and charm,” he says. “What more could you want?”

Less of both, I think, but I only say, “The point of therapy is to discuss your problems.”

“But I don’t have any problems, old girl.” He cranks up the accent for that. It’s his shtick, dialing the Brit-talk up to eleven, like something out of a movie from the twenties.

I give him a look. “Does anyone say ‘old girl’ anymore? Even in Britain?”

“No, they do not. Because I’m over here now.” He grins, and I feel the overwhelming urge to shake it from his face. Well, at least I feel something. Though Aimee might prefer a less violent impulse.

“Since you *are* here,” I say, “in this group, you *do* have problems. That’s a prerequisite for the therapy.”

“Not for me. I’m right as rain, Ril-ia Vasquez. Right as rain.” He tosses me another grin and saunters down the hall toward the room.

I bend and retie a shoe that doesn’t need retying, giving him time to get ahead. Then I straighten and I’m about to head in the same direction when I hear the squeak of a shoe and turn to see a girl. She’s maybe fifteen, with dark curly hair, wearing a cute little dress—a bit formal for the occasion, but from the way she’s nervously glancing down the corridors, I don’t think she’s a therapy regular. While the new Riley’s impulse is to turn away and let someone else handle it, I know better. So I call, “It’s this way.”

She does a rabbit-jump and spins to face me.

“The therapy room is over here,” I say, pointing.

“O-okay,” she says. “I’ll . . . I’ll see you in there.”

Again, I want to just say *whatever* and continue on. Again, there’s still enough of the old me—the girl who used

to serve on the student council, unofficial chick-in-charge-of-organizing-stuff—that I can't turn my back on her, no more than I could a freshman who looks ready to bolt on her first day.

"If you don't mind walking in with me, I'd appreciate that," I say as I head over. "I hate that part." I stop in front of her. "I'm Riley."

"Sandy," she says.

"My roommate? Even better. Please tell me you know more about these weekend things than I do."

A weak smile. "No, sorry. I'm a total therapy noob. I . . ." Her gaze darts to her hand, and I see her sleeve riding up just enough to show bandages around her wrist. She quickly yanks her sleeve over them.

"S-sorry," she says. "It's not— It's not as bad as it looks. I wasn't really . . . wasn't really trying to . . ." She sucks in breath. "Just a stupid thing. A boy and . . . stupid. But my parents are freaked out so I said I'd go to therapy, and we heard about this weekend, and I thought it would make them feel better if I volunteered, you know? Prove I regret it and . . ." She looks up, her eyes widening. "Oh my God, I'm babbling. I can't believe I just said all that."

I smile for her. "It's practice for the sessions. And you did very well." I look toward the therapy room, where I can hear Aaron's loud voice and then Max with some sarcastic rejoinder. "We can go in there with the guys or we can poke around out here."

"I'd rather poke around. He sounds like a jerk."

"Which one?"

She smiles, and we head off down the hall.

CHAPTER 2 Worst thing about group therapy? The introductions.

Hi, I'm Riley, and I . . . have a problem.

Yeah, we all do. That's why we're here.

Hi, I'm Riley, and I . . . need help.

Um, well, then you're in the right place.

Hi, I'm Riley, and I've been diagnosed with situationally related anxiety and depression leading to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Say what?

Hi, I'm Riley, and I was in the house while the couple I was babysitting for were murdered.

Oh, you poor thing.

Hi, I'm Riley, and I was under the bed while the couple I was babysitting for were murdered downstairs.

Oh, you poor . . . Wait, you were under the bed?

No one ever says the last one. But I hear it. Over and over. Some days, it's all I hear.

Now I'm in the therapy semicircle again. Sandy sits to my right, wearing a cardigan, sleeves pulled down over her hands. Max is in the back, as usual. Aimee sits off to the side, letting the second therapist—a balding guy named Lorenzo—lead the group. The boy on the end was supposed

to talk first, but he wouldn't. The girl on my left went instead. Brienne. As tiny as Sloane but blond, Brienne looks like a cheerleader. She's here for "emotional stuff." That's all she says for now, which is fine. No one will push. Yet.

