

Maddie's Fight

Prologue

Maddie Sanderson didn't like herself. She thought she was ugly. Her very dark brown hair stopped at the bottom of her neck, brushing against her shoulders. She did not like her blue eyes. She thought her complexion was too pale and her lips too red. She thought the shape of her face was too square. She didn't like her body, either, because apparently her breasts had grown before any other part of her body, making her unproportional a funny-looking. Her classmates appeared to agree. She was often the victim of school pranks: signs taped to the back of her shirt, mean jokes, or even verbal bullying. She didn't like it. High school was difficult emotionally for her. Some days she didn't know how she would pass and receive a diploma without leaving because of her depression. She was also struggling with her grades in classes. One day three other girls cornered her. All three of them had this teased, long, blonde hair wearing heather gray t-shirts. Their jeans also were the same style of light blue skinny jeans. They wore different yet similar shades of red lipstick and had silver hoop earrings and studs in second pierced holes jutting out of their ears.

"Hey Maddie, wanna know what's dumb? *You!* You're an ugly, stupid, unpopular loser."

"Hey, that's not nice," she said to them.

One of the blonde bad girls shoved her right index finger into her left shoulder. "But it's true," the second girl said. "You're just a little wimp. Let me take that backpack."

"No!" But one of them grabbed by the arms, another one grabbed her by the legs, and the third one grabbed her backpack. They laughed at her. Maddie was going to have to report the theft, but she was also afraid it was going to happen again. She knew their names, which were Angie, Rebecca, and Missy. This sort of thing happened to her all the time. She wished it would stop. She didn't like to cry. She didn't do it often, because she intentionally kept them back. But today little beads of tears dotted her eyelashes. She took her fingers and touched them. *I can't do this, I can't do this.*

Chapter One

Maddie did have one friend. His name was Jeffrey Richardson. He had dirty blonde hair, with a tall, bony frame.

His aqua eyes displayed a friendly, outgoing kindness. He was like a loyal dog who followed her everywhere she went and adored her. She was relieved and grateful for that. He often chatted with her at her locker and had lunch with her, because they had the same lunch period. Sometimes they would hang out after school.

But today they were fighting. Her one happiness, which was her friendship with Jeffrey, was being threatened, and she was afraid.

His final words to her remained in her mind. *Why don't you ever talk to me about your parents?* It's not as though he meant to upset her; no, that was probably the furthest thing from his mind at that point. But Maddie, her name short for Madeleine, had avoided the subject of her mother and father since the first day she and Jeffrey had met. She could still picture the night when Dad and Mom's screams tore across the quiet night in their sheltered Ohio neighborhood. Maddie couldn't remember what they were fighting about this time. Dad shouted at her mother as she huddled on the stairs, listening. There was silence and then he stomped out, tearing the blonde oak back door almost from its hinges, and never came back again. He had probably kicked her, as he was often prone to use violence to strike fear in their hearts.

Jeffrey had left earlier after helping her with her homework. She had been delicately eating the second half of the turkey and cheese sandwich she hadn't finished during their lunch period while studying with him. They'd used flash cards to memorize facts for an upcoming test. He showed her each flash card with a smile, and she remembered each one by the end of the night. It was for a history class. When they were finished studying, Jeffrey asked, "What's bothering you, Maddie? You have a frown on your face."

"Jeffrey, there's nothing bothering me." Although she knew her frown deepened and her forehead creased, a reflection of the anger she felt.

"That's not true. I think it's your parents. Maddie, I overheard them fighting on my way to your house. It sounded... abnormal. I think that's why you've been struggling in school. I think that's also one reason why you have so many bullies. I think you need to open up. Why don't you ever talk to me about your parents?"

But Maddie was silent. Jeffrey looked into her eyes, but didn't say anything more. He got up, picked up his books and notebook, put them into his bookbag, and left.

Now alone, after her parents' argument, Maddie reflected again about the fight downstairs.

Maddie was glad that her father had left, but she was also angry that he had abandoned them.

