

MAYHEM AND MADNESS

CHRONICLES OF A TEENAGED SUPERVILLAIN

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HOLIDAY HOUSE • NEW YORK



*For my parents
On their fiftieth anniversary
In love and in awe*

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NOW. FRIDAY. 8:05 P.M.

I did not expect to be spending the night of my winter formal hiding from the police.

I mean, I've never even been given a suspicious look before.

Yes, sure, sixteen-year-old boys can be prime targets for the neighborhood-watch list. Even skinny ones like me. But I don't do stupid stuff like vandalize mailboxes, or spray-paint walls, or even smoke.

Well, not stupid stuff like that, anyway.

And these aren't local police. These are SWAT teams. Backed by the National Guard and who knows what else. I think they may be calling in the army, even special forces. I'm not an expert, but my on-board computers are identifying highly coordinated movement. These aren't amateurs.

I hope I don't have to hurt any of them. I said I wasn't going to do that anymore.

At least, I don't want to.

I'm dictating this into my phone. There are other ways I could do it, with what I've got, but given what I've learned, simpler is better. I'm sure that if—when?—I don't make it out

of this, the government will confiscate everything I've ever touched. But maybe the recording will help me at my trial, or juvenile hearing, or whatever.

Not that they'll ever let anything like that happen. At least not in public. I'll end up in some supermax prison or one of those CIA black sites being waterboarded every day to try to get me to give up information about the Bloody Front or Mr. Jones.

But at least I got a date out of it, right?

Which reminds me: Rebecca's probably sitting at home waiting for me. I'd like to think she's crying her eyes out, but who am I kidding. Hard enough to believe she agreed to go out with me in the first place.

Maybe I can make it up to her once I hit another bank vault?

No. I'm not going to do that anymore, either.

Let's be honest: all of this is pretty much beside the point. I hear a helicopter—no, helicopters—and they're definitely not reporting on weather and traffic. And if I'm reading this panel correctly, it's telling me there's stealth technology being employed in the area—I mean, aside from mine. If the government is moving F-35s into my neighborhood, how long can I really have left?

I better get this recorded while there's still time. I'm going to try to tell the whole story. From the beginning. Put it in order, with the whens and wheres laid out nice and neat. Almost like one of those outlines Mrs. Delgado keeps wanting us to make in English class.

I'll try not to leave anything out. Even if it makes me look like a monster. And I think some of it does.

No one's going to believe it, of course, even if they do get to hear it, but some of the evidence speaks for itself.

I meant well.

You have to believe that.

THREE MONTHS AGO

The thing you should know about my dad is that he was relentlessly normal. The only weird thing about him was the way he disappeared without a trace seven years ago.

He was an assistant regional service manager for one of the big chain stores. I'm not going to say which one, but we got great discounts on electronic goods right around Thanksgiving and Christmas. I'm sure he had hobbies, but I don't know what they were. He loved my mom, and used to give her a kiss or a squeeze as they maneuvered around the kitchen, enough for me to guess they still—well, you know—but not enough to be gross or embarrassing. He never raised his voice, except to remind Mom that there was no smoking inside the house. He was a fanatic about it, ever since I had had an asthma scare when I was three—or so I'd been told.

Absolutely, totally, normal.

He was good at the dad thing, too, until he vanished. We played this rhyming game when I was little where I would have to complete a rhyme with a part of my body. Like: "It's

something everybody else can see, the middle of your leg it's got a—" and then he'd tickle it.

We would spend hours building those Playmobil and Lego kits together, sprawled out on the floor of our guest room. The only time I ever heard my dad curse was when he stepped on one of the Legos, hopped up in the air, and then landed right on another piece. My mom was there, and I could see that she wanted to warn him about language, but she was laughing too hard. So was he, and so was I.

Later, I got into the Beatles, which made him really happy. We made up a new game where we'd have to identify one of their songs using the fewest words. I still remember stumping him with "is not," which, believe it or not, appears only once in all their lyrics. It's in "Tomorrow Never Knows," in case you were wondering.