I'm up next.

"I'm Riley Vasquez, and I . . ." I trail off, searching for the right words as my stomach clenches.

"Oh!" Brienne grins at me like she's about to shake her pompoms and ask for an *M*. "You were in the papers. You saved that little girl."

As I shrink into my chair, she notices my reaction and hurries on, "And you're the city girls' fencing champ. That's why I remembered the article. I thought the fencing thing was cool."

I manage a weak smile for her. "Thanks."

Aaron wrinkles his nose. "If you're the girl who saved that kid, what are you doing in therapy? Is the pressure of being a hero too much to bear?"

I flinch.

Brienne moves forward, like a tiny attack dog straining at its leash. "She saw two people die."

"No," Aaron says. "If I remember the story, she never actually witnessed—"

"Oh, for God's sake. She was there when two people *died*. She could have been killed herself."

"The point is," I cut in, "that I'm working through some things—"

"Like what?" Aaron says. "Did you even *see* them after they'd been shot?"

My annoyance from earlier flares. "No, I just presumed they were dead and called 911 without actually checking on them. Of course I saw them. I—"

"Take the tone down, please, Riley," Lorenzo says.

“What?” Brienne says. “This jerk gets to say whatever he wants, and you give Riley crap for defending herself? And if you dare tell me he’s just needling her because she’s cute, I swear I’ll hit you. Then we’ll have to spend the rest of this session talking about my anger issues, and nobody wants that.”

“No, Brienne,” Lorenzo says evenly. “I wasn’t letting Aaron get away with that. I was about to add that we don’t challenge anyone on their right to be here. Now, Aaron, you’re next. Introduce yourself, please.”

“Fine. I’m Aaron Highgate, and I’m here by mistake.”

Brienne mutters under her breath. He glowers at her.

“Well, I am. I don’t have a problem; my father has one. *With* me. That’s why I’m here. I crashed my Rover, and if I don’t do this weekend therapy shit, I won’t get a new one.”

“Tragic.”

“Brienne, please. Aaron, continue.”

“My dad thinks I have narcissistic personality disorder. He even bribed some shrink to agree. I’m a narcissist? He’s the one screwing everything in a skirt. Mom’s finally divorcing him, and she’s going to take him to the cleaners. Like she should.”

“All right,” Lorenzo says slowly. “But why would he send you here?”

Aaron looks at Lorenzo like he’s an idiot. “Um, because he hates me. Because he hates that I’m siding with Mom. Because if he can prove I’m sick and she can’t handle it, then he can get custody and save a shitload of money on support . . .”

Aaron continues. While I’m not sure he has an actual disorder, there’s obviously some narcissism going on there. First he doesn’t want to talk about his problems. Then *all* he wants to talk about are his problems.

After about ten minutes, when he pauses for breath, I say, “I need to use the restroom.”

“I think you can wait, Riley,” Lorenzo says.

Aimee shakes her head. “That’s okay. Let her—”

“Let her take off while I’m talking?” Aaron says. “That’s rude.”

“No,” I say. “It’s part of my anxiety issue. I have a nervous bladder, and the longer I wait, the more—”

“Whoa, TMI,” Aaron says.

“You asked,” I reply, and take off before anyone can stop me.

I swear, the bathroom is a quarter mile away with all the twists and turns I have to take. I stay in there longer than I need to.

When I finally open the door, I’m not surprised to hear footsteps down the next hall. Someone’s come to fetch me. I’m torn between feeling guilty for hiding and wanting to snap, “Can I use the bathroom in peace?”

I won’t snap at whoever it is. I’ve done that enough tonight with Aaron, and I feel guiltier than I should. Story of my life these days. I remember when I was little, my dad read me a story about an obsequious mouse, quailing at every sharp word, running from every scary noise, stumbling over himself to apologize for everything. I hated that mouse. Now I am him.

