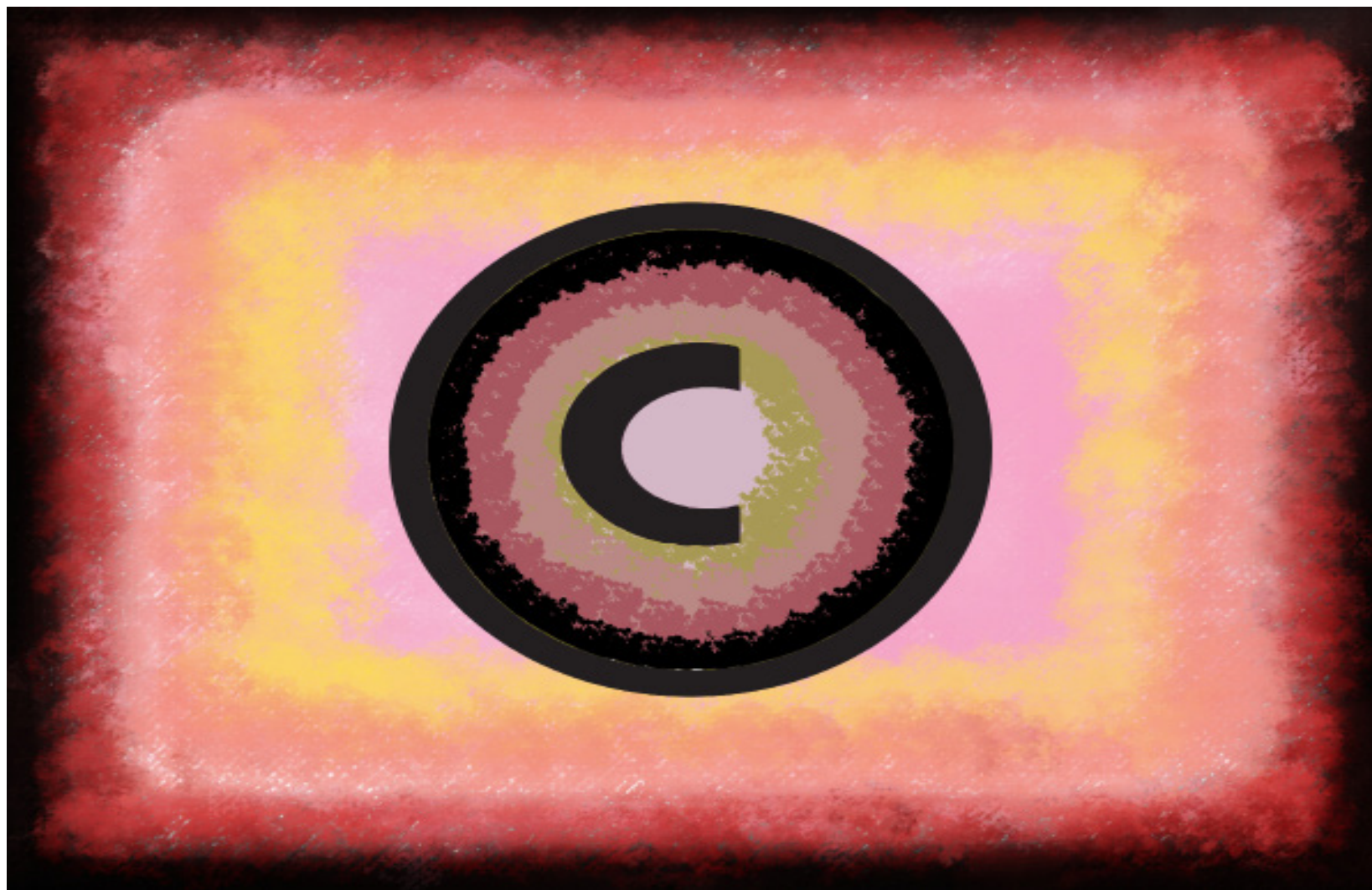


“We will look ahead at the dreams that were made in our hearts, and we can begin again. Stand and face the world with open hands and tears. In this tired body, spirit perseveres.

