

YOU'RE NO BETTER

ANDREW JOSEPH WHITE

 Daphne Press

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Before we begin, I have two quick questions.

One: How many times have you heard the phrase *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger*?

And two: When you hear it, do you agree? Or do you look away and grind your teeth?

Take your time. There is no right answer.

Sometimes, what doesn't kill you does make you stronger. Sure. That can be true. But sometimes, what doesn't kill you just hurts. Sometimes you'll carry the hurt for years, and growing around it is exhausting and frustrating and makes you want to scream. And sometimes you can't even start to heal because the world keeps opening the wound.

That's what this book is about.

To that end, *You're No Better* contains discussions and/or depictions of the following: graphic violence and torture, child abuse, sexual harassment and assault, grooming, mental health struggles including intrusive thoughts and suicidal ideation, alcohol abuse, transphobia, ableism, and physical and psychological self-harm. If you think this book will hurt more than it'll help, and you need to put it down, that's fine. I get it. This is a rough one.

But I swear: This is a story where the messed-up, spiteful, jagged trans kids make it to the end, and have the rest of their lives to get better.

Yours,

ANDREW

Podcast

THE GORE GOONIES

Oh Shit Media Corp.

About

Welcome to the uncensored true crime podcast that asks tough questions, says the quiet parts out loud, and gets real. Hosts Chance, Chase, and Chris are here to give you every gory detail—if you can handle it. Visit our merch store for shirts, hats, and exclusive vitamin supplements.

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Look, we may not like cats, but this is going a bit too far. Let's get into the sordid homosexual affair between this disturbed killer and his victim . . .

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★☆☆☆☆

goregirl91

Oh my god, is some decency too much to ask??

CHAPTER

1

A new podcast episode about my dad dropped This morning.

A true crime group calling themselves the Gore Goonies—named for the segment where they show each other crime scene photos until one of them chickens out or vomits—posted their latest episode at dawn. By eleven o'clock, it's cracked the top ten most popular episodes in the US, nestled between NPR and *Alpha Male Bootcamp*.

When I press play, I'm one of thousands.

Inside this penthouse condo, one of the Goonies is saying now, was a torture chamber. I'm looking at a picture now and it's just—it's sickening. Knives, chains, bins of medical equipment—there's a bedpan and a dirty mattress in the corner, and—I can't even describe what I'm looking at, man.

Across the cinder block waiting room, Mom is arguing with a prison guard. She, or Dad, or someone, didn't fill out the correct form to allow the documentary producer into the visiting area. Or didn't fill it out correctly enough, or whatever. "Ma'am,"

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the guard keeps saying in his exhausted West Virginia drawl, “ma’am, we got strict visitation procedures,” and Mom is talking over him: “I’ll fill it out now. Are you listening? We drove four hours. I have a pen. Give me the damn form.”

The documentary producer shoots me an awkward half smile from the plastic chair beside me. I don’t smile back. Then he gestures for me to take out one of my wireless earbuds, as if we have something to discuss. We don’t.

Mom points behind her, to him. “He’s with the *news*.”

That’s a lie, unless we’re counting hack journalists as news anchors now.

“I don’t see no cameras on him,” the guard sighs, clearly not paid enough for this shit. “Sir! Come up here, please.”

He does, while the lengthy description of my father’s torture implements—I *don’t even know what half the things in this photo are. Is that a cattle prod?*—is interrupted by an ad for a dog-treat subscription box.

I’ve heard it all before. After so many podcasts, YouTube video essays, and police procedurals that *definitely* weren’t stealing from the headlines, you realize there’s only so many ways to rephrase the facts of a case. But the facts of the case aren’t the point. The point is *how* these people talk about us: the opinions they project onto the victims, the cops, Mom, me. Me especially. When they talk about me, or turn the camera to an actor who’s supposed to be me, I get stuck on it. For days. Weeks, sometimes. I listen to it or watch it over and over, until I have it all but memorized. As if I’ll finally understand it better the next time around.

When I told my last therapist about this habit of Googling my family and painstakingly cataloging the results—I had to throw

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her a bone, keep her busy—she said it was a form of self-harm. I disagreed. If I wanted to hurt myself, I would.

Whatever the producer says must be good enough, because the guard sulks into a back office to fetch his superior.

“See,” Mom calls after him, “was that so hard?”

And when the Gore Goonies finally get around to mentioning me, it’s not even to describe my bloody clothes in the evidence locker or the lifeless testimony I gave in that courtroom. It’s to ask if my father treated me like the girls he kept in that penthouse. If he ever forced me to do anything. If I wanted it.

If I wanted to grow up to be like him.

Shut up, we have sponsors! You can’t say that! But they’re laughing, and they didn’t edit it out, so they don’t mean it. *She was ten!*

I don’t know how long it takes for Mom to snap her fingers at me. “Morgan,” she’s probably saying. I pop out an earbud to make sure. “Morgan, let’s go.”