“Looking for me?” I say as I turn the corner, heading toward the footsteps. “Sorry. I—”

An alien blocks my path. A gray-faced alien wearing a suit and gloves and holding a gun, and the thought that flashes through my mind is a memory from the month before Dad died, the two of us on the *Men in Black* ride at Universal, going through it over and over again, laughing as we competed to see who could shoot the most aliens.

The memory comes like a fist to my gut. It disappears just as fast, and I realize I’m staring at a guy wearing a gray

alien mask. Because that's what it is, obviously. A latex mask of the aliens from the old *X-Files* show. The gun, though? The gun is real.

I turn to run. I do not even *think* of jumping him and grabbing his weapon. Four months of feeling like a coward hasn't changed anything. I see a mask. I see a gun. I flee.

He grabs me by my hood. I twist and lash out, kicking and punching, and he whips me against the wall. My head hits hard enough for fireworks to explode behind my eyes. I still kick him when he gets within range and my fists aim for his gut. He wraps one hand around my throat and puts the gun at my temple. I keep struggling.

"Are you loco, girl?" he growls. "This isn't a toy."

I don't care. I'll do whatever it takes to get away because I know what happens if I don't. I can still hear the gunshots. I can see the blood. I can feel Mrs. Porter's skin cooling fast under my hands.

So I will fight and—

The gun clocks me in the temple. The same spot that struck the wall, and I black out just long enough that when I come to, I'm staring at that wall. He's behind me, with a chokehold around my neck and the cold gun barrel pressed to the back of my head.

"Riley?" a distant voice calls, a singsong: "Riley, Riley, Ri-lee-a. Come out, come out wherever you are."

Max's boots tromp along the hall. The man pulls me toward a shadowy corner. He doesn't yank me behind it, though. He leaves me standing there, exposed in the dim light, with a gun to my head and one arm wrenched behind my back.

My heart is pounding so hard I feel like I'm going to pass out. I'll lose consciousness, and I'll fall forward, and my captor will think I'm trying to escape, and he'll shoot—

"Come out, come out," Max calls. "Or don't. Actually,

let's go with that. Don't come out. You're hopelessly lost, having failed to adequately mark the trail with breadcrumbs. That way, we both have an excuse not to go back and listen to Mr. Highgate, who is, shockingly, still regaling his captive audience with all the problems he *doesn't* have."

Oh God, go away, Max. Please, please, please go away. You don't deserve this. No one does. Just walk down another hall and let this guy take me and do whatever—

A wave of lightheadedness washes over me.

And do whatever.

Kill me.

He's going to kill me.

I don't care. Can't care. Can't escape. Just go, Max. Please, please—

Max steps around the corner and sees me in the shadows, my expression hidden.

"Bloody hell," he says. "You can't play a proper game at all. Go hide, please, so I can spend the next hour seeking and—"

The man pushes me, and we both move into the light. Max stops. He stands there, frozen, like I was, except my shock lasted only a second or two. Max stares at us, and the look on his face . . . I'd say it's terror, but not the kind you get from seeing someone holding a gun. It's deeper than that. Raw and bone-chilling.

"It's a mask, idiot," the man says.

At least three seconds tick by. Then Max rubs his face, hard.

"Riley?" he says, uncertainty in his voice.

"Don't move," I say finally, my voice oddly steady, as if his terror swallows my own. "He's got a gun to my head and—"

Max spits a curse, and I realize he hasn't seen the gun. So what freaked him out? A guy in an alien mask?

Max breathes hard now, saying, “All right, all right.” Then, “It’s going to be fine, Riley. Just stay calm. It’ll be fine. I’ll—”

The man cuts him off with a snorted laugh. “Don’t even think of playing hero, kid. All you’ll do is get this girl killed. Which, by the way” —he lowers his voice to a mock whisper— “really doesn’t impress the ladies.”

“Don’t,” I say. “Please. Max doesn’t have anything to do with what happened. Let him go. It’s me you want.”

“Really? Is your daddy rich?”

Max snaps out of it, his sarcasm slingshotting back. “Her *daddy* is dead, you tosser. You’ve got the wrong girl.”