Maddie loved her mother, but from that point on their relationship changed. They hardly ever spoke, except to argue. Her mother made her lunches in the morning to take with her to school, but never did she ask her how her day went when she returned home each day. She decided not to talk to Jeffrey anymore. But he was still as friendly as could be. Instead of saying, "hi," to her when he passed her, though, he smiled.

High school was a strange experience. "Hi," classmates would say, but never want to spend time with her. They greeted her with a sort of airy, condescending way. Maddie hated herself from the first day of the ninth grade. She felt harassed not only by her family, her father who had bullied her around and sometimes shoved her, her mother who was passive-aggressive and whiny, and her brother who often teased her about every little

thing he found out about her, including what he read in her diary.

She had an English teacher in the twelfth grade who put her on the spot one day. This was after she had met Jeffrey.

"Maddie!" she said with her finger pointed in the air. "I see you have not done your homework!" Some of the other students laughed. "How selfish and irresponsible is that? Can you not understand one sentence of *The Scarlet Letter*?"

So, she was happy to leave the high school and become legally an adult around the time of graduation. She would miss Jeffrey. But it was a sacrifice she needed to make to leave the home. Somehow, her mother was going to pay for her college education, despite her disagreements with her, and she was so happy that she'd have some kind of educated future. She loved Jeffrey. She hoped that she would see him again when she came home.

Chapter Two

St. Michael's University. She was a freshman in college now in the state of Illinois. All the fears of the past were gone.

She was sitting at the desk in her dormitory. She stared at the computer screen. There, in front of her, were a multitude of words which had come from somewhere inside of that plain, uninteresting ego. *Peril's Wish*, was the title of her partially completed novel manuscript. Peril, being herself, was a girl whose name was how others characterized her. Peril's wish was to be thought of as a pretty neat girl. Peril agonized over her appearance but could never seem to like her attributes. Peril was put down but wanted to express her view of herself, which was in conflict with how others perceived her, to not just be seen as not a terror but as a strong, beautiful young woman.

She spent too much time with her creative writing. She knew that she should be spending more time with her studies. On top of that, she also had a boyfriend. His name was Drake. He had dirty blond hair and looked at her with desire.

Drake came in, looking tired.

"Drake," she said.

"Hi, Maddie. It's great to see you after a long day of classes and studying."

But she knew that he was half lying. He was a college bad boy, a slack-off drinker. She didn't know why she liked him. He

had too much lack of seriousness about college. He was a bit of a jerk.

The previous night she had lost her virginity to him.
"Drake, I had a good time last night."

"That's cool with me," he said. "Hey, there's this party going on tonight. Do you want to come?"

She looked back at her manuscript on the computer screen and hesitated. She was on a roll. She wanted to write more. But the urge to socialize trumped her creativity. "Alright," she said.

So, they walked across the campus together and went to the party. Maddie saw her roommate, Tiffany there. She said, "Hi!"

Tiffany waved at her and continued drinking her punch. Perhaps it had liquor in it, but Maddie didn't want to take the risk of trying it. Tiffany didn't look interested in talking to her, so Maddie walked away and tried to find something interesting to do. Maybe she would try to meet people.

But people were lost in conversation with each other. She couldn't find someone to talk to. The music was so loud. She was dizzy even though she hadn't had anything to drink. She thought

it was hunger and dehydration. She didn't like how she felt. Finally she saw Drake and Tiffany leave with each other, but she didn't think anything of it. She wanted to go back to her dorm, eat some potato chips, and go to sleep.

But when she got there and opened the door, there were Drake and Tiffany in her bed, both under the covers.

"Oh, shit Maddie!"

"Drake, you jerk!"

"Oh, hell Maddie, I hope you're not upset with this. You do realize it was just casual college sex."

"Well, I was not under that impression, but fine. I don't care about you anymore. Tiffany, I need to get to sleep. Can he please just leave?"

So, a few minutes later he left. Maddie tried to eat potato chips, but was nauseated, so she was only able to eat a few crumbs. Then she went to bed in her clothes and fell asleep.

The next morning she was tired, but she went to her classes, anyway.

