

CHAPTER ONE

I can't ask for a better day to be out shooting. Man, what a view. Something about how the sun's rays press against the faint distant outline of the mountains. Sick! If it can seem so dominating from all the way over here, I can only imagine what it must feel like up close. I don't know. It just always kind of does something to me.

I know, I know. Lame, right? But trust me, if you lived in the hellhole I live in, anytime alone is sacred. You start to appreciate all these little not-so-particular things. Yeah—even *the outline of the mountains*.

Carefully, I focus the lens on my Canon 7D to capture the effect of the clouds drifting across the peaks of Mt. Rose and get my shot. A few seconds later, the sunlight dims. I hadn't realized it was so late. I glance at my watch, wondering what's taking Melinda so long. She promised to pick me up by five, even though I knew that would mean five-thirty. It's five-forty-five.

I call her on my cell. It rings four times, then goes to voicemail. "Come on, Mel!" I mutter. "It's getting late!"

I've had a good day so far, probably because I've been alone for most of it, and I really don't want another confrontation with Jet. I can still taste the faint copper tinge of blood at the corner of my mouth where he split my lip the last time around. Two days ago.

I hit redial. Straight to voicemail. "Dammit, Mel!"

I tell myself to breathe, but my anxiety is really starting to kick in. Sweat is beading on my forehead and my heart is jolting in my chest. Why does she always have to be so impossible? I don't get it.

The moment I hear the loud thrum of an engine roaring up the dirt road, I jump up from the boulder I've been perched on. It's about damn time!

She screeches up to me in her new, cherry-red Mini Cooper and slams on the brakes. I dodge around to the passenger side. Grab the door handle. It's locked.

"Mel!" I shout. "Open up!"

But she's sitting behind the wheel pretending not to hear me. Eyes glued to her phone, purple nails tapping out a text message. With a tiny smirk on her glossed-up lips.

I hit the window with my fist. “Stop messing around! Jet’s gonna be pissed!”

She finishes her text, sends it . . . and adjusts the rearview mirror so she can check out the jet-black curls at her temples. She still hasn’t given me one look. Is she really serious right now?

I pound at the window again, as hard as I can. “Open up, dammit!” My anxiety is turning into rage. And rage is something Jet’s modeled for me only too well over the years, ever since he and his first wife, Leyla, took me in as a foster kid. Mel was just six at the time, but “my sister,” which she became after they finally adopted me, was a full-fledged brat from Day One, and she’s only gotten worse.

My fist hurts. I’m afraid of what Jet will do when we get back, since he ordered me to be home by six so I can start dinner.

But as far as Mel’s concerned, I might as well not be there. I can’t control it any longer. I take a step back, lift my knee, and kick the passenger door with all my strength. The hollow metal frame vibrates against the sole of my shoe. Mel’s prized car now has a six-inch dent right in the middle of the passenger door.

I guess *that* got her attention. Her mouth is hanging open. For a moment, she’s so astonished that she can’t speak. She swings her door open and charges around to the passenger side.

“MY CAR!” she screams, staring at the dent. “Are you *crazy?!?*”

“Why couldn’t you just open up?” I yell back.

“Gavin, you’re an asshole! I was just messing with you! You’re *never* gonna learn to use your head, are you?”

“Go to hell!”

She goes still, then raises her eyebrows with an “Oh, really?” expression. Then she hauls off and slams her fist into the right side of my face. All I can feel is the large stone of her ring jabbing into my cheek. She stalks back to the driver’s side with a wicked smirk creasing her lips and snaps, “You can *walk* home!”

She slides behind the wheel, slams the door, and peels off so hard and fast that the car kicks up a stinging cloud of gravel and asphalt dust all over me.

She can’t be serious. But as the Mini disappears around the first bend in the road, I realize that she is.

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The walk home is brutal. I was hoping that the sun would have begun its descent by now, but it's still as blazing hot as ever. I remember them saying on the news that this was going to be one of the hottest summers ever. Though I feel like they've been saying that for the past five years. Global warming or something.

I know that nothing good is going to be waiting for me when I get to the house. For sure, Mel's already gotten back and is showing Jet what I did to the car and batting her lashes and blaming it all on me. Equipped with her fake tears, she's probably made up a lie about how I "blew up" on her and refused to go back with her even though she "begged" me to get in. It wouldn't be the first time her lies have gotten me into trouble. And no doubt he's now in a violent rage and shouting about how I'm going to "get my ass kicked" and how "useless" I am.

I trudge along trying to prepare myself for the tempest that's going to hit me when I finally get back. I don't even need to close my eyes to envision the fury in his bloodshot eyes and smell his liquor breath and see his large, flaring nostrils.

