

# AFTER ANDERSON

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## I

### DÉJÀ VU

It had been almost two years since I'd last walked down those halls. They were all still the same, nothing had changed. The dark green floor was still the same, just like everything else. I imagined that it was only green instead of another generic colour to imitate green marble, since actual green marble was way too expensive for the school's budget. Black and burgundy covered the walls, just like the last time I'd set foot in that hallway. I had even helped paint the far north hallway on the top floor after class during my freshman year. Nothing in that area had changed.

The east and central hallways on the top floor had been completely renovated though, and the bright white paint and grey tiles made for a stark contrast with the other half of the school. New lockers were neatly lined up along one wall and brand new windows on the other. The new lockers were blue and much wider than the old grey ones still left in other parts of the school. That building had barely been renovated since my mother had attended when she was my age.

Until Anderson.

The principal had a new office and the secretary's office was merged with it in the same room since their old offices had been destroyed. Mr. Pasquale was still the principal but the school had a new secretary since the previous one hadn't been able to return. I had liked Mrs. Elgin quite a lot and it was shame that she had to be replaced. The new secretary and I share the same name: Alyson.

She was a very short woman, not even five feet tall. She had more than a few extra pounds in her tight plaid dress that I thought was inappropriate for a woman her age but she wore a beautiful smile on her face and politely greeted me when I walked into her office. She wore her chocolate brown hair in a bob and had pale green eyes popping out of her head. She was in her early fifties but still dressed like a preppy teenager in expensive clothes that she probably couldn't afford since she still drove a 1982 Ford truck that had seen better days.

Ms. Alyson handed me my class schedule along with some other paperwork and my locker combination on a little sticky note. I ended up with #347 which was one of those new lockers in the hallway with the new windows. It was a lot nicer than my old #501 that I'd had to put up with at the end of the south hallway for over two years, but I would have given anything just to have everything back the way it was before.

I exited her office and sat down on the side of the window and looked outside for a brief moment at the cars down in the parking lot below before taking out my notebook to write a little bit in an attempt to clear my head since I hadn't expected to react so negatively to my first day back to school.

Dear Anderson,

I want things back to the way they were before. It's so weird to be back here. You'd think that after almost two years things would be different, but they aren't. Well, yeah, they are, in a way I guess. I feel like an alien inside my own body. Is that weird? You wouldn't know anything about that, would you? You're dead. None of his bothers you, does it? Do you have any regrets wherever the hell you are now? You probably don't, because you're dead. I don't know what's wrong with me, but you sure messed things up for me Anderson. I'm sorry I wasted your time.

Alyson

I let my head rest against the cold glass of the window as I thought back to a happier time. I remembered when I first arrived at the largest high school in town from my small elementary school and got lost a few times in the building. On one particular occasion I was walking down the hallway when the fire alarm rang as part of the drills we had to do at the beginning of each semester and I couldn't find the door to the nearest stairwell to go outside so I stood in the window and waved at the students in the street down below.

On another occasion I got lost on my way to the bathroom and a teacher had to come looking for me. For a long time I didn't venture out by myself until the administration finally decided to put up maps of the school at every hallway intersection. The only area of the school I had never been to was the basement. There was just something eerie about that basement.

I got off the side of the window and turned around to see who was behind me. It was Jennifer Lyell, a girl I used to tutor in Spanish class. She was just a year younger than me and was having a hard time and since Spanish was one of my best subjects, I was assigned to tutor her and as a reward, my time with her counted as community service hours that were required to be performed by each student in order to graduate. I had all forty of them, but hadn't graduated. Growing up I'd had this grand vision of my future self but all of that had been taken away.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Jennifer apologized, "is everything alright?"

"Yeah," I muttered in an absent-minded tone of voice, "I was just taking a free trip to the moon there."

We both laughed at once. Jenny and I had become great friends after spending hours with each other, trying to get her to speak Spanish. She was this cute seventeen-year-old with bright red hair and bright green eyes. She somewhat looked like she could have been Ms. Alyson's daughter, only that Jenny wore shape and age-appropriate clothing. I always liked her alternative lifestyle and free spirit. She wasn't rebellious but she didn't let others tell her how things should be.