“Actually, we aren’t looking for a girl at all. We’re here for the son of Mr. Lewis Highgate, who *is* very rich indeed. As for this girlie, let’s hope her daddy left a nice insurance policy. One that will help his daughter buy her freedom.”

“F-freedom?” I say.

“I believe this is what you call a hostage situation. You two kiddies may not be the main prize, but you’ll make perfectly fine bonuses.” He prods me forward, gun still at my head. “Now, let’s go meet young Mr. Highgate, phone his daddy and get this party started.”

CHAPTER 3 Our captor leads us back to the therapy room. If he speaks on the walk, I don't hear it. I just keep staring at him, thinking, *This can't be real*. Then I notice Max doing the same, an even more intense stare, his eyes like laser beams trying to cut through the mask. No, trying to incinerate it.

He blinks hard and seems surprised when he glances over to see the man still there. Surprised and dismayed. That's all—dismayed. Not panic, and maybe that's because he's decided this is all an act or a prank, but in a weird way his calm keeps me from dropping on the floor, hands over my head, breaking down, sobbing, "Not again, not again, not again."

I can hear voices from the therapy room, raised in anger and panic and fear. I don't hear words, though. It's as if there's cotton stuffed in my ears, a weird kind of deadening inside my head.

When we reach the room, there are two other men in masks, one from the *Star Wars* cantina scene, the other from *Predator*. They have everyone against the wall, faces to it, hands over their heads.

"Well, well, I see you boys started the party without me. Let me add the two final guests, then. Against the wall,

kiddies. I'd tell you to assume the position, but I think you can figure that out."

I try to walk over to Sandy and Brienne, but the guy in the gray *X-Files* mask grabs my shoulder and steers me to the end, between the only two kids whose names I don't know—the boy who wouldn't introduce himself and the girl who didn't get a chance.

The girl is about my age, the guy maybe a year younger. When I meet his gaze, he turns away almost angrily, as if I were trying to get him in trouble. The girl whispers, "Maria," and I turn her way. She has dark braids and dark skin, and she's taken off her jacket and is wearing a Happy Bunny T-shirt that says *Crazy on the Inside*. I have to smile at that. I just do, even if it's only a twitch of my lips. She catches my look and nods at Aimee and then waves a scolding finger, pantomiming that my counselor had not been nearly as amused by the shirt. Which is probably why it'd been covered by a jacket earlier.

Later, I'll tell her I'm glad she wore that shirt, because for that one moment it made me forget that I was standing at a wall, hands over my head, waiting for armed captors to frisk me. And that moment's break is all I need to push out of the corner inside my head, squelch the inward panic, and take a deep breath and say, "I can do this."

I know how hostage situations work. My dad was on the SWAT team for a few years, before he decided it took him away from his family too much. But I know the stats—fatalities and even injuries are extremely rare. These guys want money from Aaron's dad. They won't get it by killing kids Mr. Highgate doesn't even know.

Does that make me relax? Just chill and wait my turn, no big deal? Absolutely not. Because no amount of logic and reasoning will change the fact that I'm against a wall, about to be frisked by armed captors. But I can suck it in enough

to exchange semi-genuine smiles with Maria as our captors go the line, taking the cell phones from our counselors and checking the rest of us for contraband weapons.

When they reach the boy beside me, he turns around so sharply that the guns fly up and my breath catches.

“We already went through a metal detector,” he says.

“Yeah,” X-Files says. “And we’re going to check you again, because metal detectors aren’t perfect. Turn around and put—”

“You want to check me out? Fine. Take me to another room and I’ll give you my clothes.”

“This isn’t airport security. You don’t get options here. Turn around—”

X-Files reaches for the boy’s shoulder, and he jerks away with “Don’t touch me.”

“Gideon . . .” Lorenzo calls from down from the line.

“Cool it, kid,” Maria whispers.

“Don’t tell me—”

Predator and Cantina are on Gideon before he can finish. They pin him to the wall, and he’s shaking so hard, his eyes filling like he’s going to cry, and I catch his gaze, but when I do, he glowers and turns the other way.

MAX: CONCEIVABILITY

Conceivability: the capacity of being imagined or grasped mentally.

