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Saving Max

Antoinette van Heugten



PART ONE

PROLOGUE

She walks down a deserted hallway of the psychiatric hospital, her heels tapping a short staccato on the disinfected floor. She pauses; pushes open a door; and steps inside. The room is red, all red, with dark, sick spatters of blood. They stab and soar at the ceiling and walls, pool on the floor. She claps both hands to her mouth, trying to stifle the scream that tears at her throat. Her eyes are pulled to the body on the bed. The boy lies gaping at the ceiling, his eyes blue ice. Her fingers, slick with his blood, find no pulse. She scrambles for the nurse's button—and freezes.

There, on the floor next to the bed, lies a huddled form—a boy not so different from the corpse above him. His face and hands are smeared with blackened blood, but this time her frantic search for a pulse is rewarded with a faint throb. It is then that she sees it.

Clutched in his hand is a long, spiked object, covered in the slime and blood that lacerates the room. Grasped in that hand, as tightly as a noose, is the murder weapon.

CHAPTER ONE

Danielle falls gratefully into the leather chair in Dr. Leonard's waiting room. She has just raced from her law firm's conference room, where she spent the entire morning with a priggish Brit who couldn't imagine that his business dealings across the pond could possibly have subjected him to the indignities of a New York lawsuit. Max, her son, sits in his customary place in the corner of the psychiatrist's waiting room—as far away from her as possible. He is hunched over his new iPhone, thumbs punching furiously. It's as if he's grown a new appendage, so rarely does she see him without it. At his insistence, Danielle also has an identical one in her purse. The faintest shadow of a moustache stains his upper lip, his handsome face marred by a cruel, silver piercing on his eyebrow. His scowl is that of an adult, not a child. He seems to feel her stare. He looks up and then averts his lovely, tenebrous eyes.

She thinks of all the doctors, the myriad of medica-

tions, the countless dead ends, and the dark, seemingly irreversible changes in Max. Yet somehow the ghost of her boy wraps his thin, tanned arms around her neck—his mouth cinnamon-sweet with Red Hots—and plants a sticky kiss on her cheek. He rests there a moment, his small body breathing rapidly, his heart her metronome. She shakes her head. To her, there is still only one Max. And in the center of this boy lies the tenderest, sweetest middle—her baby, the part she can never give up.

Her eyes return to the present Max. He's a teenager, she tells herself. Even as the hopeful thought flits across her mind, she knows she is lying to herself. Max has Asperger's Syndrome, high-functioning autism. Although very bright, he is clueless about getting along with people. This has caused him anguish and heartache all his life.

When he was very young, Max discovered computers. His teachers were stunned at his aptitude. Now sixteen, Danielle still has no idea of the extent of Max's abilities, but she knows that he is a virtual genius—a true savant. While this initially made him fascinating to his peers, none of them could possibly maintain interest in the minutiae Max droned on about. People with Asperger's often wax rhapsodic about their specific obsessions—whether or not the listener is even vaguely interested in the topic. Max's quirky behavior and learning disabilities have made him the object of further ridicule. His

response has been to act out or retaliate, although lately it seems that he has just withdrawn further into himself, cinching thicker and tighter coils around his heart.

Sonya, his first real girlfriend, broke up with him a few months ago. Max was devastated. He finally had a relationship—like everybody else—and she dumped him in front of all his classmates. Max became so depressed that he refused to go to school; cut off contact with the few friends he had; and started using drugs. The latter she discovered when she walked into his room unannounced to find Max staring at her coolly—a joint in his hand; a blue, redolent cloud over his head; and a rainbow assortment of pills scattered carelessly on his desk. She didn't say a word, but waited until he took a shower a few hours later and then confiscated the bag of dope and every pill she could find. That afternoon she dragged him—cursing and screaming—to Dr. Leonard's office. The visits seemed to help. At least he had gone back to school and, in an odd way, seemed happier. He was tender and loving toward Danielle—a young Max, eager to please. As far as the drugs went, her secret forays into his room turned up nothing. That wasn't to say, of course, that he hadn't simply moved them to school or a friend's house.