Like I said, he hated smoking, so I can't use the "he went out for cigarettes and never came back" line. Knowing what I know now, of course, I can't use any line at all. I just assumed he was in some terrible accident and that he'd turn up in a hospital, face wrapped in bandages, wallet missing, identifiable by a birthmark only my mom knew about. It was the only explanation for something so... abnormal.

I was in fourth grade, but I remember the whole thing sharp and clear. Came home from school, started homework, Mom got home, asked where Dad was, I said he wasn't back yet, Mom grumbled because it was Dad's turn to start dinner, she waited, we ordered sushi, I could see Mom rehearsing what she was going to say to Dad, it got late, Dad didn't come,

Mom tried calling his phone for the fifth, tenth, fifteenth time, I couldn't go to sleep, I went to sleep.

The next day I stayed home from school, and the day after that. I don't particularly want to talk about the police, given my current circumstances. I *will* say, looking back, they seemed as caring, professional, and committed as possible given that they clearly assumed my dad had skipped out on us.

So *that* sucked.



You probably need to know a bit about my house for this next part to make sense. It's not an old house, but it's not new, either: just your average ranch on a half-acre lot surrounded by other ranches that look pretty similar. We're in this part of town that the real estate agents like to call "in transition." It was built back after World War II when the plastics plant started up and they needed workers, but then things got kind of sketchy when the plant was automated and they let a lot of those workers go. Some people moved closer to the center of town, but we didn't, so I grew up surrounded by empty houses. I used to think that was just bad luck or something, that Mom and Dad had made a mistake when they chose our house and we couldn't afford to move.

Looking back, I'm not so sure.

It's just me, no brothers or sisters, and we never did do much with the guest room. There's a couch, and a desk with an old computer, and wedged in against the wall is a treadmill my mom and dad would occasionally get on after the holidays. I was more of an outdoor runner myself, although

I tended to stick to the school track: I'd gotten shin splints once after hitting the pavement too hard, definitely not an experience I wanted to repeat.

But then there was this one rainy Sunday three months ago.

My mom was watching TV in the living room, smoking one cigarette after another, and I had a paper I was seriously putting off waiting for me in the bedroom. School had just started, junior year, and I was already drowning in homework. I had to get out of the house, but it was pouring, I mean, *pouring*. Finally I announced that I was off to use the treadmill, since my lungs were going to need all the help they could get. And before she could answer I stormed into the guest room and slammed the door shut, knocking a framed picture of my parents off the wall.

That accident: verification step one. As it turned out.

I thought I heard a *click* as the door closed behind me, but I was already on the treadmill starting to jog, then sprint, then run.

So quickly, and so angrily, that the stupidest thing in the world happened: I slipped.

I didn't fall *off* the treadmill. My reflexes were too good for that. I grabbed the window frame right next to the treadmill for support, squeezing exactly the right—or wrong—place.

Verification step two.

Immediately, the small shag rug next to the treadmill slithered under the couch as a trapdoor opened to reveal an entrance to the basement.

Here's the thing, though. We live in a ranch house. We don't *have* a basement.



But there it was: a circular opening, about the size of a manhole, leading down from our guest room into who-knows-where. It was concrete. Machine-smoothed. And, judging from the way the ladder leading down was rusted, it'd been there for a while. I tried to remember how long we'd lived in the house, and couldn't remember exactly. Since before I started elementary school. More than a decade, I was sure.

Is it weird that I didn't call my mom in? I think it's like—and I hope this never happens to you—if you discover evidence around the house of your parents engaging in, uh, adult activities, what you do *not* do is go over to one of them and tell them you've found the stuff from their drawer or on their hard drive or whatever. No, what you do, of course, is ignore the whole thing, forget about it, banish the images that have entered your consciousness, and never, ever bring it up for the rest of your natural life.

Now, this wasn't the same thing. At all. But there was a similar sense of the . . . forbidden.

Maybe that was why I didn't call Caroline right away. Which is what I would normally have done. But I had the feeling that this was something private. A secret.

Family business.

I think that was it. It's hard to remember. Only three months ago, this was. But it seems like years.