If only Leyla were still alive. God, I miss her. Because of her, Jet actually used to be a decent father. He always had a short fuse, but he wasn't the angry, pathetic drunk he turned into after she died and he got serious about drinking. Looking at him today, with his beer belly lapping over his belt and the patches of thinning hair on his scalp, I find it hard to remember that he actually used to be a handsome, well-groomed guy. And not a bad foster father, either. I remember him getting home early from the construction site with a smile and he'd sometimes even have a toy for me. Things really do change, I guess.

I was four when my real parents died in a house fire while I was at daycare. I ended up in foster care because I had no other relatives to claim me.

I've never quite known how Leyla and Jet took me on, but after a year of fostering they legally adopted me. And until I was about eight, I was a generally happy kid even though Mel and I never really got along. I think she always felt threatened by me, and my guess is that she was jealous because Leyla and Jet had brought this random kid into her home and she had to share their attention with me.

I guess it would've bothered me, too, if I'd been in her place. But it's not like it was my fault. I wasn't intentionally trying to steal them from her or something. I would never do that.

That day, Leyla took me and Mel to the convenience store two blocks from our place. I was whining nonstop because I wanted sour bear gummies, and I wasn't going to let up until I had them. But while I was happily grabbing my bag of candy, two masked men with guns barged in and ordered the clerk to hand over all the cash in the register.

I had no idea what was happening, but I was so scared that I started crying. One of the guys pointed his gun at me and shouted, "Shut up, kid!" That made me cry even louder and harder.

"I said shut up!" he repeated, and took a step toward me.

"Leave him alone!" Leyla shouted. She grabbed me and put me behind her, shielding me with her body. Mel was crouched in a corner near the Slurpee cooler with tears running down her cheeks.

"Hey!" the guy said. "Whaddya got in that purse?" He made a grab for it. She backed away from him, but he grabbed her and threw her to the filthy, sawdust-covered floor. His buddy ran over, held her down, grabbed her purse, and tore it open.

"You can't take our money!" I yelled. I ran over and kicked him in the shin to try to get him away from her. He swung the gun around at me and Leyla sprang up from the floor and lunged in front of me as the gun went off.

It hit her in the neck, and seconds later she was gone.

Before I could even process what had happened, the gunmen ran out of the store. I'll never forget leaning over Leyla's body and staring at the pool of blood spreading over the floor. Her jungle-green eyes—Mel's exact eye color—were wide open, but I somehow knew that she couldn't see me even though her tears never seemed to stop.

"*MOM!*" I screamed. "Mom! Mom! Mom, I'm sorry!"

I kept calling her name over and over and over even though I knew she would never answer me again. Finally I knelt down in all the blood and laid my head on her stomach until Mariela, the Mexican clerk who'd been working at the store ever since I could remember, hurried over and peeled me away from Leyla's body.

“*Dios Mio! Mijito!*” she sobbed, “*Ven conmigo.*” And as I started to hear the police sirens in the distance but getting louder every second, she led me into the stockroom so I wouldn’t see any more. Then she went back out to Mel, who was still huddled on the floor rocking back and forth in shock. She didn’t talk for almost a month. I’ve never eaten sour bears again.

Even worse, the next day Jet told us that Leyla was pregnant and that they’d been planning to surprise us with the news that night at dinner. So I’d been the cause of two deaths. A double loss. Go me.

Jet never stopped holding it against me. And Mel’s jealousy turned into outright hatred.

I’m not sure either of them hated me more than I hated myself.

Jet turned to alcohol. He spent his days binge-drinking on the couch that he and Leyla had chosen together. He stopped taking construction jobs and finally took a temporary leave of absence that somehow turned into a permanent one. Two years later he married Dina, who not only puts up with his brutal attacks and constant verbal assaults, but for some unknown reason actually defends him.

She’s as pathetic as he is, and that bothers me because she’s actually a sweet woman. It’s like she’s under some kind of spell. What kind of woman puts up with a man who bruises her constantly and hurls hateful remarks? Last night he called her a “filthy pig”. And he’s always calling her a “fat ass”, which I don’t understand because she’s not even pudgy in the least! And trust me—I know chunky. I was a size Hefty for most of my childhood.

In all honesty, I think she feels she has no choice. She doesn’t have enough education to get a good-paying job, so Jet supports her—although I’ve always wondered how, since he hasn’t really worked for years now. I figure that Leyla had some sort of insurance policy.

On top of everything else, Dina was Leyla’s best friend. Maybe she feels guilty about marrying Leyla’s husband and inheriting her family. I don’t know. From my understanding, Jet and Dina became each other’s “support” after Leyla died, and eventually the feelings “just happened”.

I call BS on the whole thing. I think they just found it convenient and used all the other stuff as excuses.