At twilight that evening, she was walking across the campus back towards her dormitory from the dining hall. The paved walkway looked purple from the varying colors of the sunset. The temperature was a little cool and the air was moist. She looked at her feet as she walked, brooding about Drake and Tiffany. She carried her textbooks in one arm and her tan, burlap purse on the opposite shoulder. She kept her dorm key on a chain around her neck. She heard the distant squawks of some crows somewhere nearby, and the rushing sound of wind. The clouds were streaks of gray and white.

A girl began to walk past her. She didn't recognize her. She had a small head of light blonde hair which was in a low ponytail. She was wearing exercise clothes, but was walking and also carried purse and a key was around her neck. Maybe she was on her way to the gym.

Maddie began to wave but the girl did not see her. Then, from a dark covering of bushes, a man leaped out and ran quickly towards her. He was so quick that Maddie could not distinguish his facial features or really anything about him. He shoved a hand over the girl's mouth; she struggled; but her captor was too strong.

She saw him pull out the blade. She saw him slit her throat. She then barely saw in the light of twilight that he was wearing a mask, hood, gloves, and dark clothing.

The man pulled the girl's body back into the dark bushes. She saw him look at her. She screamed. She was afraid, so she started running. She knew she needed to get out of the area. But she wanted to find a campus police intercom. She knew where many of them were.

Gasping, she saw one and ran to it. It was underneath a street light. She punched the button and waited for someone to answer her. "Campus police."

"Please, I need you to help me. I just witnessed a girl being stabbed on the path from the southern part of the campus to the northern. I'm close to the dormitories right now. I'm near the outdoor restrooms. Please, come quickly to help her and help me."

So, she waited. They came so quickly she could hardly believe it. It must have only been five minutes. "It's okay," they said. "What's your name?"

So, she told them her name. "Is she alright?"

"We're looking for her right now. Can you tell me anything about his appearance and the specific location you witnessed this crime? Which way was he headed? Who was the girl?"

She answered all their questions, but she did not know the girl and she did not know her name. She was now so cold. The temperature had dropped five degrees during that time.

In the morning the news broke that the girl's body had been found over at the lake. She had not survived. There was a stunned air all over the campus. Last night Maddie had been interviewed by the city police after they had found Samantha Higgins.

The next day, the school paper was all over it. One story detailed Samantha's death. It was probably not supposed to be an opinion piece, but Maddie could intone its meaning.

"...The campus police and the city police advise all students to be accompanied after dark and to lock their dormitories both while inside and also while away. Carry a flashlight with you if you are able. If you see something, say something. Unfortunately, the student who witnessed the attack could have followed a different safety procedure; and, as a result,

Samantha Higgins died. Do not make the same mistake. Carry your cell phones with you at all times."

Maddie sobbed for days. She was not in any trouble with the law enforcement, but just the stabs of people's eyes were painful enough punishment that she lowered her head in shame for the next few weeks.

She could not concentrate in school. She stopped going to classes. She was able to work on her manuscript a little bit, but she made a character close to Peril die. She insisted she was writing self-indulgent, depressing material. Her life had become just as it was when she was in high school, in which she was a hated outcast, insulted and bullied, shamed and punished. It seemed to be a pattern and theme to her life. *Always the underdog*, she thought. And she could not stay at St. Michael's University. She was double-majoring in English and History and had a promising future. But she had been ostracized.

Tiffany, her roommate, had done the same thing. One night she told Tiffany she was leaving the school.

"Good," Tiffany said. "You're nothing but a psycho serial killer who's bad in bed and I know because Drake told me so. So go home to your wimpy family. Go home to hang your head and

shame and judge yourself. You're a selfish brat and I'm glad that you're going home."

Had Tiffany been telling the truth? Or was it just the opposite? Was Tiffany the spoiled brat?

Chapter Three

Maddie thought about guilt on the train trip home. She watched nature and houses rush by outside her window and hated herself. She had always hated herself and always would, she thought. What would she say to her mother? How would she explain how she had wasted all of that tuition money simply because she was not able to make it through school?

But she didn't care, did she? She didn't love her mother anymore. But she was concerned that there would be a problem between the two of them, that her mother would punish her. She tried to come up with a plan for hours, listening to the methodical thump, thump of the train moving.