But, she thinks ruefully, recent events pale in comparison to what brings them here today. Yesterday after Max

left for school and she performed her daily search-and-seizure reconnaissance, she discovered a soft, leather-bound journal stuffed under his bed. Guiltily, she pried open the metal clasp with a paring knife. The first page so frightened her that she fell into a chair, hands shaking. Twenty pages of his boyish scrawl detailed a plan so intricate, so terrifying, that she only noticed her ragged breathing and stifled sobs when she looked around the room and wondered where the sounds were coming from. Did the blame lie with her? Could she have done something differently? Better? The old shame and humiliation filled her.

The door opens and Georgia walks in. A tiny blonde, she sits next to Danielle and gives her a brief, strong hug. Danielle smiles. Georgia is not only her best friend—she is family. As an only child with both parents gone, Danielle has come to rely upon Georgia's unflagging loyalty and support, not to mention her deep love for Max. Despite her sweet expression, Georgia has the quick mind of a tough lawyer. Their law firm is Blackwood & Price, a multinational firm with four hundred lawyers and offices in New York, Oslo and London. She is typically in her office by now—seated behind a perfectly ordered desk, a pile of finished work at her elbow. Danielle can't remember when she has been so glad to

see someone. Georgia gives Max a wave and a smile. "Hi, you."

"Hey." The monosyllabic task accomplished, he closes his eyes and slouches lower into his chair.

"How is he?" asks Georgia.

"Either glued to his laptop or on that damned phone of his," she whispers. "He doesn't know I found his… journal. I'd never have gotten him here otherwise."

Georgia squeezes her shoulder. "It'll be all right. We'll get through this somehow."

"You're so wonderful to come. I can't tell you how much it means to me." She forces normality into her voice. "So, how did it go this morning?"

"I barely got to court in time, but I think I did okay."

"What happened?"

She shrugs. "Jonathan."

Danielle squeezes her hand. Her husband, Jonathan, although a brilliant plastic surgeon, has an unquenchable thirst that threatens to ruin not only his marriage, but his career. Georgia suspects that he is also addicted to cocaine, but has voiced that fear only to Danielle. No one at their law firm seems to know, despite his boorish behavior at the last Christmas party. The firm, an old-line Manhattan institution, does not look kindly upon spousal comportment that smacks of anything other

than the rarified, blue-blooded professionals they believe themselves to be. With a two-year-old daughter, Georgia is reluctant to even consider divorce.

"What was it this time?" asks Danielle.

Her azure eyes are nubilous. "Came in at four; passed out in the bathtub; pissed all over himself."

"Oh, God."

"Melissa found him and came crying into the bedroom." Georgia shakes her head. "She thought he was dead."

This time it is Danielle who does the hugging.

Georgia forces a smile and turns her gaze upon Max, who has sunk even lower into his leather chair and appears to be asleep. "Has the doctor read his journal?"

"I'm sure he has," she says wearily. "I messengered it to him yesterday."

"Have you heard from the school?"

"He's out." Max's principal had politely suggested to Danielle that another "environment" might be more "successful" in meeting Max's "challenges." In other words, they want him the hell out of there.

Max's Asperger's has magnified tenfold since he became a teenager. As his peers have graduated to sophisticated social interaction, Max has struggled at a middle-school level. Saddled with severe learning disabilities, he stands out even more. Danielle understands

it. If you are incessantly derided, you cannot risk further social laceration. Isolation at least staunches the pain. And it isn't as if Danielle hasn't tried like hell. Max had cut a swath through countless schools in Manhattan. Even the special schools that cater to students with disabilities had kicked him out. For years she had beaten paths to every doctor who might have something new to offer. A different medication. A different dream.

"Georgia," she whispers. "Why is this happening? What am I supposed to do?" She looks at her friend. Sadness is one emotion they mirror perfectly in one another's eyes. Danielle feels the inevitable pressure at the back of her eyes and fiddles with the hem of her skirt. There's a thread that won't stay put.

"You're here, aren't you?" Georgia's voice is a gentle spring rain. "There has to be a solution."

Danielle clenches her hands as the tears come hard and fast. She glances at Max, but he is still asleep. Georgia pulls a handkerchief from her purse. Danielle wipes her eyes and returns it. Without warning, Georgia reaches over and pushes up the sleeve of Danielle's blouse—all the way to the elbow. Danielle jerks her arm back, but Georgia grabs her wrist and pulls her arm toward her. Long, red slashes stretch from pulse to elbow.