In any case, all three of them hold me accountable. It's been almost ten years and they're still holding it against me. They never let it rest. Not a week goes by that Jet doesn't snarl at me. Usually while he's beating me. "Adopting you was my biggest mistake! If it wasn't for you, she'd still be alive!" The hate in his words when he says it...I know he means it every time.

The worst part is, I accept everything he says because I'm still pretty much blaming myself too. I know that if they hadn't taken me in, Leyla probably *would* still be alive. And so would their second kid, the little brother or sister who never got a chance to be born.

That hurts to think about, because Leyla was a great mom. If more people had a mom like her, there'd probably be less crazies in the world. She read to me every morning. Sang to me every night. I can still hear her humming lullabies to me whenever I had nightmares about the fire. I remember drifting off to sleep with my fingers wrapped around a strand of her curly blonde hair. I loved her curls.

"Mom, they're just like Slinkies!" I used to tell her. I would tug at them to straighten them out and then let them go to spring back into curls. Slinkies were my favorite childhood toy. Now I can't stand the sight of them. Especially the neon-green ones, because they remind me of the one she brought me one day as a joke.

At night when I have trouble sleeping I can still hear her sweet voice reaching out to me and crooning, "Let the night take all your fear... Let my voice be all you hear..."

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By now I'm about a half-mile from home. Saddlehorn. A small town midway between Reno and Carson City. I can already see our development coming into view up ahead. The grid of one-story, single-family houses. I've always wondered why you never see any people outside. It just adds to the overall depressing vibe of this place. The doors are always shut. The windows always covered. You'd think the whole place was a ghost town, or some high-crime area. Don't get me wrong, it's not the swankiest area in town, but there aren't any crack dealers or prostitutes living there, either.

I fan the front of my shirt to try to release the sweat from my torso and glance at my watch. Seven-fifteen. And not one single phone call from anyone. That pushes my anxiety into hyperdrive. Usually Jet can't stop himself from calling me and threatening me. The "Just wait until you get home!" thing. But no calls. No texts. This can't be good at all.

The moment I open the front door, I see him slouched on the living room couch, his legs spread wide apart and his worn-out brown leather cowboy boots planted on the carpet. The ivory ceramic table lamp on the end table bounces yellow light off his dead expression. I can't hear a single noise except for the heavy pounding of my heart in this prison that's my home. But he isn't looking at me. He's staring at the wall above the plasma TV. I know what that means. Great.

"You got any idea what time it is, boy?" he snarls, never taking his eyes off the wall. Before I can say anything, he shouts, "And you see the damage you did to that car? I just bought the damn thing for your sister and you gotta go an' ruin it already?"

I edge along the wall, past the tacky walnut-framed mirror that he had cobbled together and Dina had stained and decorated with seashells, and continue toward the stairs. I know I need to stay out of his reach. As I make it to the first step, I say, "Sorry. I'll find a way to pay for the damage."

Jet chuckles and nods. He still hasn't once looked at me. Suddenly he heaves himself off the couch and glares at me. "You gonna 'pay for' it? Where you gonna get the money when you ain't got no job, shithead? You're livin' in this house, right? Under my roof, huh? You better get it into your head once and for all that you goddamn better start playing by *my* damn rules, boy! Whatever I say, *you're* gonna do! Better start gettin' your act together 'cause I *will* break that pretty little face of yours."

As I take another step up, he moves toward me with a look of death seeping from his tired brown eyes. I stop still. The hairs on my arms are standing on end, and I wonder for a split second whether this is how a rabbit feels the moment before a wolf attacks.

Then something in me snaps. With every ounce of boldness in me, I spit it out. "I wish *you* were the one who'd died!"

The fury on Jet's face is demonic. He grabs my jeans at the ankle and yanks me down. As I tumble down the stairs, my camera bag flies off my shoulder. It crashes onto the floor, and I hear my thousand-dollar lens shatter.

He grabs my ankle again, pulls me down onto the grimy living room carpet, and flips me over onto my back. The dust from the grimy fabric settles into my eyes and makes them burn. Then he straddles me and pins me down with his knees over my arms. I kick and struggle to free myself, but he's six feet of muscle and belly, and there's no way. He slams my head on the floor, pressing the back of my skull against the rug so hard that it burns. Then he then grabs me around the neck and starts choking me.

He brings his face so close to mine that I can smell the stale beer on his breath. "I'm tired of you thinkin' you got some worth in this home. You're a useless piece of shit that nobody's ever cared about. Not me, not Dina, not Leyla! Not even your goddamn grandparents! We never shoulda taken you in! I shoulda never listened to them! You ain't never been a *real* Hillstone, and you ain't never gonna be!"