I took a deep breath and looked down into the hole. It was dark and I couldn't see much, but really, what choice did I have? Maybe you have a different opinion, maybe you think

you'd do something else, but then I think you're not being honest with yourself.

I hadn't gone more than three rungs down when a set of lights switched on. I could see the rest of the ladder, now. It went down what looked like at least twenty feet to hit a plain concrete floor. Nothing else down there but the bottom of the ladder. Like some kind of deep, narrow, empty swimming pool.

But that wasn't the thing. This was the thing: someone had dug twenty feet under our house.

We did a unit on local geography in Earth Science class in sixth grade. It's all bedrock around here. Thus the ranch houses. Digging through twenty feet of solid rock: that's just nuts.

When I got to the bottom, I realized I was wrong: there *was* something else down there. You couldn't see it from up top, but there was a door set into the wall. Just a plain old gray steel door with a pull handle, the kind you see around the back of any commercial building. If it wasn't hiding under my house, I wouldn't have paid the least bit of attention to it. Or to the keypad lock next to it, one with letters and numbers like on those old push-button phones.

Considering what I've learned since, I guess the security could have been a lot worse. It could have been a retinal scanner. Even a DNA swab. The keypad must have been state of the art when it was installed and just never got upgraded. Which seems careless. Judging by the past few days, careless seems to run in the family. . . .

A locked steel door is still a locked steel door. I got up close

to see if any of the numbers on the keypad looked more faded from repeated pushing—maybe it would help me guess the combination—but they all seemed the same.

And then I thought I heard my mom calling.

I got up that ladder and closed the trapdoor behind me so fast that if the JV coach had seen it he might've thought twice about cutting me during tryouts. I didn't want Mom to come in and find me down a hole that shouldn't exist.

I think even then I'd realized this had something to do with my dad's disappearance.

But as it turned out, whatever guesses I had about how it was involved were wildly off base.

Not one of them, for example, involved me dodging incoming missile fire.



The next day I skipped school, which wasn't as hard as I thought it would be.

I'd never tried it before. Like I keep telling you, I'm a good kid. Or, I guess, I was.

It just meant doubling back after my mom dropped me off on her way to work, and avoiding the other carpooling moms and dads. A lot of hiding in bushes and behind buildings. I was going to have to make up a Biology test, and turn in a paper late, and probably forge an e-mail from my mom's account, but all that seemed doable. I've known my mom's password for years. She never changes it. Out of sentiment, I think—it's Baileycutie01.

I'm Bailey, by the way. Pleased to meet you.

Now Mom's going to have to change her password.

Probably a good idea, though. There'll be a lot of people interested in her now that she's got two generations of felons in the family. . . .

My phone buzzed as I got back to my house. A text from Caroline.

Where are you? What is going on? Are you sick? I told you that fifth piece of pizza was a bad choice. And the sixth was even worse.

Caroline doesn't use abbreviations in her texts. She says it's because her mom, who is an English professor at the community college, would kill her. I think she likes being different.

I texted her back that I was at home, that I was fine, and that I would see her tomorrow.

Which led to like thirty more texts. Asking questions I didn't know how to answer.

Explain everything tomorrow promise promise, I promised, having no idea if, or how, I'd be able to.

I am going to hold you to that promise, she texted back.

To which I responded *k bye* ☺. Then I put the phone down and took the photo frame off the guest room wall.

Yeah. The photo. I'd noticed it lying on the floor when I climbed out that first time, once I realized Mom hadn't been calling for me. It wasn't until later that night that I wondered if there might be some connection: I was sure I'd touched the window frame plenty of times before, and I'd never seen any tunnel. So when I took the photo off the wall a second time and heard a faint *click* deep inside the walls, I wasn't completely shocked.

I grabbed the window—this time without the surprise

and the scrambling to keep my balance—and the hatch in the floor slid open, pushing the rug aside. I climbed down and stood in front of the door, trying to figure out the pass code. But not trying too hard, really: I got it on the third try, after my dad’s birthday and my parents’ anniversary. It was his name: G-E-R-R-Y. The door opened, the floodlights went on, and I saw it for the first time.