When Max first sees the alien with Riley, the only conceivable answer is that his meds aren't working. No. Not again. *I will not go through this again. I'll—*

You'll what, Max?

Nothing.

No, really, Maximus. When you say you won't go through it again, do you mean—?

Bugger off.

We need to talk about this.

No, he doesn't. Moving right along, there's an alien in the hallway, and he's quite certain he knows what that means. His latest cocktail of meds is not working. Oh, yes, he thought it was. Was so certain it was, but that was just another sign that it wasn't. Delusions of a world where his bloody meds work, and he can get back to living a bloody normal life.

Ha-ha. Very funny, old boy. There is no normal life for you. Not anymore. Just aliens holding pretty girls hostage. Perhaps this is a new subtype of delusion—one where you get to play the knight in shining armor. Well, hop to it, then. Slay the alien. Win the girl.

That's when the alien speaks, and Max realizes it's a man in a mask. That a perfectly ordinary criminal is holding

Riley hostage. His next thought: *Thank God, it's not the meds.* Followed by: *Bloody hell, there's a man holding Riley hostage.*

The kidnapper takes them back in the main room, and they go through the “Everybody against the wall, hands on your heads” and the pat-downs and the panic and the “Oh my God, I can't believe this is happening.”

You and me both.

Then they're sitting on the floor, listening, and Max is trying to process what the hostage-takers are saying. It's not that he can't understand them. They came to the States a year ago, him and Mum—*I think what you need, Maximus, is a change of scenery, and what I won't mention, dear boy, is that by “change of scenery” I really mean let's both run across the ocean and find someplace where no one knows what you did.*

A year here means it isn't as if these men speak a foreign language. He understands their words just fine. The problem is that he has to keep fighting against the voice in his head that whispers this isn't real, that the meds actually *aren't* working, that, yes, the alien heads do appear to be masks but that's only because the logic center of his brain hasn't completely shut down during this particular hallucination.

Three men in alien masks. The one speaking is the man who grabbed Riley. He wears a bulbous gray head. One of the others looks like a cross between an insect and a robot . . . with braids. Max vaguely recalls seeing it before. A film, maybe? He isn't really into films. Reading is his thing. Reading and writing—wild stories that everyone always told him were so creative and vivid and how did you ever come up with that, Max my boy, and that's some serious imagination there, and you'll be a writer one day, mark my words, a famous one like Stephen King or Dean Koontz, and you'll put me in your book then, won't you, ha-ha.

No one says that to him anymore. Now it's: Hmm, there's some disturbing stuff here, son, and is this what you see in your head, and did you really dream this up or were you documenting one of your hal-oo-sin-aa-shuns. That's how his American doctor says it. Hal-oo-sin-aa-shuns. Like one of those words you read but never have to say out loud, and when you do, it's not quite right.

Bloody hell, Maximus. *Focus.*

Can't. Sorry. One of the symptoms. Disorganized thought. Look it up.

No, Max. That's just you. Always has been. Brain flitting like a hummingbird on speed.

Because *it* has always been there. Waiting to pop up like a funhouse skeleton. You thought you were normal, kid? Surprise!

No, I'm quite certain no one ever called you normal, Max. Don't go blaming the crazy for everything.

Why not? It fits the symptoms. You want to know another one? Hearing voices.

He squeezes his eyes shut. What was he thinking . . . ? Right. About the aliens.

The third guy wears a mask he recognizes from *Star Wars*. That's one film he's seen a few times, because it's an excellent lesson on story structure and the universal monomyth of the hero. He'll call that one *Star Wars*. The other is *Braids*. And the one talking? Gray.

"So the next step," Gray says, "is to contact Mr. Highgate, tell him not to phone the police and then send him a proof-of-life video and an ear. Preferably Aaron's." Gray laughs, as if this is hilarious. Even his confederates don't join in.

"Kidding," Gray says. "Well, maybe not about the ear, but we'll see how Aaron here comports himself. The rest? Hollywood bullshit. Everyone with half a brain calls the police. So that's where we start. Aaron? Smile."