Remembering these wounds will heal, you are not alone in this.”

-Stand, Flyleaf



BACK TO NORMAL

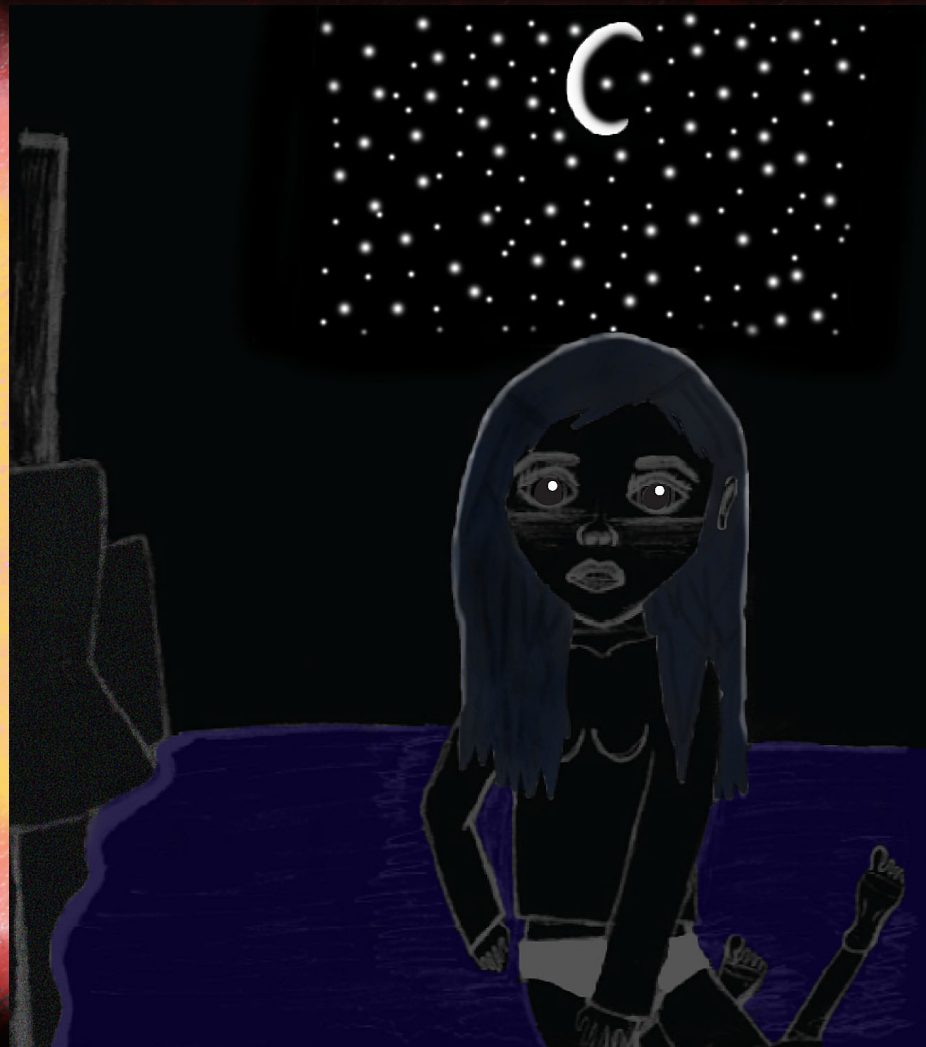
BY MARISSA MERRIMAN

"HAVEN!" I bellowed as I opened my eyes. I heard a sharp intake of air and I felt her jolt against my body, the rusted bedsprings squeaking underneath the thin mattress. Her dark figure was lingering over me as I violently woke up. She was looking at me with a doe-eyed stare, her long hair tickling my face. The moon shined through the small window to my right, and the bare, beige walls were tinted blue by the light. Haven's jet-black hair shined in it as she scooted back, towards the foot of the bed, like a frightened, whimpering puppy. I quickly pushed myself into a sitting position. I could practically see her cheeks flushing in the dark, knowing that she felt guilty. I ran my hands through my scruffy brown hair and shut my eyes.