"Don't!" Danielle yanks her sleeve down, her voice a

fierce whisper. "He didn't mean it. It was just that one time—when I found his drugs."

Georgia's face is full of alarm. "This can't go on—not for him and not for you."

Danielle jerks back her arm and fumbles furiously with her cuff. The scarlet wounds are covered, but her secret is no longer safe. It is hers to know; hers to bear.

"Ms. Parkman?" The bland, smooth voice is straight from central casting. The short haircut and black glasses that frame Dr. Leonard's boyish face are cookie-cutter perfect—a walking advertisement for the American Psychiatric Association.

Still panicked by Georgia's discovery, she wills herself to appear normal. "Good morning, Doctor."

He regards her carefully. "Would you like to come in?"

Danielle nods, hastily gathering her things. She feels hot crimson flush her face.

"Max?" asks Dr. Leonard.

Barely awake, Max shrugs. "Whatever." He struggles to his feet and reluctantly follows Dr. Leonard down the hall.

Danielle flings a terrified glance at Georgia. She feels like a deer trapped in a barbed-wire fence, its slender leg about to snap.

"Don't worry." Georgia's gaze is blue and true. "I'll be here when you get back."

She takes a deep breath and straightens. It is time to walk into the lion's den.

Danielle files into the room after Max and Dr. Leonard. She takes in the sleek leather couch with a kilim pillow clipped to it and the obligatory box of tissues prominent on the stainless steel table. She walks to a chair and sits. She is dressed in one of her lawyer outfits. This is not where she wants to wear it.

Max sits in front of Dr. Leonard's desk, his chair angled away from them. Danielle turns to Dr. Leonard and gives him a practiced smile. He smiles back and inclines his head. "Shall we begin?"

Danielle nods. Max is silent.

Dr. Leonard adjusts his glasses and glances at Max's journal. Dense notes cover his yellow pad. He looks up and speaks in a soft voice. "Max?"

"Yeah?" His scowl speaks volumes.

"We need to discuss something very serious."

Dr. Leonard takes a deep breath and fixes Max with his gaze. "Have you been having thoughts of suicide?"

Max starts and looks accusingly at Danielle. "I don't know what in the hell you're talking about."

"Are you sure?" Leonard's voice is gentle. "It's safe here, Max. You can talk about it."

"No way. I'm gone." Just as he starts for the door, he catches a glimpse of the leather journal on the corner of Leonard's desk. He freezes. His face a boiling claret, he whips around and shoots Danielle a look of pure hatred. "Goddammit! That's none of your fucking business!"

Her heart feels as if it will burst. "Sweetheart, please let us help you! Killing yourself is not the answer, I promise you." Danielle rises and tries to embrace him.

Max shoves her so hard that she slams her head against the wall and slides to the floor. "Max—no!" she cries. His eyes widen in alarm, and for a moment, he reaches out to her, but then lurches back; grabs the journal; and bolts out of the room. The slamming of the door splits the air.

Dr. Leonard rushes over to Danielle; helps her to her feet; and guides her gently to a chair. She shakes all over. Leonard then takes a seat and looks gravely at her over his glasses. "Danielle, has Max been violent at home?"

Danielle shakes her head too quickly. The scars on her arm seem to burn. "No."

He sits quietly and then puts his notes into a blue folder. "Given Max's clinical depression, suicidal ideations and volatility, we have to be realistic about his needs. He requires intensive treatment by the best the

profession has to offer. My recommendation is that we act immediately."

She tries not to let him see that her breathing has become irregular. Like an animal trapped in another's lair, she has to be extremely careful about her reaction. "I'm not certain what that means."

"I mentioned this option earlier, and now I'm afraid we have no choice." His usually kind eyes are obsidian. "Max needs a complete psychiatric assessment—including his medication protocol."

Danielle stares at the floor, a prism of tears clouding her eyes. "You mean…"

His voice floats up to her very softly, very slowly. "Maitland."

Danielle feels her stomach free-fall. There is that word.

It is as final as the closing of a coffin.

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