Gray raises an iPhone and Aaron scowls.

“You’re a natural,” Gray says. “Now, let me send that to your daddy, and in about twenty minutes I expect this place to be surrounded by cops. Unless your daddy’s busy tonight—screwing his girlfriend or screwing over another company—because that would be very inconvenient.”

Aaron says nothing.

“There, picture sent. Video even, with a time stamp. Yes, I did the proof-of-life thing, as cliché as it is. Now, the next steps, kiddies . . .”

He keeps talking, but Max’s attention slides away. This isn’t real. Cannot be real. *Kidnapped at a therapy sleepover? Really, Maximus? You’re losing your creative touch. You need to start writing again. Give that imagination a workout.*

Oh, believe me. It’s had a workout. Just ask Justin.

Now, Max. You weren’t thinking clearly. It’s not your fault.
Sod off.

He looks over at Riley and focuses on her instead. That’s easy as pie, as his gran would say. Namely because Riley Vasquez is easy to look at. Two years ago he’d have sat across the class and planned how to talk to her. *Hey, I think you’re brilliant and cute, and I’d like to get to know you better, so how about we go to the cinema Friday night?*

He did fantasize about talking to Riley, but the conversation, as with most everything in his life these days, was different. *Hey, I think you’re smart and sweet and a little bit messed up, and do you want to talk? Just talk? You seem like someone I could talk to, and sure, you think I’m a idiot, but that’s just an act. All right, maybe not completely an act. But you seem like you need someone to talk to and I do too, so how about it? You can talk about what happened to you and— Me? Um, nothing happened to me. Nothing important. Just lost my mind and haven’t found it again. Never will. Schizophrenia. Ever heard of it? Short version:*

I'm crazy. Sorry. Not supposed to say that. Bad Max. Bad, bad Max. No using the C-word. I'm not crazy. I just see things that aren't there, hear people who aren't there . . . Huh, yeah, that does sound like crazy, but shhh, don't tell anyone. And don't worry. I'm perfectly harmless. Well, unless I mistake you for a demon and try to strangle— Wait! No, come back.

Gray snaps his fingers in front of Max, startling him. “Am I boring you, son?”

“Yeah, kinda, mate. Can we speed this along?”

“Maximus . . .” his therapist, Aimee, says, her voice low with warning.

Gray snorts. “Maximus?”

“I prefer Max.”

“I bet you do. What kind of sadists name their kid Maximus?”

“A historian specializing in ancient Rome and a lieutenant-general in the British army. And if you know anything about the salaries of academics and career soldiers, you’ll realize I’m really not worth your time.” Max takes out his wallet and removes three twenties. “I have sixty. Can we call it a night? Things to do and all that. It is the weekend after all.”

“Max?” a voice says. “Sit down.”

He turns to see Riley walking toward him. Her hands tremble, and she’s obviously struggling to keep it together, and he wants to nod and say *all right* and sit down, but he wants to make her smile too, make her relax, show her this isn’t a big deal, not like before, like what happened when she was babysitting.

“I’m cutting through the bull—” he begins.

“Sit. Down.” She stops and lowers her voice. “Are you trying to get us killed? They have guns.”

“Are you sure? Maybe we’re imagining it. We are a little nuts, after all.”

She gives him a look that makes him happy she's not the one with a gun.

So no chance of that talk, then? All right. Maybe we can just make out instead.

He chuckles, and her eyes narrow.

“Sit the hell down,” she hisses.

Sorry. Not his fault. Inappropriate affect. It's a symptom.

Bollocks. You're just an idiot. No meds for that.

At least she doesn't look scared anymore.

Max sits cross-legged on the floor. Riley lowers herself beside him. See? Bad behavior has its reward.

Except she kind of hates your guts right now.

And an hour ago, she just didn't like him very much. He's making progress.

“Max?” she whispers. “Pay attention. Please. Don't make this worse.”

She does have a point. If it is real, he isn't helping. If it isn't, then that's all the more reason to pay attention. Find the lies. Find the truth.