She decided to go home only long enough to gather a few belongings and leave again.

"What are you going here?" her mother asked sternly.

"Why? Is it wrong to come home from college?"

"It's not winter break! You should be at the school right now going to classes and studying!"

"I couldn't stay there," she admitted. "I want to tell you the whole story, but maybe you wouldn't understand."

"Try me. Are you dropping out?"

Maddie thought for a second, calculated what she would say. "I can't do this college thing. I'm not intelligent enough. I cannot understand what the professors are teaching. I do not like the other students. You can't make me go back."

"Oh, yes I can!"

"No!" Maddie yelled. "I will not go back. I will not try anymore. It is impossible. I'm done. But don't worry; I won't be here long, only long enough to pack my things and leave."

Her mother didn't argue with that. She would not try to convince her to stay: Maddie knew that. She would not even ask where she was going, because she could care less about her welfare. She would watch Maddie leave and write her out of her book, for good.

That night Maddie prayed she would be safe. She packed her huge, camping backpack with underwear, clothes, a rain jacket, travel-sized shampoo and conditioner, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a sleeping bag, her wallet, her cell phone, and little cans of tuna and chicken she stole from the pantry. That was all.

She planned to find shelter anywhere she could, inside or outside. She would take a train one more time, this time to the state of Michigan. And there she would wander the streets with nowhere to go. She had never been homeless before, but she was desperate to leave her mother.

She could not sleep when it was time to go to bed, so she decided to leave in the middle of the night. With seventy bucks in her wallet, not much food, and nowhere to go, she was frightened, but she saw no other choice. She walked to the train station in the dark, and it was a long walk. It was a five-mile walk. She could have taken the bus, but she decided to save money. Anyone could have been lurking in the dark streets, like the man who had killed Samantha Higgins, but she ignored the fear.

Arriving at the train station, Maddie purchased a ticket. "One-way to Ann Arbor, Michigan," she said.

And thus, another life chapter began for her. Fear of the unknown was anxiety that felt like a fist squeezing her stomach and other internal organs. It was like the time she came too close to the edge of a mountain cliff when she was a little girl, the time she thought she was going to fall off. And her family had tried to psych her into falling. "Go closer!" they teased. But Maddie shakily walked backwards, and she didn't die that day. To be presented with such an enormous enemy, the fear of heights and falling from a very high place, was an anxiety which gave her gut such a strong, sharp pain. She would never forget that day, but today she relived it. Every horrible thing which could have ever happened to anyone had been like a monstrous tidal wave rushing towards her, as she was faced with her greatest fear, as the wave crested and came towards her, and she thought that she was going to feel the worst pain that ever was. This was the life flashing before her eyes when she was a child, a life of torment, of suffering, of tragedy, and of loss.

When she was recovered, life returned to insignificance, of tiredness, and of boredom. Of course, she had not been a popular teenager, nor had she been a popular child. All her life she doubted herself and her abilities.

And she did not know love.

But maybe she had it; she just didn't see it.

And it was the truest desire of her heart, to have love and to keep it, to have True Love.

Now, as an eighteen-year-old, running away from home, she felt not only fear but sorrow. She felt sorry for herself that she did not have a loving family or a good boyfriend or any friends. At this age, girls were beginning to meet the loves of their lives and get married. They would soon have children and start their adult lives. Maddie did not foresee any such thing happening for herself. She imagined what would be at the other side of the train trip, but she only saw a dead end.

The trip took hours. She got off, shook off two sleeping legs, and looked for the nearest taxi.

"Sir, do you know where I can find the nearest homeless shelter?"

The African man wearing a black hat looked surprised, but he said, "I can take you downtown to the homeless shelter. Free of charge."

So she got in, hefted her big backpack to the seat beside her, and he stepped on the gas. It wasn't a long trip. It was just several blocks away. As she saw it from a little distance, it looked dirty and dark.

He dropped her off, said, "I wish you luck and I hope you will be safe."

She thanked him for his charity.

He left.