My face is turning red. I keep on struggling to break his hold, but the blood is rushing to my head and I can't breathe. I'm seeing flashing spots in front of my eyes, as if somebody's taken a photo of us with one of those bright, exaggerated flashes.

"You think that's an insult?" I manage to gasp, and I grab one deep breath and spit right in his eyes.

He's so startled that he lets go of my arms and rears back on his heels. "You little fucker!" he shouts. He swabs at his eyes and then lands a direct punch to my face that knocks the breath out of me. I grunt, momentarily paralyzed as the pain explodes all over. He's knocked the breath out of me. I can't move, but I manage to grab one short in-breath before he hauls himself to his feet and kicks me in the ribs. The stiff, pointed toe of his cowboy boot stabs me like a knife. The last bit of air whooshes out of my body. He grabs my shirt, drags me to my feet, and throws me against the wall. I'm as limp as a puppet. I can't say a word. My brain is too busy channeling all the waves of pain flooding through my body.

He pushes his face close to mine. His sweat splashes against my face. He bites down on his lip and snarls, "You just messed things up for yerself *real* bad!"

CHAPTER TWO

By now I'm so groggy that the police sirens flooding the air sound like a roaring in my ears. Then I hear banging on the front door and men shouting. For all I know, they could be angels who've come to rescue me. As Jet raises his fist to pummel me again, Dina rushes out from the kitchen and sprints to the door like a mouse scurrying to snatch her cheese. As the police break through, she screams, "Help! Please! He's going to kill him!"

The officers wrestle Jet to the floor. One of them knocks out his front tooth. I collapse at the foot of the stairs. Searing pain is radiating through my body. Mel finally comes running from her room sobbing as the police handcuff Jet and drag him out to one of the patrol cars. They tell us that he'll be booked and held until he's arraigned and can make bail.

I see Dina's shoulders sag in relief, as if a burden's been suddenly lifted from her. It's a feeling I can relate well to. If Jet's out of the house, that'll give us at least a few days of peace, without the constant reminder of how miserable our lives are. And I'll have some time to figure out what I'm going to do.

Meanwhile, the paramedics, who charged in right behind the police and rushed to check me out, tell me I should be monitored for a possible concussion.

"No, I'm fine," I keep insisting. "Just let me go to my room."

They leave shaking their heads, but I'm stuck downstairs for almost an hour while the police take statements from all three of us. Their report includes a lot of history about the violence in our "home".

After the police finally leave, Dina comes over and puts her hand on my shoulder. She's been crying pretty much nonstop, and her eyes are red and swollen. "I'm sorry," she says. "I should have done this a long time ago... Are you doing okay?"

Every rib on my left side is pulsing with fire, but I tell her, "I'm fine. Thank you."

I hug her as best I can, but I can't help grunting from the pain. I look over at Mel, who's huddled on the couch, and I can read everything she wants to tell me from the expression on her face. I see that she's really sorry. She gives me a quick glance, then immediately drops her gaze to the floor as if she's embarrassed. But I have no real idea

why she should feel embarrassed when it was Jet who attacked me. Maybe it's finally dawned on her that her lies fueled the entire thing. Again.

I start to make my way up the stairs to my room, but I have to hold on to the railing instead of bouncing up two steps at a time the way I usually do. When I reach the top, I stop and turn back to look down at Dina.

"You should be proud," I say, followed by a grunt of pain. "You've set yourself free."

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I peel off my bloodstained, favorite Coldplay shirt and take a look at myself in the mirror next to my desk. My left side is turning a mottled purple. My right eye is almost swollen shut. As I ease the icepack that the paramedics gave me against my eye, I can't help but find some humor in it all because I kind of look like a hobbit that's been trampled over twice.

I ease myself onto my rumpled twin bed. The same bed I've had since I was taken in. Even that hurts. I am so tired of all of this. No real parents, no family. There's no reason why I should have to be going through this.

Then I remember Jet shouting at me while he was punching me. "*Not even your grandparents!*"

Grandparents? Since when did I have grandparents? The only thing Jet and Leyla, and later Dina, have ever told me was that I had no biological family left. And how grateful I should be that they'd taken me in. *Right*, into this dysfunctional home in this piece-of-crap town. "Home sweet home"... *right*.

My ribs are still killing me, but I ease myself off my bed and power up my computer. My original last name was Greene, so that's what I start my search with. Which is useless because Google spits out more than a thousand pages of Greenes.

The next step, I guess, is to sign up for one of those ancestry websites. I use my Social Security number and start answering the security questions.

WHAT WAS THE COLOR OF YOUR FIRST CAR?

I answer "invisible" because I've never been so lucky as to have a car. I don't even have my license yet.