Finally. I turn off the podcast, hand my phone to another guard by the door, and step through the metal detector into the United States Penitentiary, East Early.

†

Mom and the documentary producer talk as we’re herded through security. Filming schedules, interview procedures, a blur of last-minute contract negotiations. “I know it’s happening fast,” the producer is saying, “but if we move quick, we could wrap postproduction before next year’s film festivals hit full swing.” I want to eavesdrop but I can’t focus. USP East Early is a stark-white cinder block cavern: The lights are too bright and

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the AC isn't loud enough. One of the guards frowns at my skirt like I'm breaking the penitentiary's dress code for visitors, again. I pick at the corner of my thumbnail until a little red strip reaches toward my knuckle.

Then we're taken past the visitation floor to the Box. The sign calls it "no-contact visiting," but it's the Box. A coffin-sized room cut in half by bulletproof glass, us on one side and the prisoner on the other, connected by a black corded phone.

The first time Mom shut me in the Box with her, I had such a bad meltdown that I started hitting my head against the wall.

The correctional officer on chaperone duty unlocks the door. "If you need water," she says, "or the restroom, you'll need to be escorted—"

"We know how it works," Mom huffs.

We step inside, and the door closes.

Dad smiles at me.

My thumb is bleeding now. I tuck it carefully in my fist. I know the door didn't lock and trap us in here, but my brain doesn't believe it, not with Dad so close. He shows his perfect teeth and his eyes crinkle, and thank god I don't look like him. I look like my mother. I have her dark red hair and upturned nose, and when we're mad, our upper lip twitches the same way—twins separated by twenty years, she used to say.

Dad cradles the phone to his ear. *Hi*, he mouths, even though nobody has picked up the receiver on our side to hear him.

I don't move. Neither does the producer.

Mom, though, arranges herself perfectly in one of the two stools in front of the glass, lifting the phone with a flourish. "Hello, dear. Good to see you again."

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The producer offers me the second stool, but I don't take it. Dad says something, his voice an almost-intelligible drone through the phone speakers. Mom narrows her eyes at him.

"I told you," she says, "it's a documentary. A docuseries. Four parts. Or six, depending on who we can get for interviews."

The producer leans over to me. He's in his late thirties, over twice my age. I don't like how close he is.

"You think he'll work with us?" he asks me.

I suck on my teeth. Mom told me to play nice.

I say, "Yeah. He's probably bored in here."

The producer nods like I've given him some great insight into the complex, twisted mind of a monster. He probably thinks there's some genius machination in Dad's head; that people like Dad are a species apart from us, a kind of devil brought from Hell to walk the earth. But there isn't and they aren't. Serial killers aren't smart, or clever, or superhuman. They're just evil, and cops are bad at their jobs.

Mom turns in her seat and holds the phone out to me. Her lip twitches.

"He wants to talk to you first," she says.



From the ages of nineteen to forty, my father, Graham Nathaniel Slaughter, kidnapped, tortured, and killed fifty-one women and girls across Virginia and the greater Washington, DC, area. In the early days, it was nothing fancy. Run-of-the-mill brutalizations in his college apartment. But by the time I was born, he'd fashioned a prison out of a waterfront penthouse,

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where he would trap girls and keep them for weeks at a time. He'd take them apart, piece by piece, until they were rotting with sepsis and he put them out of their misery.

When I was ten, I watched his fifty-first victim die, and I brought the police right to her body.

Even with a still-warm corpse on the floor, the trial—*Did he murder this woman or not?*—was a nightmare. This is what happens when the accused is a well-respected Capitol Hill lawyer. Between filing errors, thrown-out evidence, and general bullshit delays, it stalled for months; three judges in a row backed out due to “previous professional involvements” with the accused. Dad’s defense litigator, a buddy of his from law school, claimed it was manslaughter, that Dad was simply a man with unusual tastes and it was all a consensual game that got out of hand. A mistake. And we don’t punish men like Dad for mistakes, do we?

He would’ve gotten away with it, too. Because it’s true. We don’t punish men like Dad. For mistakes, or for anything at all.

The only problem was me. The little girl on the witness stand saying, *I don’t think she was the only one.*

I had no proof of this, of course. My childhood autism diagnosis, combined with the worrying results of my psychiatric evaluation, forced the jury to consider whether the only real witness was misinterpreting a string of sadomasochistic extra-marital affairs or making it up for attention. Besides, who would believe a cold, dead-eyed child over a handsome Capitol Hill attorney? And why did details change every time I told the story? Did I see other women or not? Were they hurt or not? Dad’s side of the courtroom pulled my psych eval and called me a

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manipulative liar. Mom joined in. I'd spent my whole life lying, so why would this be any different.