She went inside and spoke to a woman with short hair. "Hi, is this the homeless shelter?"

"Yes. What kind I do for you?"

"I need a place to stay for the night."

The woman, who introduced herself as Sally, started asking her questions. When she asked, "How much money do you have with you?" Maddie said, "Seventy dollars."

Then the woman shook her head and said, "You have too much money. You can't stay here."

So she left. Once outside the shelter, she began wandering the dirt-covered streets, ones which had gotten a dusting during

the overnight wind storm. It was evening again, and the sky was a deep purplish blue—very dark.

She was so frightened and so tired that she just sat down on a hill rising up from a sidewalk, a hill she realized belonged to a church, and she cried.

She had seventy dollars, money which might be able to afford her a motel room for the night. But then she would be penniless again. She did have a cell phone with her, but no one to call. She wished she could make a telephone call to God up in Heaven. But cell phones around here didn't do that.

At that moment a man came out of the church. He was wearing a white and black collar, black clothes, and a coat. He saw her sitting on the lawn crying, and he came closer to her. She was embarrassed she had tears on her face. "Are you a parishioner?" he asked.

She was crying too much to be able to respond. Finally she said, "No, I'm homeless."

"Have you tried the homeless shelter?" and he looked a little amused. "You don't look like most other homeless women I've ever met. Your clothes aren't as dirty. You've taken a shower within the last day. I see you have belongings. Why again are you homeless?"

"Father," she said. "May I call you that?"

"Yes," he said. "People usually do call me, 'Father.'"

"I ran away from home, from a different state. I took a train here. But I only have seventy dollars. I don't know what to do."

"You look like a youth. How old are you?"

"I'm eighteen, Father."

"Listen to me. You must go home. Whatever fight you had with your family is not important enough to lose your home."

"But I can't. It's too difficult for me."

"I will pray for you, then. I have a few minutes. We just finished confession and evening mass. First, what is your name?"

"My name is Madeleine."

"Madeleine, you have some thinking to do. You have run away from home. I want you to listen to me carefully. The world is not so safe. You could have been seriously hurt or victimized out there on the streets. I thank God you're alright, but you need to go back where it's safe."

"I know," she said.

"Youth often make dangerous mistakes. Please pray to God that you have learned your lesson about getting lost. I don't ever want you to do that again. I will give you money for another train ticket back where you came from. But only if you promise me you will meditate about the Seven Sorrows of Mary."

Maddie thought that the man was insane. She was not Catholic, and she did not know what the Seven Sorrows of Mary were.

"The loss of her child, Jesus, caused her and St. Joseph to worry about him until they found him later at the temple. So, Jesus once ran away from home, too, but he is perfect and our Savior. There will be joy when you return home, as long as you realize the Blessed Virgin Mary never chastised Jesus. The two loved each other as the Divine and his meek, human mother. Jesus explained to her why he went to the temple. Jesus made no mistake, although Mary probably almost had a heart attack that her child was missing for so long. Think about that. Whoever worries about you loves you, and whoever chastises you for making no mistake is a sinner. Remember that the cross was punishment for the mistakes of the world. Jesus was tried and convicted, and then executed as a criminal even though he was blameless, the victim of misplaced blame. If you believe in him, you will not suffer hell. As far as punishment goes, think about

Mary right before you see your family again. Mary was a child-like mother. A sword of grief pierced her soul when her son was mistakenly crucified. If your family punishes you, have hope that resurrection from sin comes after the pain of punishment. Meditate on the truth. Ask yourself if you have truly been disobedient to your parents."

"Alright."

So he gave her money and drove her to the train station again. Maddie still felt tearful, but it was going away. She knew she would be home soon. But she needed to hear the words of salvation from a priest, no matter how far she needed to travel to get it.

Chapter Four

When Maddie got back her mother was busy in the backyard hosing the lawn. She didn't take great care in greeting her. She looked up, but not at her, and quietly said, "Oh, you're home."

Maddie put down her things in her old room. She hadn't been gone long, but the room had changed. The same posters of kittens and ballerinas were there, the lacy white bedspread and stuffed

bears on the bed, the same rocking chair, dolls on the bureau, books in a little bookcase, and clothes in the closet. She could sense that her mother had been in there briefly, once. Otherwise, nothing had changed.

