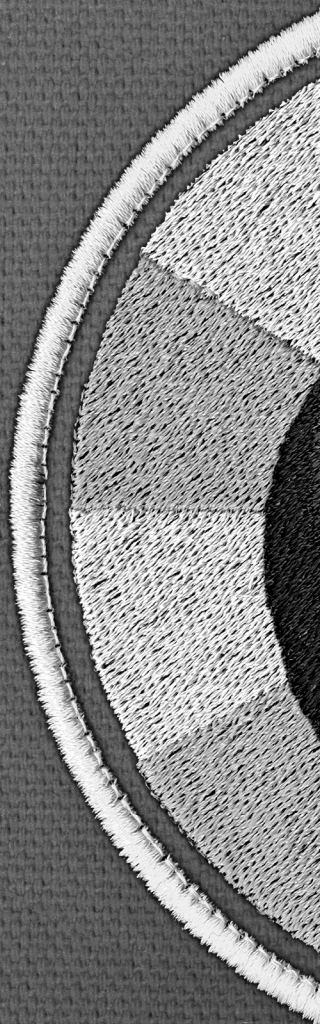
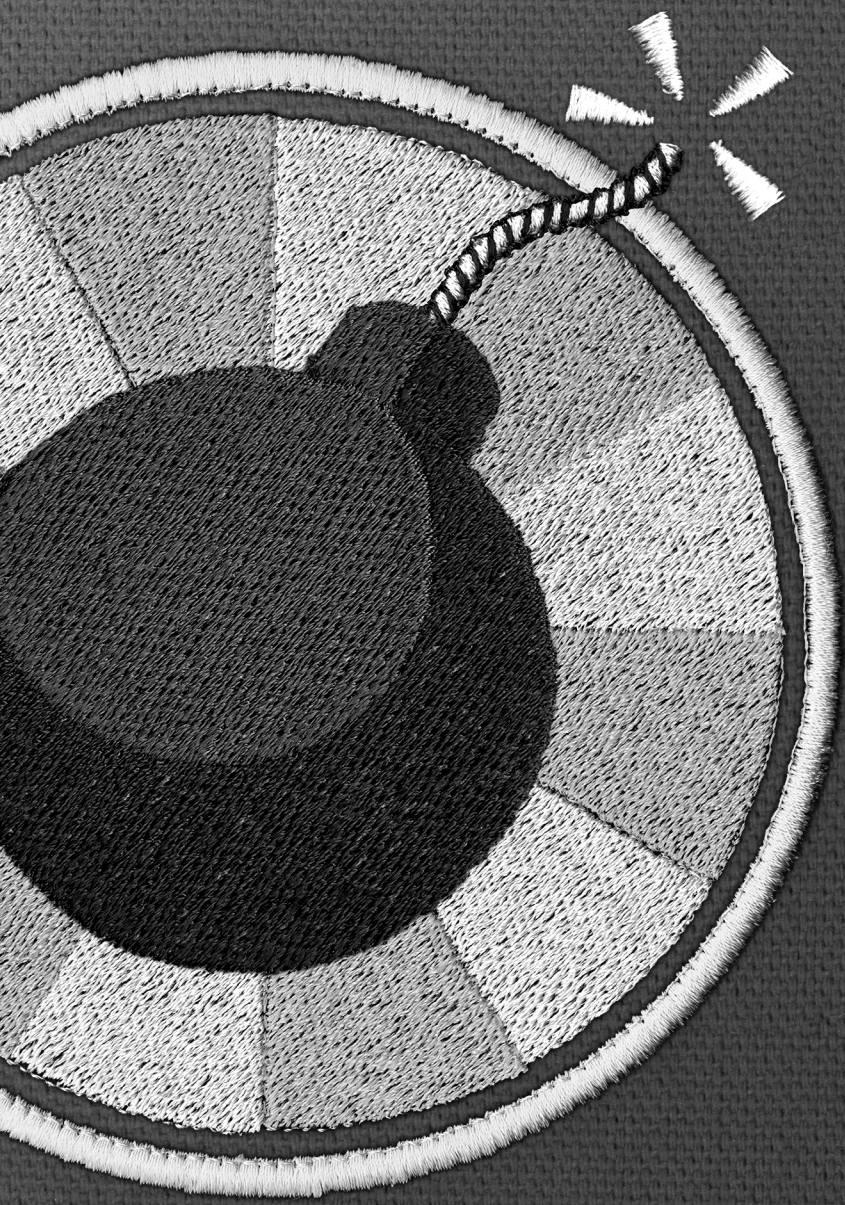


MAYHEM

JEFFREY SALANE





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**To the counted outs who can be counted on.
And to Adrienne for being herself.**

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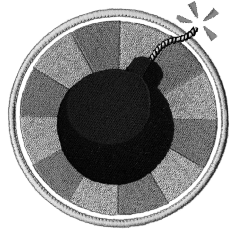
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Here's the rub . . . There's no difference between
poison and the cure.