Then they found the hard drive of photos and, well. I almost preferred it when people thought I was a liar. Being a victim is worse.

On the other side of the Box, Dad gestures for me to sit and put the phone to my ear. My reflection in the glass vaguely overlaps his and, sure, I don't look like him, but we have the same empty eyes. When we smile, neither of us does it correctly. Behind me, Mom is whispering to the producer again.

I do as Dad asks.

"I don't know anything about the documentary," I start.

Dad wrinkles his nose playfully. "Isn't a father allowed to say hello to his daughter?"

I don't reply to that. I made the mistake of coming out to Mom as trans last month—I thought she might support me for the Instagram clout, like she does with the whole "autism mom" thing—and got a screaming fit for my trouble. Figures she wouldn't tell him, but it's weird to have it confirmed.

Faced with my silence, Dad changes course. "It's been a while, Bug. Your mother told me you'd gotten yourself on the warden's shit list. Got yourself banned for a few months. What'd you do?"

I shrug. "Dress code."

"And?"

I wore a too-short skirt and, when called out on it, took a page from Mom's book. Threw a fit. Really caused a scene. "I told the CO to go fuck himself."

"That's my girl," he says, even though I got myself banned on purpose.

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I *was* doing better, too. I think. Away from him.

"What do you want?" I ask.

He looks at me like I'm being incredibly rude, rushing through the conversation like this. "Are you on board with the documentary?"

"If I want the money, I have to be."

"Oh, come on. It won't be that bad."

Mom slips into my peripheral vision. She's got her phone out, camera pointed at us, and when my eyes turn to her, she waves me away. *Don't look*, she's not saying, *you're ruining the shot. It's supposed to be candid.*

I glare. Who gave her permission to bring a phone past security?

Mom flicks my attention away again. My teeth grind, but I raise my chin, tilt my head, give my best angle on instinct.

"I thought you'd be happier about it," Dad admits. "You're getting the cash a full seven years early. That's a deal if I've ever heard one."

I guess. Mom made it clear: As long as I cooperate with the documentary, I get my trust at eighteen instead of twenty-five. Half a million dollars. Enough to get out of here. Start testosterone, buy a tiny condo in Chicago or Seattle, invest the rest. But actually *getting* that money means pretending to be a girl for a year. And playing nice with the documentary crew. And not losing my shit in the process.

I'm not sure I can do that.

"Terms could be better," I mutter as Mom adjusts the phone to get a better shot.

Dad tsks at me. "You'll be fine."

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"Morgan," Mom says, squinting at her screen. "You really should've run your makeup by me before we left the house. The camera makes you look like a whore."

I snatch the phone out of her hand and whip it at the wall.

It misses her head by inches. Mom squeals. The producer recoils. The phone crashes against the cinder block and clatters across the tile floor, half the screen a wreck of dead pixels and shattered glass. The pretty rose-gold case sits around it like a broken eggshell.

A moment of silence.

My heart knocks against my ribs. We all stare at the mess.

Except for the producer, who is looking at me like I'm the most interesting thing he's ever seen.

Mom whirls to bare her teeth at me and says, "You bitch."

And Dad laughs.

It's not a manic laugh. Nothing stereotypically *serial killer*. Only a gentle chuckle. But I can hear it through the receiver anyway, even with the phone dangling from my fingers.

"*Get out*," Dad says. The grainy voice is difficult to understand—I have to stare hard at his mouth, pick apart the shape of his lips to confirm what consonants he's using. Dad points at Mom, then the producer. "*Bellamy, take your little cameraman and get out.*"

"But—" Mom protests.

"*Give me a moment with my daughter.*"

Mom doesn't move. The muscles in her neck stand out. A bitter taste rises in the back of my throat.

But after a second, she stoops to pick up the pieces of her phone, and the producer knocks on the door to explain that

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they'll both be stepping out for a moment, and suddenly they're gone and I'm alone.

I don't want to be alone with Dad.

When Dad mimes for me to put the phone back up to my ear, I do as I'm told. My fingernail tears at the wound on my thumb, turning it from a small red streak to a weeping mess.

"You missed on purpose," he says.

A forgotten piece of glass glints in the unrelenting white light of the Box. The phone was a new model, one of those big solid ones, and it would've done real damage if it'd connected.

I'm pretty sure the correctional officers can hear what we're talking about. I'm pretty sure these phones are tapped.

"Yeah," I say. "I did."

Dad leans back to inspect me. "Why?"

"I'm not stupid."

"Use a better word than *stupid*, Bug. You're not *what*?"

Easy. Deep breaths. Watch the mouth, not the eyes.

"I'm not shortsighted," I say. "I know better than to injure somebody inside a federal prison, in front of witnesses, with my kind of record."

"Would've taught her a lesson, though."

I don't respond to that.

"I saw the way you looked at her," he says. "You wanted to hurt her."

"No."

"Don't lie to me."