"Thank God, it was just a nightmare," I whispered.

Haven remained silent like always, waiting for me to let her know that I wasn't angry. I felt bad for startling and upsetting her, but in my defense, her perpetually frozen hands were pressing against my bare chest again and it always woke me up. This conscious habit of hers that developed after the incident six months ago seemed harmless, but the nightmare it triggered came from the same, haunting memory: Haven's body was sprawled out on the kitchen floor and blood was pouring out of her neck wound. Her green eyes had rolled into the back of her head and her olive skin was the palest shade I had ever seen.

6



After the third defibrillator shock to her chest, her eyes snapped open and wildly searched for me in a cluster of four paramedics who were tending to her with bandages and towels. A gurgling noise resounded from her throat as she tried, and failed to speak with a sliced windpipe and nicked vocal chords. Tears blurred my vision as I leaned back against the counter and stared at her.

“We’ve talked about this, dear. I just started catching up on sleep,” I said while rubbing my eyes. We had tried therapy after Haven checked out of the hospital, a month after the attack, because of our lack of sleep and paranoia. However, once insomnia pills and anti-depressants were prescribed to us, we backed out of any treatment. I didn’t want to pay for the pills, and I never found meds to be the solution for any type of mental issue. That’s when I decided to take care of things my way.

“I know, I’m sorry Carter,” she whispered with a shake of her head, “You looked and sounded so still - I needed to feel you, just to make sure you were still breathing,” I sighed and reached a hand out to pet her silky hair. I had been more understanding and concerned about her right after the attack, but it had been six months since it happened, we needed to move on with our lives now. Remember what the doctor said, *get back to as normal of a life as you possibly can*, I thought as she leaned into my touch like a cat and shut her eyes.



Her hair was soft, and the skin on her cheek was smooth. I also saw huge bags bulging out from underneath her closed lids, noticeable even in the dark.

It was no secret that Haven still wasn't sleeping well. I suppose that a random trucker creeping into our kitchen would scare the living shit out of anyone. Haven and I had gotten into the habit of locking the door as soon as we went to bed, and it was only eight pm when he attacked. But thankfully, the incident only lasted two minutes. I had been shaving off my five-o'clock shadow in the bathroom upstairs, staring at my shirtless self in the mirror with the door closed when I heard Haven scream and a thump on the floor. The man was already bolting out the door with a purse in his hands while I was running down the stairs, yelling:

"HAVEN!"

The attacker was arrested while Haven was in the hospital for one and a half months. She had just woken up after her third surgery, and I was the first person she laid her eyes on. I stared down at the love of my life - a little bird with a broken neck. She was hooked up to all kinds of tubes and machines and her neck was wrapped in white bandages as well as a neck brace. Her cheeks were a bit swollen too, like a chipmunk storing acorns in its mouth. I grasped her cold hand and sighed. That's when the trooper - a man in his late fifties, in a tan jumpsuit, a cowboy hat, and boots, walked into the room.