I greatly admired her for that since I was a victim of cliques and stereotypes. I didn't always have fancy or expensive clothes but I always made sure to dress as nicely as I could and to still be stylish. Jennifer had always thought that I was the pretty one between the two of us while I'd always believed it to be her! I was tall and slim with long caramel hair that went down to my shoulders. I had naturally curly hair but I preferred to wear it straight. I thought it complemented me more.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," Jennifer whispered to me in a concerned tone of voice.

"I know," I softly replied as I hugged her, "I've missed you a lot. How have you been holding up?"

"I still can't speak Spanish, they still call me fat and Josh and I are still together!"

"That's wonderful! I know how much you two love each other and I can tutor you girl, you know that, always."

“Thanks Aly, but I decided to switch to French this semester. I’ve completely given up on Spanish, but they say that the two languages are similar so we’ll see how I like that.”

“Oh! I’ve signed up for French too! We can sit next to each other in class if you want! I’ve also given up on Spanish because after everything it sort’ve leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.”

“I completely understand Aly, and I would love to sit next to you!”

“Then that’s a deal!”

It was going to be awkward for me being an almost nineteen-year-old young woman in class with students that were only sixteen and seventeen. I felt as though they still had their youth and their innocence while I’d matured too much. Sure, there were students even older than me, but that didn’t change that inexplicable corruption I felt inside. I felt as though my youth and my carefree spirit were gone forever.

I knew that most of the students I’d be with in class wouldn’t be immature, in fact, most of them were probably very mature but that gap between our lives would certainly make things awkward at times. It would be especially awkward for me since I barely knew any of the people at school anymore. All of the people I’d been friends with had either long since graduated, or passed away, to the exception of Jen. I had a few other friends outside of school, but that was the problem, they were *outside* of school. They were far away, out of my reach.

“In French class we can still sit in trios like we did before,” Jen told me, “you know on those really long tables with the wheels. They also have new smaller tables where we can sit two by two. It’s your call if you want to have someone else sitting with us but if not I’d like to sit next to the Petrov sisters.”

I’d never heard of the Petrov sisters but I agreed to Jennifer’s proposal. There wasn’t much I could do about it in the first place. I didn’t know anybody! It would just have to do as the first step to making friends. As the two of us were walking quietly down the renovated hallway, the bell rang and we arrived in class only to hear an announcement from the principal telling everyone to meet up in the auditorium.

I walked in silence down the hallways and made a left turn at the end just before the stairwell. Everything in was still the same in that area of the school. In the auditorium things were a little different though. The carpet had been ripped out from the staircase and replaced with dark red linoleum, ironically the same colour that the carpet had turned right before its removal. There were new windows and new shades covering them as well as new seats from top to bottom.

The place didn’t look like it used to at all. My feelings of going back there were mixed but I prayed for a new start, a new beginning. I sat in the very first row and Jenny sat next to me. Two girls then got out of their seats and came to sit next to Jennifer. I figured that they were the Petrov sisters that Jennifer was friends with because the two of them looked exactly alike, *twins* alike. They spoke amongst themselves in a language I did not understand as we all waited for the presentation to begin.

The girl sitting next to Jennifer wore a long gold shirt underneath a jean jacket and black palazzo pants. The gold buckles on her sandals matched the full set of gold teeth in her mouth that almost sparkled underneath the artificial lights as she spoke to her sister. Her hair was covered in a black headscarf that contrasted with her very pale skin. Her twin sister, on the other hand, was far more outrageous.

She wore faded blue jeans and a baggy dark hoodie that might’ve been black once upon a time and had carrot orange hair that landed here and there over her head. As she spoke I couldn’t help but notice the contrast with her sister in the fact that all of her bottom teeth were missing and the top ones had nearly completely fallen out. They looked like they’d been crushed by something as pieces of them were missing. To some degree it awfully reminded me of a creepy presentation in the seventh grade where the teacher had showed us pictures of what happened to sailors who had scurvy.

“*Zdravo*, I’m Svetlana Petrov,” the one in the headscarf exclaimed as she stretched out her hand to shake mine once she noticed I was looking in her direction.

“Alyson Feldman,” I replied as I shook her hand, and then her sister’s hand.

"I'm Sveta's twin sister Vera," the one with no teeth added.

"It's nice to meet the both of you," I responded, trying to be as friendly as possible.

As the other students filled up the auditorium, I took a good look at the twins underneath the lights that had shifted to shine down directly on them. Vera was very thin, a real walking skeleton in fact, and her sister didn't seem to be a whole lot bigger underneath her baggy clothes that covered everything except her face, hands and feet. Svetlana appeared to be wearing designer clothes while Vera's clothes looked like old rags that had been in the family for centuries.