The problem is, he's right. Mom has been afraid of me for as long as I can remember. When we argue, my father's words come out of my mouth. When she's drunk, she says she's

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going to lock me up for good. She says she's going to sign me over to the state so she never has to look at me again. And yes, sometimes I want to hurt her. Sometimes I feel like a cornered animal and the only way to escape is to maul whatever has me backed against the wall.

A lot of the time, most of the time, that thing is her.

Dad says, "For what it's worth, you were so good at hurting people."

I close my eyes. I can't look at him. I can't do this.

"You were a natural. God, if you'd just kept our little secret, I could have taught you everything. I could have helped you get away with anything."

He speaks slow and exaggerated, so I catch every word.

"But you stuck me in here," he says. "So when you finally make a mistake, I won't be there to save you."

I hang up the phone.

CHAPTER

2

According to The autopsy report, The official cause of death of Dad's final victim was strangulation. It was an easy call. Her throat was crushed in on itself, scraped raw where the rope took off the top layers of skin. She'd fought so hard she'd shattered her fingers, clawed until her nails splintered and came off in pieces. The night it happened, I was ten years old and there was blood all over my hands and the cops wouldn't let me wash them.

A mistake, Dad's defense called it. Even with the back of her leg cut to the bone.

After investigators found the hard drive, the entire East Coast breathed a sigh of relief. The DC Ripper had been found—Dad's reign of terror was over. They matched cold cases to photographs by the pattern of injuries. Severed tendons, pulled-out teeth, empty eye sockets. A jury member would eventually say it reminded her of *The Human Centipede*; you know, what the mad doctor did to those people before sewing them together.

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Anyway. A day and a half after our trip to USP East Early, it's Saturday night, and I'm almost drunk at a house party.

I nagged Alyssa until she brought me. She didn't want to, but she gave in eventually. She said she burned up a lot of goodwill to get me through the door. "This might be good for you, though," she admitted while she fixed her makeup on the Metro ride over. "Like, talking to people?" But now everyone else is in the living room, laughing and slamming mixed drinks made out of whatever Jenna St. Clair found in her parents' stash, and I'm in the bathroom tearing up my hands again.

My elbows are braced on the marble sink. I've got a toothpick jammed under my thumbnail and I'm digging at a speck lodged out of reach. I usually paint my nails—one of the only good suggestions I've ever gotten from a therapist, if I can't see the dirt it can't bother me—but the polish chipped and I didn't fix it. I'm going to think this is blood every time I look at my hands and I can't do that right now.

Alyssa says from her spot perched on the edge of the clawed bathtub, "You're going to have a meltdown."

I push the toothpick deeper. Pretty sure this is a torture technique. Bamboo shoots under the fingernails or something.

"I'm not," I say, as if that will make it true.

Alyssa makes an unconvinced sound and pointedly looks away.

I hate when she's right. I *thought* this would be a good distraction. Wrecking myself with secondhand smoke and too much social interaction—anything to stop thinking about the broken phone, the producer's eyes boring into the side of my head, Dad leaning in close to the bulletproof glass.

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You were so good at hurting people.

I was. I am.

But there's a speck under my fingernail, and it's too warm in here, and Jenna St. Clair's boyfriend said that if I make one wrong move he'll call the cops, and I keep smelling the inside of the dead girl's mouth under the weed stink.

Finally, the toothpick catches the speck and wedges it unceremoniously free. A brownie crumb from the Trader Joe's snack platter. Seriously? I drop the toothpick in the trash and turn on the water, scalding, to wash my hands. Outside the bathroom, the music slides from whiny straight-girl pop to lesbian eighties throwback, and Alyssa looks longingly at the door. She's got her hair fluffed up and her best butch-bait outfit on, a picture-perfect femme-in-waiting with her crop top and pink corduroy overalls.

"Jason won't, like, actually call the police," Alyssa says distantly. "You're not doing anything wrong."

"I wasn't thinking about that," I lie.

"I mean—if he calls, *he'll* be the one who gets in trouble, *he* brought the weed—"

"You don't have to be in here with me," I say, sharp enough that I almost sound like my mother.

Alyssa takes a moment to let my comment roll off her, like she always does, and slides down from the tub to test the water temperature in the sink. "Jesus," she says, and turns it down. "You're going to burn yourself."

The way she's looking at me makes my skin crawl. It's the borderline pity she reserves for her sister's own meltdowns, and also her dad when he's being particularly pathetic. Whatever. I turn off the water and flick my hands dry.

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"What happened during the visit?" she asks.

She doesn't have to do this. "Nothing."

"Morgan."

"It was fine."

Except it's never fine. Visits to USP East Early make me crack. They put Alyssa and my school and my therapist—back when I had one—on high alert, waiting for the inevitable show of whatever mental illness they think I have at any given time. Something impulsive. Something violent. Like Dad.