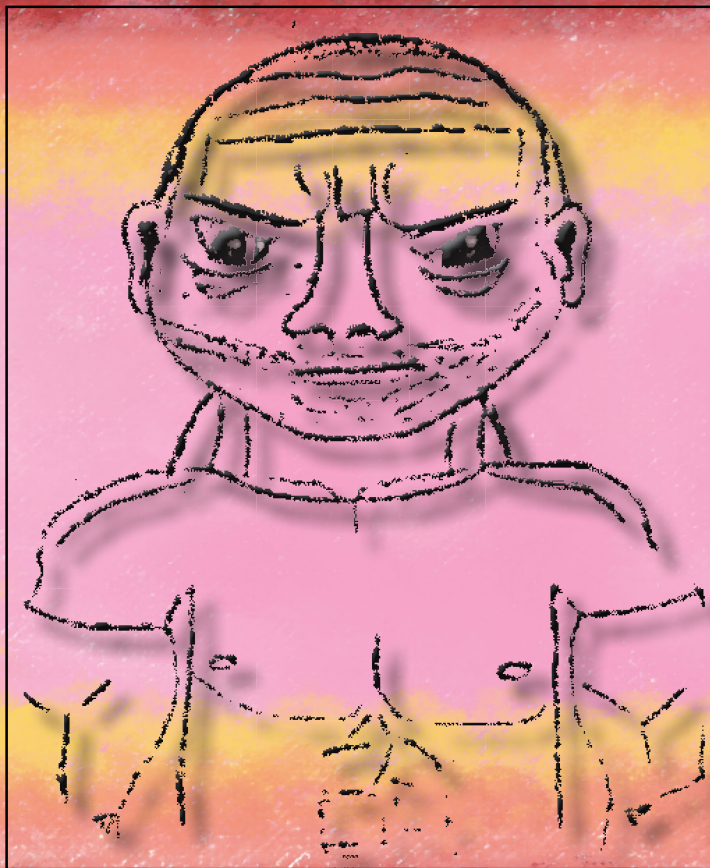


He greeted us, introduced himself, and then laid out four pictures on top of the food tray that was connected to Haven's hospital bed. He smelt of tobacco and old spice.

"These are the suspects based on Carter's description of what 'e looked like, but 'aven got a better look at 'im. Do ya recognize any of these men, doll?" the trooper had asked. Haven only needed to scan the four photos once before she recognized her attacker. She couldn't speak, but her eyes had gone wide, her head began to shake wildly, and she dug her nails into my hand.

After about a minute of me having to calm her down, she finally took her shaky index finger and placed it on the mug shot on the very left end. The man in the picture was fairly large and bald, with blazing amber eyes, a wrinkled forehead, clenched jaw, and thin/furrowed eyebrows. Baker was staring at us out of that photo as though he were penetrating our souls. However, despite his usage of Haven's debit card from her purse that led to his official arrest several hours later, we moved from that house on the Maryland highway after Haven was released. Now we are currently in a small apartment in Pennsylvania, back in our hometown - Bethlehem.

10



"I'm not dead yet. I'm just sleeping. No need to double check," I reassured her with a yawn.

She let out a shaky sigh and sat back on her heels. She turned her head to the right and I shuddered as her noticeably large, dark scar starting from the bottom of her left shoulder and then ending underneath her right ear stretched across her neck. Then I followed her gaze to the bedroom door on my left that was locked shut. I frowned, noticing that Haven had moved the wooden desk chair from the other side of the room, and placed it in a leaning position, right underneath the doorknob, even though I dead-bolted the front door. *Dammit, she's still scared, even after six months*, I thought.

"I'm going to go make some hot chocolate," she whispered, sounding depressed. Her mouse-like voice had fully recovered a couple of weeks ago, but she still didn't feel comfortable finding a job. We had left our Maryland, minimum-wage jobs that we got as a waiter and waitress after graduating from Pennsylvania State University one year ago. Honestly, the only thing that college did was teach us how to have great sex. Stressing over exams did nothing to prepare us for the life that was currently kicking our asses.

We decided to follow our vision of starting over in a brand new environment after living in the same state for twenty-three years of our lives. Haven wanted to be a journalist and I wanted to be an editor... but landing our dream jobs turned out to be more far-fetched than we thought. The major downside of living in the same state for our whole lives was that we didn't realize that everyone was unemployed or working minimum-wage jobs just to pay the bills, no matter where we went. So, it's not like we were actually doing very well before Haven was attacked, but afterwards, my attempts to continue trying to get us back on track with our dreams seemed postponed indefinitely.

I opened my mouth to reply and lifted my hand to grab her arm, but she was already inching away from my touch and sliding off of the bed. She tip toed to the chair and removed it from underneath the doorknob. I sighed and watched her.

"Wait, please - " I begged, crawling to the edge of the bed as she unlocked the door, turned the knob, and pulled it open. She slipped out the door without a word as I threw the covers off of my legs and scrambled after her.