She had a good night's sleep and in the morning decided she wanted to try going to community college. But before working on admittance, she wanted to pay Jeffrey, her old friend, a visit. So after breakfast she gave him a telephone call and waited for him to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Jeffrey? This is Maddie. Do you remember me? We used to be best friends in high school. I feel so horrible that we haven't seen each other for so long. Would you like to get together today and talk about what we've been up to?"

"Sure," he said. They arranged a place, which was his house, and a time, which was two o'clock that afternoon.

"Oh, Jeffrey, it's been such a long time. We haven't spoken since before graduation. I have so much to tell you. Do you have so much to tell me, too?"

He was silent for a moment. But he smiled and said, "I would guess you have more to tell me than I have to tell you."

"Are you sure about that? I guess you've had a very exciting life without me."

They both walked upstairs to his bedroom. His mother had made sugar cookies and put them on a plate to take them upstairs. Once there, they sat down on his bed. "Jeffrey, I had a horrible experience in college. I decided to come home. I don't want to go back."

"Oh? What could have happened? Did you not like your classmates? Did you have difficulties studying? I'm sorry that you were not able to stay. Don't tell me you found more bullies."

"Something like that."

"Well, Maddie, like I said last year, those bullies are not important. Anything they might say or do to you is nothing to worry about. You've got to ignore some things. I hope it wasn't too disturbing."

"I am thinking about going to community college."

"I should really do that, too. I haven't been in school since graduation. I took a job at the drugstore and have been living at home."

"Let's go to community college together."

At that moment his dad came home. She heard the door close downstairs and a man's voice calling out to Jeffrey's mother. "That's my dad," Jeffrey said. He looked a little frightened.

"Do you want me to go?"

"I think that would be best. Will we keep in touch? I think I'd like to look into taking classes with you for the spring quarter."

She was so happy that he was going to be a schoolmate. She went home feeling light.

So, after speaking with their parents, they both registered for the spring quarter. At first, classes were easy. Maddie was majoring in an associative arts degree in English. The first day they introduced themselves and looked at a syllabus. It was going to take just a little bit of effort and punctuality to do well, but Maddie knew she was capable.

She ate her lunches in the cafeteria, not with Jeffrey, because they did not have time in between classes at the same time. But she saw him passing by sometimes. It didn't feel as pressured as St. Michael's University.

Strange occurrences began to happen. Maddie came close to several crimes during the quarter. Stolen goods became vandalized property. At various times Maddie smelled thick marijuana smoke and witnessed drug paraphernalia on campus. Someone she had just passed was abducted and taken to another part of town, bound and gagged and held for ransom. Finally, the perpetrator gave up on the ransom and ran, only for the police to discover the abducted young woman. And then another murder happened.

"This can't be happening," she said to Jeffrey that night. "After what happened at St. Michael's University, this is too strange and frightening. I have come close to so many crimes. I don't know what's going to happen next. I need some clue about what is happening."

"Maddie, it's going to be okay. Just be safe out there when you're at school. You know what to do. You've heard all this before. Let the police help the victims and the college, and take care of yourself in the process."

But the police began to look at her as a suspect. It was when a clothing item of hers, a light jacket, was found near the scene of a crime, that the police began to question her innocence. And then they were able to surmise that she had been near of all of the recent criminal incidents during the entire quarter. How did she figure out that they were going to arrest her? It was because the evidence against her was increasing. Left and right they discovered more and more mounting evidence that she was the link between the crimes. And she knew they were on their way to arrest her when she heard the rumor, which quickly spread, that she was a person of interest. Rather than be jailed like a trapped squirrel, she decided to run away from them. No one liked to be captured. Animals, criminals, and victims never liked to be trapped. She could not imagine herself helpless, unable to escape, and desperate.