"Here," Alyssa says, pulling a paper cup from the fancy dispenser by the sink and filling it with lukewarm water. "Drink this."

I do as I'm told and crumple the cup into a little ball. I'm timing my breathing and I can't focus my vision and I think I'm rocking back and forth on my feet, trying to calm down. It's not working.

Look. Of the fifty-one victims, Dad's last was the only body the investigators couldn't identify. No DNA match, no identifying evidence, no missing persons report with her face. Her name in every document is *Jane Doe*, which is fitting—I don't remember much about that day, but I do remember that she had big, beautiful doe eyes. Dad hadn't gotten the chance to take them out yet.

I breathe out, hard. It's not usually like this. It's not usually this bad. Usually I can manage, I was *managing*, I thought for a second that maybe I'd actually be able to keep it together and get my trust in a year and get out for good. But Mom had to drag me back to East Early and mess me up all over again. Like she always does. God, if Mom isn't basking in the attention she

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gets from trauma dumping about Dad's crimes and my issues, she shrivels up into *nothing*.

"Okay," Alyssa says, "we should head out." She grabs her phone to check the time. "It's not too late; we can do the Metro if you want. I know you like the Metro."

I snap on instinct. "*I'm fine.*"

"Oh, bullshit—"

The bathroom door slams open.

It's Jenna St. Clair and her future-Republican-senator boyfriend, Jason. Her hands are up his shirt and they've both got that glazed-over crossfaded look. The boyfriend stumbles halfway through the door and then sees us.

"Oh," he says, suddenly far more sober than he was two seconds ago. "Shit."

But Jenna's eyes get all wide with a mix of fear and excitement. "Oh my god, Alyssa, again?"

Alyssa and I only hooked up once, but it's all people think about when we're in the same room. I might be locked in the closet, but Alyssa has been an out and proud trans girl for years now, and everybody acts like they've never heard of a trans lesbian before. *Wait*, they'll say, *does that make it gay or straight*, like it's *any of their business*.

The music roars in. I can smell the hard liquor and chemical perfume and hair gel. I was panicking and now there's other people in here and they're looking at me and they're too close and—

I'm screaming before I even know what I'm doing.

"Get the *fuck out!*" My voice shatters. Jenna flinches and her boyfriend steps in front of her and Alyssa grabs me by the

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shoulders, pushes me back against the sink. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Learn to fucking *knock!*"

"Okay," Alyssa says, "okay, we're leaving."

Jenna St. Clair whimpers. "I thought—"

I don't give a shit what she *thought*. They have to get out, get away from me NOW. I try to say that but the words don't come out. It's a guttural, sick-sounding wheeze.

"We're leaving," Alyssa says again. "I'm so sorry."

Jenna's boyfriend takes out his phone. "You have thirty seconds."

Severed tendons. Broken fingers. The rope around her throat and all the blood staining the penthouse carpet.



Outside the condo building, in the crisp night air, Alyssa says, "You know, that's her place. I don't get why she and Jason couldn't go to her own room instead of the literal bathroom?" Then: "What would he have even called the police for! It doesn't even *work* like that. Not that he would know—"

I don't respond. Talking is difficult.

Washington, DC, never shuts up, no matter how late it is. It's almost midnight, and a big red bus hisses as it pulls to a stop; cars groan their way through the tangled Dupont Circle roundabout; someone honks and someone laughs loudly on their way home from a club. Two men in Commanders jerseys lean against the railing overlooking the Connecticut Ave NW tunnel, talking about their ailing mother next to a row of tents.

The Capital City. Miles of gray concrete, flocks of annoying tourists, and every single person somehow works for either a

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defense contractor or a politician you personally hate.

Alyssa walks me down the streetlamp-gold avenue toward the roundabout park, holding my hand like I'm a toddler at the intersection. I'm chewing on the scab of the hangnail I ripped up at USP East Early and staring blankly at her wrist. She's wearing a pretty bracelet with a single pink bead. When we met during the trial—her dad is the former chief of police, Mom spent a lot of time at his house, etc.—I made her a friendship bracelet. She'd claimed she threw it away because *boys don't wear pink*, but really she'd saved it, and years later the final surviving bead is threaded between designer charms.

Friendship is a weird way to phrase this; whatever this is these days. Yeah, we hooked up junior year, but sometimes I look at her and wonder if we were supposed to be siblings. It would make more sense if we were brother and sister. We almost were. We should've been.

Blood on the carpet, rope around the throat, *if you'd just kept our little secret—*

Alyssa pulls me across the intersection before the light changes and sits me down on one of the benches encircling the park's central fountain. "Here," she murmurs. I don't fight her on it. "I'm gonna get you home. Take a second, and then we can get you on the train. Sound good?"

I manage five words: "Can I stay with you?"