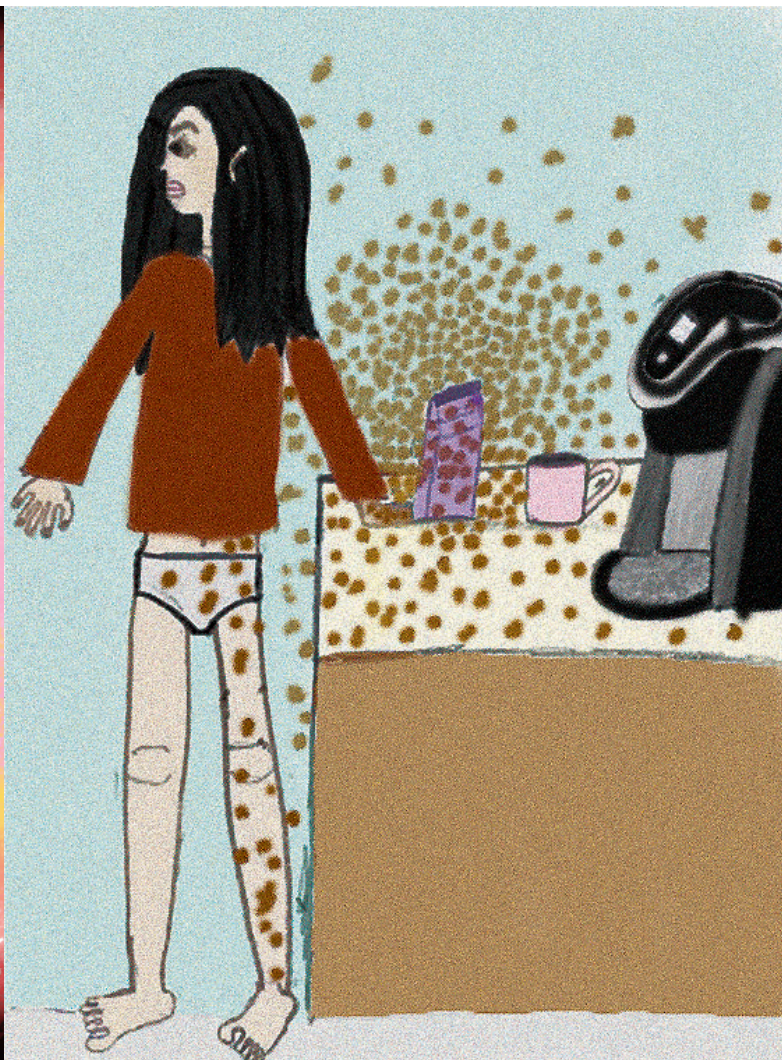
"I'm sorry, Haven, I didn't mean to belittle your fear," I added as I followed her into the tiny kitchen area of the apartment. She flicked on a light switch and headed towards an open cabinet full of mugs. She took a pale pink one out, twirled around, and placed it on the kitchen island without looking at me.

"I don't want to do this, Carter," she suddenly whispered, placing her heads on either side of the mug and leaning heavily against the kitchen island. My stomach tightened and my eyebrows furrowed.

"I don't want to testify against him in court tomorrow, I don't even want to look at that psychopath ever again," she added. The lines on her forehead began to wrinkle as she struggled to keep from bursting into tears. She turned around quickly, probably feeling ashamed, and walked towards the counter behind her. She turned on the coffee maker and reached into another cabinet right above her that held the hot chocolate mix.

"And you won't ever have to again after tomorrow," I replied. She slammed the hot chocolate mix onto the counter, the top flying open at the opposing force, and brown powder sprinkled everywhere. Haven whipped around as I stepped backwards.

14



“Look, I can’t go back to normal. I love you, but I can’t. I still can’t look at a knife without flinching, I can’t sit still in a room that doesn’t have a locked door, and I can’t stop seeing his face every time I close my eyes, I just can’t! So please spare me the: ‘it’s all going to be okay, just go back to normal’ speech, Carter,” she screamed, her voice raspy and broken towards the end of her lecture. Her voice had recovered, but not that much. Then she turned back around and made her drink.