She ran away to another building and behind its side entrance, hidden from view. She was on the fifth floor looking down at the road pavement, and the night was beginning: it was getting darker. A figure came up to her. The figure was one of a female, and she was running towards her. She could not see her face, but the woman was running so quickly that Maddie screamed a little. Just before the female slammed into her, knocking her off the building railing, Jeffrey appeared and grabbed the woman

around the waist and told Maddie to get out of there. He had saved her life.

So she ran again. She ran down the stairs, step by step and flight by flight. She hit the pavement at the bottom and found her car to go home.

She went home. The house was empty. She feared for Jeffrey's life. But then the call came from Jeffrey's cell phone. "Maddie? Are you okay? I got the woman, but she ran away from me. Now I'm looking for you and the police. Where are you?"

"Jeffrey, the police were going to arrest me. All of these crimes have been pinned on me. I'm innocent. I don't know who's doing this, but I can't go to jail for something I didn't do. I want this person caught and to never do it again."

"Maddie, you don't have time now. Just let the police arrest you. Maybe you can sort everything out. You can tell them about the woman, because I will, too. You can explain why you weren't a part of any of this."

Maddie hung up on him. She ran downstairs and out the door. She not only wanted to save her life, but also escape the police.

She ran down gravelly streets and across darkened patios. She was not a very fast runner. She had never been on the track

team and never even did very well jogging in gym class. But she kept going. She went for a few miles, headed out of town. And then another figure walked across her path. This time it was a man.

"Maddie, didn't you ever learn your lesson that you're just a worthless kid?"

Maddie looked up at him, and she could see his face under the street lamp. He was Jeffrey's father. She had only met him twice. "Mr. Richardson, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to tell you what you are."

"I don't understand."

"Jeffrey didn't tell you I'm an ex-con, did he?"

For the first time, she saw a little tattoo with numbers on his arm peeking out from underneath the sleeve of his shirt.

"No, he didn't. I take it you didn't like being in prison."

"Of course not. It's because of innocent little babies like you that I went in there in the first place."

"Who says I'm a baby?"

"Maddie, since the first day I met you, I've been bothered by you. You and my bratty son may have made a cute couple, but you've never been through what I have. I've been following you.

I wanted you to know what it's like to be seen as guilty, to be treated like a good-for-nothing criminal without a drop of good blood in him. I wanted you to feel how it felt to be punished, because that's all I've ever known. You're worthless, Maddie," he teased. "But I hate you because you're so innocent."

She knew he planned to kill her. But bravery rose from within her soul. He looked her directly in the eyes. She looked back at him. And when he made a move to hit her, she threw up her arm to defend herself, punched him in the gut with the other fist, and then wrapped her arm around his neck, cinching it tighter and tighter. She took two fingers and shoved them into his eye sockets. He fell down on the ground on his knees, and then she ran to a whirring police car which was passing nearby.

We can only love ourselves when we realize our own innocence. Maddie's hatred of herself came only from the taunting voices of her enemies, her family, the bullies at school, her ex-boyfriend and ex-roommate, and Jeffrey's ex-con father, the serial killer who pinned his crimes on her and tried to kill her, too. When someone assigns blame to us, we carry

with us the ugliness of sin. Hating ourselves happens when we live in pain and sorrow. But our resurrection, our rebirth into happiness, always happens afterwards, once we defeat our enemy. Maddie learned that day that she was indeed a strong, courageous, intelligent, beautiful young woman. What Jeffrey's father told her was not true. She reflected back on her life and realized that she had faced her greatest fear, which in her childhood came in the form of a looming mountain cliff. Her greatest fear was death, but die she did not, and instead, she lived to defeat an evil person. She had looked death itself in the face and defeated it. Her fight was to love herself, which she finally did, because of her bravery. Sometime in her childhood she remembered a little boy who once told her he loved her. She immediately forgot this occurrence and it went deep into her psyche. And now, she remembered why she fought to love herself. She fought to love herself so that she could know that the little boy was telling the truth, because if she didn't love herself, she didn't know she was worthy of love, and that he really did love her. She had always had True Love, but she just hadn't known it. Maddie's fight came from a desire for love, to love herself and be loved by others, and to love others. And that day, she met the little boy again. His name was Jeffrey.

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