I don't want to go home. Mom's still pissed about the phone, even though she bought a new one this morning, and I'm trying to avoid her as much as I can.

There's a long silence before Alyssa responds, so I know what the answer's going to be before she even speaks.

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"Leah's had a bad day, too," Alyssa says. That's her sister. "I don't think she'll take it well if there's someone else in the house."

If Leah was just a typical bratty preteen, I'd say she needs to suck it up, but unfortunately I understand the deep autistic distaste for people showing up at your house without at least forty-eight hours' notice.

"Okay," I say.

Alyssa stands in front of me in the dark, half illuminated by the streetlight, and I take one more deep breath.

Everyone thinks I'm going to hurt them, and sometimes they're right.

Jane Doe's blood drying on my hands—splattered across my shoes—heavy, reeking splotches soaked into my middle school uniform. The boy I put in the hospital freshman year. The therapist whose reputation I ruined. My hand around Alyssa's throat. Mom's shattered phone and splintered mirrors and broken plates.

And now there's going to be a documentary crew watching my every move. I *saw* the way the producer looked at me when the phone hit the wall, when Mom turned to scream at me. He was *hungry*. They're all just waiting for me to lose it. Wouldn't that be such a satisfying conclusion? I can see it now: THE SLAUGHTER DYNASTY CONTINUES blazoned across the news tab of every social media site under the sun.

I could have taught you everything.

He needs to get out of my head. I can't do this anymore.

"Alyssa," I say.

She turns to me with an earnest blink.

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“Do you remember—” A stupid opener. Of course she remembers. “The last girl. With the . . .” I gesture across my throat. “You know. Jane Doe.”

“Yeah?” She pops her hands on her hips. “Is this about the visit? I knew it.”

I tighten my sweater around myself. “No. I told you, it wasn’t—it was fine. I was thinking, though. They never identified her.”

Alyssa doesn’t react, visibly unsure of where I’m headed with this. On the other side of the roundabout park, a woman jogs on a late-night outing with her pit bull terrier. If she was in the city when the DC Ripper was active, the world must seem so much safer with him behind bars.

When you finally make a mistake, I won’t be there to save you.

Tendons, fingers, throat.

If I can’t get out of the documentary, then I won’t give it what it wants. I am not Graham Nathaniel Slaughter. Yes, according to my psychiatric and criminal record, I am a dangerous child with a proven history of impulsive violence. Yes, that girl died, mutilated and afraid, while I watched.

But I am *not my father*.

I say, “I’m going to figure out who she is.”

Alyssa says, shocked, “What?” But it’s too late. I’ve said it. I’ve made the promise, and it’s stuck in my teeth, and when I want something, Jesus Christ, I will burn through everything I touch if it means I’ll get it in the end.

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Graham Nathaniel Slaughter, Family Documentary in Works via Hexagon Productions

By Rachel Simpson

September XX, 20XX

EXCLUSIVE: Hexagon Productions, the team behind controversial documentaries such as *Mother of a Monster: A True Story* and *Bloodsport 71*, is teaming with wife of serial killer Graham Nathaniel Slaughter on a multipart docuseries about the family before, during, and after Slaughter's months-long trial.

Production is currently underway on the series, which is described as a raw, real look into the family, "including exclusive interviews with Slaughter's wife and daughter, among others, and information about the killer's life that have never before been released to the public."

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CHAPTER

3

It's a bad sign when even the Washington Metrorail doesn't calm me down. Red Line to Metro Center station, then Orange to Eastern Market—it could've been Blue or Silver, but Alyssa knows it needs to be *my* line tonight. Our Orange Line train is a 7000-series, the kind made by Kawasaki, and I ignore every available seat to stand by the electronic board wired into the wall, watching the station names blink past.

I'm so overstimulated that my clothes hurt, but I don't tell Alyssa because it's always worse when people know.

Federal Triangle. Smithsonian.

Alyssa gets off at L'Enfant Plaza, which we call Le Infant as a joke on good days, to catch the Green Line to Navy Yard and her dad's town house by the Anacostia River. She smiles when she says goodbye; I'm not sure I do.

Federal Center SW. Capitol South.

Home.

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When I wake up Sunday afternoon, I know the crash is coming—tacky-mouthed, dehydrated, too warm—but that doesn't mean I can stop it.

I manage to avoid a meltdown, which I'm proud of. For safety's sake, I stay firmly out of my mother's orbit. It's difficult, considering the narrow layout of our two-million-dollar town house, but manageable with practice. Through the walls, I can hear Mom in Dad's office, which she's taken over as a social media room. "*Get ready with me for a weekend in DC!*" I sneak food from the kitchen while she's distracted; scrub my nails with acetone to repaint them maroon; lie in bed with the lights off; document the Gore Goonies episode in my catalog with the labels "nonfiction," "podcast/audio," "comedy," and "assholes."

Still, I listen to it three more times that day.