Meanwhile, I swallowed and blinked at the back of my girlfriend, feeling horrified. Haven was normally never the one to yell, or make hot chocolate without asking me if I wanted any coffee first. She knew that I didn’t like hot chocolate, and she always offered to make me coffee before making what she wanted. That’s why she was so satisfied as a minimum-wage waitress and I wasn’t – she was always doing things for others before herself. I sighed as I realized that this moment was a testament to how out of character she’d been acting over the past six months, and it was only getting worse. It’s amazing that such a simple act can point out so many flaws within a relationship.

However, I forced myself to calm down and nod in response, with a better understanding of her fear. About three months ago, we had gotten a phone call while we were unpacking – we needed to testify at Baker’s murder trial. Yes, murder.

Apparently this incident was not a coincidence. This creepy fucker - I mean, *trucker*, had been traveling on highways across the country for years, stopping at random houses along the way - stealing, raping, and murdering victims who unluckily left their doors unlocked after the sun went down.

If only I'd locked the door as soon as I came home from work that night, we wouldn't have been placed within that unlucky group. The trooper told us that once Baker confessed, his own words were: *"Most people just don't expect anything like this to happen to them, you know? Two of my motivations in life are to hunt humans like animals and prove people wrong."*

"Okay, I won't tell you that anymore," I said, "But you can do this, Haven. We have to do this. We've gotta give the families of the people he murdered that closure. We need that closure," I told her, slowly approaching her on the opposite side of the island counter, right underneath the hanging, artificial, ceiling light. She turned back around, looking calmer, with her eyes downcast and her head low. She wiped a few tears off of her cheeks and sniffled, brushing a finger underneath her nose. That's when I smiled, suddenly noticing that she was wearing one of my large shirts with no pajama pants on - subtly reminding me of why I was immediately attracted to her when we met for the first time in middle school: her cute incoordination, and beauty. "God you are so gorgeous," I added. She looked back up at me with tearful, shining green eyes.

"Even though I still have this nasty scar on my neck?" She asked, covering the front of her neck with her hand. I rolled my eyes and walked around the island.

"Dear, c'mon, you ask me this every single day. The scar doesn't matter to me, and I love you, you know that," I replied. I desperately wanted to distract her and continue pretending like nothing had ever happened - for both of our sakes. We both needed to move on, just like the doctor said. She dropped her hand from her neck and began picking at her fingernails as I wrapped an arm around her back.

"Even though I'm still a pain in the ass?" She asked. I laughed and gave her a tight side hug. I kissed the top of her head as she leaned into me, curling against me like a cold kitten. I engulfed her in a tighter hug, knowing that she loved how warm I was. *"That's why we work so well together,"* she once told me, *"We're complete opposites. I'm always cold, and you're always hot. We balance each other out."*

"Especially because you're a pain in the ass," I joked with a smile, and she laughed while crying. I loved that I could still make her laugh after everything that went downhill since our college graduation last year. It was an indication that she was starting to become her normal, less paranoid self again. She used to be bold, outgoing, happy, and optimistic, but that all disappeared after the attack. I squeezed her small figure and buried my face in her hair, taking a deep breath of the sweet coconut smell from her shampoo.

18



Haven suddenly pulled away from me, hiccupped, and wiped the tears off of her cheeks. Her eyes were red, her hair pushed back behind her ears.

"Just...just please promise me something," she replied.

"What's that?" I asked. She looked at me sternly.

"Don't cry," she ordered. I hesitated and looked from left to right.

"Why would I cry?"

"You cried when I almost died - don't do that while I'm up on the stand," she explained, "If I see you crying, it'll upset me, and I don't want to look upset in front of him," she said, turning back around towards the coffee maker and filling her white mug with hot chocolate. I smirked and nodded at her back, realizing that she was partially wrong about us - we weren't complete opposites.

xxx

However, the promise that we made to each other the night before did not have a chance in Hell of surviving once we actually stepped into the courtroom.

"Haven Helstrom, do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do, Your Honor."

"You may be seated," Judge Kennedy said as Haven tucked her knee-length black and white flower dress underneath her butt as she sat down at the witness stand, her back straight, her hair flowing evenly over her shoulders, and her eyes wide. She refused to look at Baker, who was sitting over on the defendant side, in a blue suit and tie. His leg was shaking and his head was hung low, but I could only see him from the back. I swallowed and adjusted my red tie - feeling extremely uncomfortable and hot.