— JOHN DYER BAIZLEY

CHAPTER 1

ALARMED



M was awake.

Or almost awake. She felt herself at an edge. Perched between a dream and a nightmare that drifted into each other like clouds in the sky.

It wasn't a bad feeling. It was just another day. It was the feeling of being alive.

Slowly, M smiled and stretched out her arms, running her hands over the soft blankets on her bed. Comfort flooded in as she fumbled with the buzzing phone alarm on the side table until the silence finally came. Then she opened her eyes.

The smell of waffles hung deliciously in the air.

M sat up in her bed and let out another stretch along with a yawn that nearly cracked her jaw. Too much sleep was a dangerous business.

Her room was painted a sophisticated gray with pops of bright teal and burnt orange in the chevron drapes. A white cushioned desk chair sat empty across from her. She had picked all the colors herself. She remembered that.

M touched the carpeted floor with her bare feet and walked

over to her full-length mirror. Her long brown hair was held back with a pink headband. There was some acne threatening to come in on her forehead, but nothing she couldn't handle. Photos framed the mirror, tacked and taped around the edge. Her best friends stared back at her: Jenny, Chloe, and Emma.

"M, I hope you're up," came her mother's voice from the kitchen. "Those lessons aren't going to learn themselves, *ma petite miette*."

M climbed downstairs still dressed in her favorite pair of flannel pajamas and tracked the smell of breakfast into the kitchen. "Morning, everyone."

"Morning, love," said her mother with a warm smile. Her deep black hair was down and swept around her shoulders in its unkempt, uncombed glory, like always. She had on an over-size sweater poncho and sat cross-legged sipping her coffee. Her mother was such a hippie!

"Morning, M," said her father. He stood by the waffle iron in a ridiculous BLESS THIS MESS apron that was ghost white with flour mix. "Flaxseed waffles and agave nectar, sound good?"

"Sounds perfect, Pops," said M as she gave him a kiss on the cheek. She grabbed her plate and joined Mom at the table. The newspaper was open, so M let her eyes wander over the headlines that didn't make the front page.

"Oh boy, NASA found more comets heading our way, huh?" M said with her mouth full. She smacked her lips and mimicked a comet crashing into the table. "Maybe it will strike before school photos. My skin is doomed."

“Oh no, that organic papaya mask I made for you didn’t work?” said her mom.

“It smelled too good,” admitted M. “I ate it.”

“Attagirl,” said her father as he sat next to her and cut into his waffle. “If it looks good, smells good, and seems good, it’s probably good. Even if it’s papaya zit spread.”

He let out a huge laugh, maybe bigger than the joke deserved, thought M, but his laughter emitted a happiness that cheered up any room, like an antidote to the blues.

Looking at the two of her parents together in quiet moments, M felt an itch. Not a physical itch, but more of a disturbance, like a Jedi might feel in *Star Wars* . . . a disturbance in the Force.

She couldn’t put her finger on it, but there were things about her parents that felt almost out of place sometimes. Her father’s green eyes and blond hair sometimes shocked her. M looked at them every now and again and thought, *How did I come from these two people?* But maybe every kid felt that way about their parents at some point in their lives? Sometimes, though, M could almost see scratches in her family story, like static, and for a split second another picture rose out of the mess. A different family, a different home, a different M. Then it would all become clear again and her dad would tell another bad joke.

These disturbances were few and far between. And they were nowhere near as dire as the Death Star. No planets were going to be harmed by these two people. These were the type who made flaxseed waffles and papaya spread on a school day.

Her father pulled out a knife and slit open a banana before dicing it into bite-sized slices for his waffle. “Mmmmm, M. You’ve gotta try this.”

For a moment M wasn’t sure if he was talking about the banana or the knife skills, but then he tossed the banana slices onto her waffle. She folded it in half like a banana-filled taco and stood up from the table.

“Thanks, Pops,” she said, taking a bite. “Mime gonna finish dis upstairs. Need to get ready before the gang arrives.”