Do you think this shit is genetic? Should we be keeping an eye on this girl?

Actually, she almost killed a kid a few years ago. There's video of it somewhere. I'll see if I can find it.

And on Monday morning, Mom is angry before I'm even ready for school. While I brush my teeth, she's stomping around downstairs, talking loudly on the phone, probably with a glass of wine. "Don't you think you could've given me a little more notice?"

I throw my makeup in my bag and slip outside while her back is turned.

Winthrop Academy is a short Metro ride from the house—

today the Green Line has a Breda 3000-series that'll be retiring soon—and the packed rush hour car shudders as a Gore Goonie guffaws in my earbuds. *She was ten!* Then I'm slipping through the crowd and jaywalking across a busy street and school is right there: a glass-and-limestone monstrosity plunked on a busy street, wedged between a law office and a restaurant.

I never use the front entrance, though. This early, you can't. Everything's locked up tight. Instead, I duck down an alley to the employee entrance, flash my school badge for the security camera that nobody ever checks, and jam in the door code.

Winthrop is the kind of small private school that doesn't believe in Individualized Education Plans or 504s for disabled kids. They think it ties them down or gets in the way of their potential or whatever. So I don't have either. What I *do* have is free rein of the building.

"This means you have a place to go when you don't feel safe at home, instead of getting in trouble somewhere else," the principal said to me as he scrawled the entrance code and alarm shutoff PIN on a scrap of paper. "But this comes with responsibility, Morgan. I'm putting a lot of faith in you."

So I don't know why Principal Vincent Morris jumps and curses when he sees me in his office. Technically, he's the one who let me in.

"I need to put a bell on you," he groans, dumping his fancy leather bag on his desk. "Or make a system for you to warn me."

I snort to signal my understanding that this is a joke.

My last therapist—Dr. Terry Lý, her name was—said that I overcompensate for *the deficits endemic to both autism and extensive childhood trauma* by becoming *socially and emotionally hypervigilant*,

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at the expense of making every social interaction *overly draining and potentially retraumatizing*. Whatever.

"Anything to say in your defense?" Vincent continues.

I shrug, plucking at one of his desk toys. "I left the door unlocked for you."

Not a real defense, but a continuation of the joke. Vincent finally cracks a half smile. Signal: *Bit's over, kiddo. Good job on the human interaction.*

"Did you eat breakfast?" he says instead. "I brought muffins. Chocolate chip."

So I get a muffin while he preps for the day. It takes guts for a grown man to be alone with me, but he's chill, and there's a camera in the room to make sure his ass is covered. He answers emails as I walk around his office: setting off the clacker-ball toy, watering the plant on top of his file cabinet, inspecting his halo of diplomas. Bachelor's in secondary education. Master's in education leadership. Certificates in special education and positive behavior supports. Plus a Black Excellence Award from when he was a teacher.

Eventually, the front doors unlock and other students start trickling in; we can hear them in the hall, shouting and mumbling and shuffling to class.

"Your mom giving you trouble?" Vincent asks.

"I'm here, aren't I?" His stapler is empty. I grab it from his desk and pop open the supply drawer to refill it.

"Well, I'm glad you came in."

I roll my eyes. "Here. Fixed your stapler for you."

"Your attentiveness to my supplies is appreciated," Vincent says. "First bell's in ten."

"I know."

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When the bell rings, though, I'm still in his office. He gives me a look over the top of his thick-rimmed glasses. "*Class.*"

"I know," I say again.

But then the tardy bell sounds, and the receptionist comes in to ask a question, only to flinch when she sees me. Vincent pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Ms. Penny," he says to the receptionist, "can you escort Ms. Slaughter to class?"

I knew this was coming—it always does, inevitably—but I still look away with a sneer. He knows what I mean. *Traitor.*



Jenna St. Clair, or her boyfriend, has apparently decided to punish my outburst at the party, because I get a text from Alyssa while Ms. Penny walks me to homeroom.

Alyssa

The video's going around again :(

"Phone off, please," Ms. Penny chides.

Great.

The video makes the rounds every few months. Every time I lose my cool, someone digs up the grainy clip from my old school, of my scissors hitting William Campbell's radial artery in freshman-year history class. It oozes from group chat to group chat, five seconds of screaming fourteen-year-olds and scraping chairs and blood vomiting onto the tile.

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I make it to homeroom and sink into my desk at the back of the class while the teacher takes attendance. She pauses and marks me present, begrudgingly.

"She was at Jenna's party?" someone in a gaggle of popular girls whispers to my left. She looks green, like she's watched the video for the first time and it's the only real gore she's ever seen. "Oh my god."

For what it's worth, I didn't aim for the radial artery. I wanted him to stop touching me, and I had scissors, and I didn't know what I'd hit until it was too late.

Daddys girl.MOV. Tagged "nonfiction," "video," and "evidence."