The armor.



Everyone knows about Mayhem, of course. It’s impossible not to know: those pictures of a big mechanical monster landing in front of a bank, crashing through the wall, and tearing off a safe door with its bare hands (well, bare gauntlets, I guess) spread as fast as the Internet would allow back then, before I was born.

And with every robbery he pulled off over the years, the theories got crazier. He was some sort of supersoldier and the robberies were government black-ops tests before they unleashed a squadron of the things on America’s enemies. He was a terrorist, trying to trash the American financial system. He was an anarchist who didn’t even care about the money—a few large anonymous deposits into various orphanages’ bank accounts went a long way toward supporting that theory.

The name “Mayhem” came from one of the first eye-witnesses. He said something to a reporter about how the guy was creating mayhem all over downtown, and the name made its way onto one of those CNN crawls, and it stuck. Mayhem never spoke, so who knew what he thought of it. During recess you used to be able to see kids

pretending to play Cops and Mayhem. You could tell who got to be Mayhem—they always had something stuck on their head and they always got away in the end.

Nobody had seen or heard from Mayhem in years, which, of course, led to new theories about what had happened to him. I didn't have much of an opinion. There was enough crime and terrorism and corporate destruction of the environment. In the scheme of things, what was the big deal about one nut who'd managed to put a few iPhones together and make a robot suit? It felt like comic-book stuff.

That said, it became a much bigger deal when the nut in question was your father. Obviously.

I'd never seen my dad do anything more complicated than change the batteries in the smoke alarm. Even working for the big chain store whose name I'm not going to mention, he wasn't one of the guys who built or installed the electronic equipment. He just did paperwork. But given what I saw scattered around the workbenches that lined the room behind the steel door, he'd clearly been taking advantage of the employee discount.

Or—now that I'm thinking about it, trying to put the whole story together, not just live it in the moment—maybe he hadn't. I mean, if he robbed banks, he probably wasn't too worried about taking some stuff home from work without paying, right?

The room was crammed with tools I didn't even recognize, much less know how to use, and the walls had shelves packed with bottles of nasty-looking fluids and boxes heaped with rusty gears and sharp blades.

But it was the armor that was terrifying.

Not its size. Hanging there, from the hooks, it actually didn't look so imposing. More like wet laundry hung up to dry.

But its presence. And its . . . implications.

One supervillain on the planet. Turns out it was my dad.

NOW. FRIDAY. 8:12 P.M.

It's getting warm in here.

The armor's working overtime to keep the shield functioning, so the internal controls aren't running the way they should.

But a little sweat is the least of my worries.

Maybe getting arrested won't be so bad. I *am* a minor, and a citizen. So maybe they won't send me to Guantanamo right away.

That's assuming no one else gets to me first.

I can hear the soldiers shouting at one another: the receptors in the Mayhem armor pick up everything. No one has made visual contact yet—I guess my cloaking device is still working—but they're monitoring energy usage, and I wouldn't be surprised if they black out the neighborhood just to find me. They're out for blood, after all.

I'm going to have to make a move soon, or else just sit here and wait for them. And maybe I'll have a convenient accident as I get taken in. . . . I'm sure nobody'll shed any tears.

Not after Clapham Junction. At least, not after the way the news will cover it.

Such cynicism in one so young, I can hear Mr. Jones saying. Well, it's his fault, isn't it? But I'm getting ahead of my story.

THREE MONTHS AGO

I couldn't spend very long down there.

Mom was at work, yeah, but I had visions of her coming back to the house for something, and—of course—I'd forgotten to close the trapdoor behind me. I just looked around long enough to notice another door and a computer workstation, glowing invitingly. On my way out, I saw a Styrofoam coffee cup, the kind you get at the gas station. I looked inside and grimaced. Judging from the mold, no one had been near it for years.

Which would make sense, of course.