“Of course, don’t let us get in your way,” he kidded. “We’re only here to serve you.”

“Paul, don’t tease,” her mother scolded sweetly.

Back in her room, M dressed and reviewed her homework from the night before. There was going to be an exam today on Monet and his contemporaries in Ms. Ohlmsted’s class and M was determined to ace it. Sure, Art Appreciation was a blow-off course for other kids in her school, but she weirdly loved it, especially the history and study of different techniques. Maybe M had been an artist in her former life.

Like clockwork, the doorbell rang downstairs over and over again, accompanied by a flurry of frantic knocks. It sounded like survivors trying to get inside a locked door to be saved from the apocalypse.

M ran to the door with her backpack on. Jenny, Chloe, and Emma had their faces pressed up against the side glass panels, hollering at the top of their lungs.

“Save us, M! Save us!” they screamed while trying to keep a straight face.

“Mom, Dad, you know the drill. My squad’s here!” M shouted over the madness. “I’ll see you after school!”

“Have a great day, dear,” her father said cheerfully. “And don’t go changing today; we like you just the way you are.”

“Har, har har,” said M as she stepped outside and turned her attention to the others. “There’s no hope for you jerks, especially if you keep scaring my neighbors like this.” Then she called out across the street, “It’s okay, Mrs. Truffle. Everything’s fine. My friends were just joking.”

An elderly woman sat on her porch with several small dogs darting around her front yard. She waved back with an annoyed gesture. “They’re stirring up the dogs.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Truffle,” the girls all apologized in a flat tone.

“Ugh, let’s get to school before you make the whole neighborhood think I live in the weirdest house for miles,” said M as the group walked down the street. “It’s bad enough we have neon-green barrels to collect rainwater and compost religiously in our backyard. I think my parents are two days away from getting livestock and starting a commune.”

“Oh, please,” Jenny scoffed jokingly. “You won the parent lottery, M. Sure, they’re crunchy, but your parents are *cool* crunchy. I mean, my parents think I can survive on one hundred texts a month. Well, I’ve got news for you, Mom and Dad: I can’t!”

“And what’s wrong with lime green?” asked Chloe. She was

trying a new color of nail polish, *Shrieking Lime*, and the name fit. Her fingers looked like they were wearing Day-Glo green outfits.

Fort Harmon Middle School was bustling with kids getting dropped off by their parents, but M lived criminally close, like across-the-street close. All of her friends lived close, too. M remembered moving to Harmon last summer. Her parents must have known that moving to a new city would be hard for her, so they invited all the neighbors with kids her age over on their first night in the house. Ever since then, Jenny, Chloe, Emma, and M had been inseparable. They walked to and from school together every day. And they had almost every class together, too. Except for their electives. While M had chosen Art Appreciation, the others had chosen one of the wildest courses the school offered: Survival Skills. They had begged M to join them, but survival skills weren't something M had any interest in.

"M, just to make you jealous, we're going to learn how to start a fire without a match today," bragged Emma. "Are you sure you don't want to switch electives? I've asked Mr. Harch and there's a spot for you if you want it."

"Sounds like a scorching good time, but I'll stick with the arts," said M. "Besides, we can't be in every class together. Geez, stalk each other much?"

"Hey, it's not creepy. It's survival," joked Chloe. Then she shook her *Shrieking Lime* finger and spoke in a low, husky voice that mimicked Mr. Harch. "And survival is no laughing matter."

The girls burst out laughing again as they made their way inside the building to their first class. But there was a buzz in the hallway this morning. A new kid was starting today, four weeks into the school year. The collective excitement and curiosity of the school hadn't peaked to this level since M started at the beginning of the year.

"It's a guy, that's all I know," some kid with long hair admitted to his friends as M walked by.

"I heard he got kicked out of Turnington Prep," said another. The walls were talking, and M couldn't help but listen to every scrap that floated by.

"Do you guys know about this new kid?" she asked her friends. But when she turned, she noticed that they weren't by her side anymore. They had fallen back into a huddle behind M, speaking in hushed whispers.

No one said anything about this.

Relax, it's probably a test.

This is what we've been training for. It's finally here. They've come to take . . .

"Guys?" M asked, catching small pieces of what they were saying. "What are you talking about?"

"Sorry!" Jenny snapped around, cutting the girls' private powwow short. "No idea about Mr. X. But why would we? It's not like we're on the lookout for newbs." Jenny wore a nervous smile and M couldn't figure out why. Chloe and Emma were behind her, nodding in agreement like bobbleheads on springs, bouncing up and down, up and down.