I had just given my personal testimony, and now Haven was on the witness stand. The entire process progressed exactly how I expected it to. I told them what happened from my perspective and then I sat down - piece of cake. However, I knew that Haven's process would not be as smooth since her experience with Baker was far more traumatic. The atmosphere suddenly grew thicker and stuffier. I felt like I couldn't breathe. Just focus on Haven, I thought. Get her through this day, and it'll all be over. We can go back to normal and you don't ever have to think about it again. I stared at Haven, trying to communicate with her telepathically to look at me. Her eyes finally made eye contact with mine only a few feet away from her in the first row. I smiled reassuringly, and her posture became a little less stiff - her expression noticeably softened. She puffed her chest out slightly and looked at the standing attorney.

"Miss Helstrom, tell us about what you were doing at eight-ten p.m. on February fifteenth of two-thousand and eleven," the attorney said. Haven took a deep breath and explained everything that happened right before the attack began.

"I heard the front door open, but I didn't panic until I saw a reflection on the glass door that leads to the backyard of a strange man standing at the entrance of the kitchen," She finished. I gulped and dug my nails into my pants.

"I'm sorry, whose reflection was on your glass door?" the attorney asked. Haven lifted a trembling hand and pointed to Baker.

"His reflection," she replied nervously.

"The large, bald man in the blue suit?"

"...Yes," Haven said, nodding once, on the verge of tears. I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and exhaled slowly. Restraining myself from killing Baker in that very courtroom, and then rescuing Haven from the witness stand, was the hardest thing I'd ever done. The jury stirred slightly at Haven's emotion, but the crowd remained dead silent. Police officers were stationed throughout the courtroom, standing like statues. The trooper who arrested Baker was sitting right next to me, patting my back and whispering.

"She's doin' great," as Haven told the prosecutor what Baker had looked like.



"What happened after you saw his reflection, Miss Helstrom?"

"H-he pulled out a knife from his j-jacket and - and quietly told me to give him all of my money and that if I made an effing noise, that he was going to - to kill me... and I figured that he must have known that Carter was home. I-I thought that I could stall him until Carter came back downstairs," Haven explained, but then started speaking so quickly that she had to stop and breathe. I wanted nothing more than to go back in time and redo that moment. If only I had locked the door or could have gotten downstairs to her before Baker slit her throat.

"I grabbed my purse off of the kitchen counter and looked through it on our table as he approached me with the knife."

"What did the knife look like, Miss Helstrom?" Haven shook her head and swallowed like it was almost painful for her to do so.

"It was just a kitchen knife," she replied with a shrug. "It was really sharp and very pointed at the end, with a black handle."

"And what happened next?"

"He threatened to kill me again if I didn't find it faster. I had my w-wallet in my hand, but I d-didn't want to show him that I had found it. Carter and I were very low on money... s-so, I pretended like it wasn't in there," Haven explained. She was trembling like a scared, trapped animal in a cage.

"His-his knuckles around the knife handle were turning white and h-he started breathing hard through his mouth. Then he g-g-grabbed my wrist with his other hand and y-yanked me towards h-him," Haven was stumbling on her words and starting to cry. My heart felt like it was being squeezed to death. She shut her eyes and made sharp, gasping, sobbing sounds, "H-he twisted me around so my b-b-back was towards him. I screamed as loud as I possibly could before I felt the knife on my neck!" I let a stray tear slide down my cheek while she wasn't looking at me. It wasn't until this moment that I realized that I had never actually asked her for any details in regards to the attack because I figured that if she wanted to talk about it with me - she would have. I had no knowledge about the extent of the terrifying agony she had experienced that night, and I originally thought that the incident had happened quicker than that.

"How did he cut your throat, Miss Helstrom? Show the jury your scar," the prosecutor demanded. Haven gave a sobbing gasp and then stood up from her chair to face the jury fully. She turned to the right, lifted her head, took her right finger, and pointed at the lower part of the left side of her neck, her fingertip sliding along the long, nasty scar all the way up to underneath her right ear. Some members of the jury had to look away while others looked unaffected. Meanwhile, Haven seemed to have gained a newfound strength. Tears stopped flowing and she puffed out her chest.