I climbed back up, headed straight to my bedroom, and thought about it. A lot. My dad: Mayhem. It just didn't compute—like when you see old movies of Arnold Schwarzenegger and wonder how that bodybuilder with the oily muscles and the loincloth went on to be the governor of California. I mean, I don't think I'd ever heard my dad raise his voice, and I know I'd never seen him raise a fist. Meanwhile he'd been ripping open safes and brawling with cops? And *winning*?

But where had he gone?

According to the Internet, there hadn't been any Mayhem sightings for years. Most of the remaining online fan communities—my dad had *fans*—were going with the usual theories that he was dead, or he'd been caught, or whatever. There was one commenter who suggested that he'd retired, gotten out while the getting was good, and was sitting on a beach somewhere counting his money. *Nope*, I thought at first, and then, *Who knows?* I mean, if my dad really was Mayhem, who's to say he wouldn't abandon us to sit in a cabana with some new young girlfriend? That didn't seem like him at all . . . but then again, neither did using super-advanced technology to create a suit of armor and live a life of crime.

One thing I did know. School was going to be tough to handle the next day. Especially since Caroline was going to want to know exactly what was going on, and I hadn't the vaguest clue of what I was going to tell her.

Luckily, the fight made that irrelevant.



No, not some sort of supervillain fight. Not yet, at least.

That Tuesday I was still just a kid with a massive secret, like half the other kids at school—although theirs are generally about having an abusive uncle or how they're sniffing glue or whatever.

The thing was, I knew Caroline was waiting for me in our usual spot, near the back door to the library, and I hadn't figured out what to say to her, and so I went another way, a different way, and if it hadn't been for that—

Getting ahead of myself again. I have to talk about Caroline first.

I'm not sure what to say about her. But I have to say something. Right? For anyone who hears this? Eventually?

She'd kill me if she heard me waffle like this. *Just spit it out, Bailey*, she'd say.

All right. I will. But I'd better backtrack a minute.

I'm sure you've read those books where the kid with a personal tragedy—say, a missing dad—becomes an outcast and walks around school with a deep sense of resentment that eventually morphs into violence against himself or others. That's not what happened to me. The kids in my town were, by and large, a decent group. So when my dad disappeared I got plenty of sympathy.

Which *sounds* nice, but it stuck to me over the years, like a bad smell. Who wants to hang out with the kid who misses his dad all the time? Mom thought high school would give me the chance to start again, find a new crowd. Right. Everyone on social media knows that starting over is impossible. The only people who think otherwise are grown-ups. Kids know better. Things were pretty much the same as in junior high, only with slightly better desks and lockers on account of the extra money the football team boosters brought in. I wasn't a loner, exactly, but not quite finding my place, either. Nothing really clicked. No one really got me.

Except Caroline. There was always Caroline.

We met back in fifth grade, when we were both miserable orphans.

Not like that—although her parents were divorced and she

lived with her mom, and my situation was . . . well, I guess it was more complicated than I thought at the time. I mean we were both *playing* miserable orphans. In a community children's theater production of *Annie*.

It had been Mom's idea. It'd be fun, she said. I'd be onstage and she'd be behind the scenes, helping with sets or something. I don't have a scrap of musical talent, but it was community theater and they didn't like to turn kids away, I guess. They invented a role for me in the chorus. The only boy.

Caroline was in the chorus, too. I recognized her from school: we were in the same grade, but different classes, so we didn't know each other well. But there were these long rehearsals where we didn't have much to do—and it turned out that Mom and I hardly saw each other, she was always backstage or running errands or something—and so somewhere between “It's the Hard Knock Life” and “You're Never Fully Dressed without a Smile,” Caroline and I became friends.

Good friends. Best friends, if either of us ever used that kind of phrase. Though that implies that I have lots of other friends, which is not true. At least not friends who talk to each other about everything, or everything that doesn't include your dad being public enemy number one. Apparently.

But it wasn't just that we had some family stuff sort of in common, the poor sad kids finding each other or anything like that. She had the coolest takes on pop culture. We once spent two weeks watching unboxing videos and she asked me, “Why aren't *boxing* videos a big thing? Is it because everyone will think they're sports stuff and not click on them?” I mean . . . maybe? But who else thinks like that, right?