“Hey, don’t we have that, um, thing?” Emma asked the others.

“You’re right!” Chloe burst out in agreement. “For Harch’s class. We needed to get that thing from the library.”

“A book?” guessed M.

“Yeah, a book on flint history or something. It’s not important,” said Jenny. “M, why don’t you go ahead to class and we’ll meet you there.”

The group left in unison and disappeared around the corner, leaving M alone. She shook her head, confused at the strange interaction and her friends’ sudden need to all go to the library at the same time, but she’d noticed that about them before. They were the kind of girls who did everything together. Come to think of it, M wondered, had she ever hung out one-on-one with any of them? To her surprise, she hadn’t.

Hearing the first bell drone out, M wheeled around to go to first period – and bumped right into a boy carrying a load of books.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as everything was knocked out of his hands. The books landed open-faced, with a series of thuds, on the ground. He froze for a moment with his arms open and chuckled with indifference. “Look out,” he said flatly once it was over and done.

M knelt down to help with the mess. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, I didn’t see you and . . .”

He smiled nervously at M’s horrified rambling and stooped down next to her. “It’s cool,” he said. “I wasn’t really looking

where I was going, either. Um, I'm Evel. Otherwise known as the new kid."

"Yeah, I thought you didn't look familiar," said M as she flipped the splayed books closed and stacked them carefully.

The boy laughed again. "You're funny."

With things gathered, M and Evel stood back up. He was tall. Taller than her. He was also tan and Asian, dressed in a black hoodie as dark as his long hair. When he tucked the stack of books under his chin for support, M noticed a slight scar that ran under his jawline. He definitely looked older than M. Actually, he looked older than all the kids at Fort Harmon.

"Are you sure you're in middle school?" asked M.

"Wow, and you're not shy, either," Evel noted. "Um, let's just say I haven't been the best student in the past. But I'm trying to change that. Would you like to help me?"

"Me? How can I help? Besides suggest where you can get a backpack."

Evel motioned his head toward the hallway as the other kids moved around them. "You can help me find my first class before I'm late, for starters."

"Oh," replied M. "Sure. What class are you looking for?"

Evel readjusted the pile of books in his arms and pulled a crumpled piece of paper out from his pocket and handed it to M. "Here's my schedule. I think it's . . ."

"Math," she answered. "It's this way. Room 108."

As they walked, Evel kept talking. "Man, this place is big. How many kids go here, anyway?"

“I don’t know, like a thousand, maybe?” said M as she led the way.

“How long does it take before you learn your way around?” he asked.

“It wasn’t hard for me and I just started here this year,” admitted M. “Give it a week, I guess. So, you’re not from Harmon. You’re too tan.”

She let the statement hang in the air without asking a question.

“What can I say? I’m blessed with good genes,” said Evel. “I’ve been all around. Born in Japan, moved to France, then to LA for a while. Now I’m here.”

“But you’ve been in Harmon,” said M. “Rumor has it you were at Turnington before FH.”

“Rumor has it right,” confirmed Evel. “They didn’t care for my anti-backpack stance.”

“You know what I say about that?” asked M.

“What?”

“Get a locker.” M stopped in front of the door to room 108. “You have arrived safely at your destination.”

“Thanks for the company. It was great bumping into you,” joked Evel. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Definitely,” agreed M as she held up his schedule and tucked it back under his chin. “Today at two fifteen, in fact. We’re in Art Appreciation together. Just a head’s-up, there’s going to be a test. Rough day to be a new kid.”

Before Evel could get a last word in, M turned on her heel and hustled away to class.

Her heart beat a new rhythm in her chest. Evel was a different kind of disturbance. One that she hadn't been prepared for. It was a good disturbance this time, like seeing a shooting star and making a wish. Suddenly the flat routine of Harmon didn't seem so dull and predictable.

As she made for her class, a door whipped open and tagged the side of her elbow with a whump. "Hey! Ouch!" she cried out.

The man on the other side of the door slowly turned toward her. His head was shaved bald and he sported a white goatee that jutted out like a sharp extension of his chin. But what M noticed most was the man's size. Not his height, because he was short. What jumped out more was his sheer muscle mass. This wasn't a teacher. He was a steroid-abusing weightlifter by day and a back-alley brawler by night.

"Outta the way, girlie," he said with a Cockney accent. "I gots pupils that need schoolin'."

He shuffled off and left M gripping her arm and late to class. This was turning into the strangest day of her life.