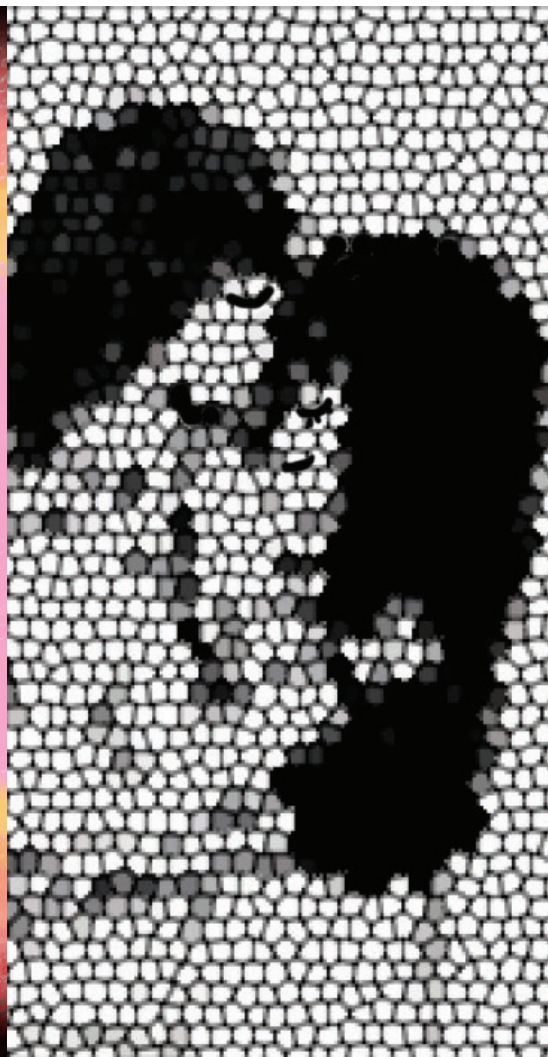
"After he did this motion, I tried falling to the ground as loudly as I possibly could to alert Carter," That's my girl, I thought. "And once I heard him start running down the steps, Baker sprinted out the front door with my purse." Haven finally finished explaining, and then fell back into her chair, looking exhausted. She finally looked over at me and I smiled back at her, but now I was the one who couldn't stop crying. How could I have been so stupid with her? She should have been allowed to take off as much time as she needed to before we restarted our lives again. I felt like slapping myself in the face as everyone in the courtroom hesitated for a couple of seconds to regroup. The cross-examination didn't last long, and it wasn't done in a vigorous fashion. Before I knew it, Haven was sitting next to me after being interviewed about her vulnerable moment.

On top of the seven hours that we spent in that courtroom, the jury took another two, long, agonizing hours to deliberate. When they finally reappeared, they found Carwin Baker "guilty." They eventually charged him with attempted murder in the first degree, as well as first and second-degree murder charges for all of the other families who lost a loved one. He was then pronounced guilty, and Haven's head fell against my left shoulder while I felt the trooper's hand squeeze my right shoulder. The three of us fully relaxed in our seats for the first time as we realized that we had officially locked Baker away, for good. I wrapped my arm around Haven's back and hugged her.

"It happened," I whispered. She lifted her head with tears of relief in her eyes and she nodded at me, "You're right. We can't just 'go back to normal' now, like I thought. We're going to have to make some changes in our lives, and deal with this the right way."

"What's the right way?" She asked curiously. I leaned over and kissed her on the lips, tasting her apple-flavored lip-gloss and smelling her sweet perfume. Then I pulled away, enclosed her cold hands in my warm ones, and leaned my forehead against hers.

"Your way."



"There I was, awaiting death for you. And all I did was love you too. I'm facing what you won't tonight. The dawn is breaking, my body's shaking. Great love, setting the world on fire. I am in awe of who you are. And it's your love I'm living for. Great love, filling me up inside. You are the one I'm looking for. And I am yours forevermore."

-Great Love, Flyleaf