She played, like, three instruments, and although her singing voice wasn't anything special—part of the reason she'd ended up in the chorus—she had this musical understanding of tone, if you know what I mean, which made her an incredible impersonator. Once she imitated our principal, Mrs. Wentworth, so well it made me snort cherry Diet Pepsi through my nose. Which was both incredibly painful and awesome at the same time.

We talked about serious stuff, too. Whether she should spend Christmas with her dad this year after three years in a row with her mom, and what that might do to her relationship with both parents. How I felt about my mom, how angry I got, sometimes, because she was always at work, and how guilty I felt because I knew those double shifts were what paid for my new sneakers. Whether Caroline should learn the French horn just to put it on her college résumé. (No, we decided.) We even speculated about what we called the TGT, “The Grand Theory,” meaning whatever we'd come up with as the newest possible reason for my dad's disappearance.

And she was basically cool with me going on and on about Rebecca until any normal human being would be clawing their eyes out with boredom.

I guess I should say something about Rebecca at this point, too. Rebecca. Who I'd been thinking about obsessively since the first time she showed up to school freshman year with that charm bracelet around her ankle, and I was just . . . well, just gone.

Rebecca was funny. Or at least I assumed so, since her

girlfriends laughed at things she said. I was rarely close enough to hear what they were talking about. She was a talker in class, which I liked—she was smart, and not afraid to show it. Definitely a girly girl, the kind of girl you'd expect to be a cheerleader. But she wasn't. She spent all her time producing our school podcast, interviewing the latest student movers and shakers. Grown-ups, too: she had the local state assemblyman on for a long interview about no-bid recycling contracts. But those were less popular, obviously. In fact, judging from the numbers, I might have been the only kid who listened to that one.

Yes, I listened. To every episode, sometimes more than once. It was the only time I got to hear her voice: warm, smooth, charming. I remember reading the phrase *dead sexy* in some book, and I thought of Rebecca's voice right away. Being the focus, the direct target of that voice, that attention—it would be enough to strike you dead. Me, anyway.

Not that she was all hearts and flowers as an interviewer. She was tough. If she didn't like something or someone, she was not afraid to let them know it. But that didn't bother me. I fantasized about getting the chance to talk to her, one-on-one. I mean, other than my undying feelings for her, what did I have to hide?

Before. I mean before.

At first talking about Rebecca with Caroline had been a little awkward. There had been this one time, early on, sixth grade, maybe, when I guess you could say there was a . . . moment. Once. At Caroline's place. In her mom's den, when her mom went out to the store . . . something could have happened.

But it didn't. That was the thing. We could've kissed, but we didn't. We just stood there in the middle of the room and ignored the conversational pause, and that was that.

I never forgot it, though, so I was wary of mentioning girls until one day when Caroline told me about this guy in band she thought was *Byronic*. Which I had to look up. But once I did, and realized what she was talking about, and that there was no possible world in which the word *Byronic* could apply to me, I felt totally comfortable unloading my Rebecca stuff on her.

Sometimes I think she regretted ever mentioning that guy. Turns out he was a senior so she never saw him again. But she got to hear about Rebecca *all the time*.

Her opinion on the subject of Rebecca and me—after lots and lots of discussion—boiled down to this text message: ?

Which was, I pointed out to her, not a complete sentence.

She pointed out, in turn, that it was the name of a classic-rock band, and thus a proper noun, and I should know better than to challenge her. I checked and she was right: ? and the Mysterians.

It was a fair point: ? After all, Rebecca and I might not have had anything in common. I had no idea. She didn't know I existed, at least not in any meaningful way. But, as Shakespeare or somebody said, to true love there are no impediments.

Well, maybe one impediment.

I should explain about Logan. He is, as you have already guessed, Rebecca's boyfriend. It's a total cliché that he's the captain of the football team, but in both their defenses, that's

because (a) it would be very hard for anyone, even Logan, to be immune to Rebecca's charms and (b) who wouldn't want Logan? He is by all accounts a great guy, and he seems to be a good boyfriend. As far as I know he doesn't hook up with anyone behind her back, despite having plenty of opportunities, and he's always looking out for her, giving her little gifts, carrying her books, and he's not afraid to look mushy doing it.