A few minutes after the final bell, though, after a day of keeping my head down and my mouth shut, Alyssa leans into the mirror to touch up her lipstick and says, "Have you . . . considered saying something about the video?"

I dump out my makeup bag across the counter. This bathroom at the end of the science hall is always dead after school, so I avoid the rush and hang out here while everybody else does whatever normal people do when class is over: attend extracurricular clubs or go home to their loving family, I guess. I wouldn't know.

"Like what?" I reply.

"That you didn't mean to."

"Uh-huh. Let's see how that goes."

Alyssa sighs. As we stand next to each other in the mirror, our black skirt-red sweater uniforms match perfectly. It reminds me of the semester I transferred to Winthrop—sneaking her into the girls' room and teaching her makeup, then wiping it all off before the ride home. It was a good distraction from the

expulsion, court dates, and threats of institutionalization that come along with putting a boy in the hospital.

That said, I'm not sure if I actually like makeup. Gender gets weird when you're a closeted trans boy, but also feminine, but also coerced into girlhood by a bitch of a mother. Am I actually feminine? Or is the mask I put on to hide my autism just in the shape of a girl? It might be easier to prefer something I don't have a choice to be. After all, if I come home barefaced, Mom might accuse me of trying to transition behind her back. And there'd go the trust—the only shot of getting away from her before I inevitably rip out her throat.

Am I jealous that Alyssa was actually allowed to transition? Every day.

"It might help," Alyssa says, and I roll my eyes.

"*I didn't mean to*," I mock my alternate-universe self in a whiny voice as I dab on my foundation, "*it was an accident*. Come on." I scoff. "Whatever. I'm going to the library, figure out where to start with the whole Jane Doe thing. Missing persons database or something. You should come with me."

Alyssa frowns. "You're really going through with this?"

I glare into the mirror as I work. "Of course I'm going through with it. I'm sick of this, I swear to god, every day it's something else, you're all watching me and *waiting*. The documentary producer, Jenna, *Mom*—"

"Oh," Alyssa says. "Oh." Like it's finally clicked for her why I'm doing this. "Morgan. You answered so many prayers when you got him arrested. You don't owe anyone more than that."

I snap, "Then maybe people could *act like it*."

The last words come out loud. They crack.

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Hands shaking, I smear on my concealer. "And what prayers, anyway" is all I can say. "They're all still dead."

Alyssa looks at the sink in silence.

She knows how bad it was. The DC Ripper forced her dad into early retirement. According to her parents' divorce proceedings, the police department practically strong-armed him into resigning—his obsession with my dad destroyed his marriage, messed up his kids, nearly killed him. It hangs over her head almost as much as it hangs over mine. She should want this, too.

"So." Concealer done. "Library. It's a block or two away, we can walk. Sound good?"

Alyssa's mouth opens, shuts.

Not good.

"My friends and I are going to the Portrait Gallery," she says quietly. My stomach drops. "The photography conservator is doing a demonstration. We got tickets and everything. I really don't want to miss it."

I didn't know she had friends. She's certainly never told me about them. "The Portrait Gallery."

"We've been planning this for weeks." She gathers up her bag, eyes flitting nervously to the door like she can hear my teeth grinding together. "And. I don't know. This doesn't feel, like, good? Thinking too much about your dad, I mean. Getting involved in that again. I think you should give yourself a little bit, wait until you're not so . . . freaked out."

"I am not—" Oh my god, she is *not* doing this to me. "Is some stupid museum more important than this? Do you want to help your dad get his shit together or not?"

That was too far. Alyssa takes a step back.

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"I'm not saying I won't help," she says. "I'm just worried about you."

Whatever. "It's fine. I didn't know you gave a fuck about the Portrait Gallery, but it's fine. Have fun."

"Right," Alyssa says. Her throat bobs as she reaches for the door. "We will. Bye."

And then I'm alone, makeup scattered across the sink—blush, eyeliner, palettes, lip gloss—and nails digging so hard into my palms that I'm about to draw blood.

The Portrait Gallery? *Friends*? I mean, I know she's better with people than I am. Or, at least, she doesn't hate herself or want to scream after almost every conversation, not like I do. But *friends*?

In the corner of my eye, something moves.

My heart kicks up into my throat.

Alyssa and I were the only people in the bathroom. Or we were supposed to be. Was there someone else in here the whole time? Was someone *listening*?

In the last bathroom stall in the row, a shadow. The toe of a black uniform shoe.

And the unlocked door shifts ever so slightly, like they know they've been caught.

Shit. They heard everything: My voice cracking. The pity in Alyssa's voice that creeps in every time she tries to talk me down. Nausea hits my stomach like a brick.

None of that can leave this room.

I grab the stall door—"Wait," a girl's voice says inside, "*wait*"—and smash it into whoever the fuck is hiding back there.