Of course, that could be because no one would dare make fun of him, since he'd pound them into the ground. I'm not big into football, but even I know a linebacker's not generally the team captain. I heard the quarterback was afraid to take him on for the position.

Part of his good boyfriending is being protective of Rebecca from things he thinks would bother her, which includes any person other than him showing any sign of romantic interest. It's not like he's heavy-handed about it or anything. But when you're his size, you don't need to be.

Everyone else has declared her off-limits as a result and they basically slink around cautious and frightened in her presence. That's just not possible for me. Much as I worship at the altar of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, I have to disagree with them: Love isn't all you need. But it's pretty much all I've got.

And so sometimes, on particularly depressing days, I felt the need to be around Rebecca. To just . . . soak in the beauty of her presence. I know I sound pathetic. It wasn't much different from the huffers out by the bleachers, except that I called it love.

Maybe you can see where this is heading.

Usually, I was subtle about it. Super-subtle. So subtle I was pretty sure that neither Logan nor Rebecca noticed my existence. But this time, to avoid Caroline and her inevitable questions, I'd taken an alternate route to Rebecca's locker, where I figured she'd be. Meaning I was approaching Rebecca's locker from a different direction than usual. Around a sharp corner rather than down a long hallway. And when I turned the corner and was suddenly full-on facing her and Logan in the middle of a hot-and-heavy kiss, I hadn't had any time to prepare myself. I didn't—couldn't—look away. I wasn't even jealous. It was more that I was almost . . . awe-struck. Lost.

Of course, from Logan's perspective, I was a little perv staring at a private moment between him and his girlfriend.

And something had to be done about that.

NOW. FRIDAY. 8:23 P.M.

I'm sure most of you have tasted your own blood at one time or another. What's surprising to me—and I've had more opportunity than I'd like to sample it recently—is that it doesn't taste terrible.

You'd think evolution would have gotten on that, to make absolutely sure you don't want any of it on the outside for a quick lick or whatever. On the other hand, I guess it figured the pain would take care of that, so why bother.

Right now I'm tasting it because of that last wave of bullets. The armor stopped them, but something sproinged inside because of the impact and I got a gash across my cheek. Maybe I'll have a sexy scar for Rebecca to Instagram to all her friends. Assuming she ever sees me again.

Assuming anyone does.

THREE MONTHS AGO

To be fair to Logan, I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt me that badly. At least not consciously. Especially given what happened later, I want to be clear about this: I don't think he's the kind of guy who beats on people. At all. I think he was a little annoyed, and a little embarrassed, and he just wanted to give me a push, like, *Nothing to see here, move along, stop making this weird.*

But he doesn't know his own strength, and I'm a lot lighter than most of the football players he moves around in practice. Maybe I was light-headed and off-balance from the kiss by proxy. What I definitely was, was unlucky.

The push tripped me up and I stumbled into a locker the wrong way: face-first. I heard this *crack* as my nose moved about three inches to the right of its original location. Logan didn't even notice; he and Rebecca had already headed down the hall. Rebecca did, and I *think* she looked at me with sympathy, but the truth is I'm not sure. My hands were covering my nose and it was a little hard to see.

I wasn't going to make a thing about it. I really wasn't. But

it wouldn't stop bleeding—gushing, really—so I had to go to the nurse. When she asked me what had happened, I lied and said I'd walked into a door when I wasn't looking where I was going. The truth didn't come out until Caroline—who was *absolutely furious* at Logan on my behalf when I told her what happened, and was not going to let him get away with it, and was *definitely* not going to accept any excuses or anything on his behalf, even from me—started spreading the actual story. And then it looked like I was too traumatized and scared to admit I'd been bullied. And by the school's greatest hope for a state title. . . .

Well.

Teachers got involved. Coaches got involved. The administration got involved. And thankfully for them, they managed to make sure the press did not get involved, which would have destroyed the season, and maybe Logan's career. Which, I have to say—especially given what happened later—he 100 percent would not have deserved. Like I said, he hadn't even noticed what he had done, and he certainly hadn't intended any real harm. When he found out, he was miserable, and genuinely apologetic. That went a long way toward things blowing over. Even with Caroline.

The administration was happy to let things lie as low as possible. I think they wanted me and any possible nose-related scandal out of the school spotlight. And my mom wasn't snooping too closely into any non-nose-related behavior. The upshot being that although I didn't exactly have a free pass to skip school any time I wanted, for the next two weeks if I held my nose and said I had a throbbing

headache, my mom let me stay home and the school didn't have a problem with it. The freedom almost made the cotton balls I had to shove up my nostrils worthwhile.

And in the craziness, Caroline forgot about that first mysterious, unexplained absence of mine.

This was only the second-best thing about the incident—I've been calling it a fight, but who are we kidding. The best thing was that all of a sudden I was a big deal at school and Rebecca was drawn to attention and celebrity like a . . . well, I was going to say like a magnet, but maybe the fairer thing to say would be "like a journalist."

I mean, obviously there were, how can I put it, conflicts of interest, given the circumstances, and so she never did or said anything, but—for the first time ever—I saw *her* looking at *me* sometimes, rather than the reverse. Nothing more than that, not then, but this was a change on the order of, I don't know, the Revolutionary War or something.

I had no idea how to handle this. Any of this. Some days it seemed easiest to just stay home.

Well, about twenty feet underneath my home.



I had already started thinking about putting on the Mayhem suit, if I could figure out how to work it. I told myself it was how I could learn who Dad really was, maybe even discover what had happened to him. But now I think I know better. I think the decision to do it was just . . . aesthetic. Like it would have been weird not to. I know that sounds horrible, and I guess it is, but it's probably the truth.

As to what came after . . . I'm still figuring that out, I guess.

Anyway.

I knew—or thought I knew—what everyone knew about the Mayhem suit: it was made of tough metal, the kind bullets bounce off. But from that first close look, I could see it was actually some sort of soft material, almost cloth, that hung loosely off the hook. . . .

Maybe there were some answers on the computer down there. I mean, there are always answers on the computer, right?

Dad was full of surprises. I assumed the computer would have some sort of insane encryption and that would be the end of my life as Mayhem. But the computer—which was an old MacBook, like, at least six years old by now—just asked for a password, the kind you need to get into the user settings and profiles. This one was a lot harder to guess than the door keypad one, though, since it had more possibilities, and I was worried that if I put in the wrong thing more than two or three times it would shut down completely or activate some knockout gas or who knows what.

Except there was one thing I *knew* about Dad: he had a terrible memory. Which made me bet he'd hidden the password somewhere in the lab. Or, when a careful search didn't turn up anything passwordy there, some place in the house.

It took a while. I had to be supercareful about putting things back where they'd been—my mom had gotten more distracted since my dad disappeared, but she'd still notice if her shoes were put back in the wrong order. Eventually, tucked into a small space between the vanity and the wall in my mom's—my parents'—bathroom, I found a scrap

of a printout with three long combinations of letters and numbers.

I'd been wrong: you didn't need a password to get into the computer. You needed three, one prompt popping up after another, after another. But once I painstakingly entered them—and you better believe I put that paper back exactly where I found it, after copying the sequences down for myself—there they were: a bunch of files arranged in neat folders on the desktop.

When you put them all together, the files added up to something like a car manual, but for a supersuit: *To activate blowtorch, press your ring finger against the palm of your right hand twice.* (That's just an example. The Mayhem suit doesn't have a blowtorch. It has something more like a microwave-based thermal amplifier . . . not the point.) There were notes about Dad's training with the suit, like: *Since you don't want to repeat that incident with the cow in New Hampshire, always be sure to refill the gas cartridges before you go out.*

Like I said, Dad had a terrible memory. I figured they were just notes to himself that also happened to make the perfect personalized instruction manual for his son.

In retrospect, it was pretty stupid to imagine he had done all this alone.