Neither one of them seemed to be interested in school as they looked around the room for distractions. The two sisters had bright green eyes that seemed to burn with both annoyance and anger as Mr. Pasquale stepped up on stage. He'd never been a very popular principal but since the massacre his approval rating within the student body and the community at large had dropped dramatically.

Vera looked like she hadn't slept in a century as she brushed her hair out of her face with her hand. As she lifted up her arm I noticed that she had many tattoos under her baggy sleeves but I couldn't make out what they were. The sister returned to speaking amongst themselves with defiant edges in her voice just as the last students walked in and finished filling up the seats. Mr. Pasquale then began to speak in his usual overly diplomatic tone of voice with a hint of arrogance.

"Good morning students," he announced proudly in an overly loud microphone, "welcome back to Belden High! I especially want to welcome the students who are coming back for the first time since the incident two years ago."

"*Incident?*" Someone behind me spoke in a hoarse, voice. "What happened was a lot more than just an *incident*."

"There will be counselling available to any student who may need it beginning after this presentation," Mr. Pasquale went on, "we are Belden!"

"Belden," Svetlana grumbled to herself, "what kind of name is that? It sounds like Bergen-Belsen!"

"Bergen-Belden sounds more like it," I grumbled under my breath.

"Mr. Belden was an Austrian philanthropist that came to America centuries ago and people loved him so much that they named a school after him." Jennifer whispered back.

I did my best to zone out of Mr. Pasquale's speech because his high-pitched self-righteous voice reminded me too much of my last up and close encounter with him. I desperately tried to shake the image out of my mind but I couldn't. My breathing dramatically accelerated and my hands began to shake as the memories came rushing in and eventually my whole body shook uncontrollably. I got up as quickly as I could on my weak legs and bolted out the door that was just to my right to catch a breath in the hallway but I came face to face with the memorial plaque set up on the wall.

I hadn't previously known that it was there and I hadn't noticed it upon walking to the auditorium either but it was right there in front of my face with nineteen names engraved on it. Twenty minus one. My stomach tightened and I suddenly felt nauseous upon seeing the plaque so I went down the nearest flight of stairs as fast as I could and flew out the side entrance into the parking lot where I collapsed and vomited. Only bile came out, but it was still vomit.

The cool morning air helped soothe my rising body temperature as well as calm me down. I hadn't expected to react that way. After almost two years I thought I would've been ready to return to Belden but coming back had only made me sick. I sat on the damp concrete sidewalk on the almost deserted street for what seemed like forever before an unknown female teacher came to join me and asked me if I was alright like I was a small child.

I looked up at her in a daze but I couldn't see her face because everything was blurry and all I remembered was that she said she would call my parents to come and pick me up and about fifteen minutes later my mom showed up. My mother took me into her arms and then commented on how pale I looked as we rode back home. I felt lightheaded but the cold of the window pressed up against my forehead helped me come back to my senses.

“I guess that maybe it was too soon to send you back to that school,” her gentle voice whispered to me as she squeezed my cold hand into hers.

“Mom,” I muttered, “I’m an adult now.”

“I know you are sweetheart, but adults also need to be taken care of sometimes.”

“I chose out of my own free will to go to school, you don’t need to pity me or worry about me.”

“I’m your mom, I can’t help it.”

I knew better than to argue with her because I was well aware of the fact that I couldn’t win. Once we arrived home I immediately walked up to my room on the second floor and flopped onto my bed. Lying on my stomach, I looked aimlessly around my room to distract myself but nothing was ever able to stop my mind from wandering into places that it shouldn’t.

I looked over at my pictures of Anderson, Elaine and Amanda. I missed the three of them so much, and somehow I wasn’t allowed to grieve. I knew that things would never be the same again, but inside I silently begged for some sort of sense of normalcy again. Where I had I been for two years? I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer to that question either. My inner dwellings and contemplations were interrupted by my mother barging in through the door and sitting on my bed next to me.

“Maybe it’s better that you don’t look at these right now.” She spoke softly as she took all three of my pictures and put them facedown on my table so I couldn’t see them.

I rolled over onto my back and looked blankly at the ceiling tiles. They were blank and white, probably just as blank as I was. I didn’t know what to feel, or even *how* to feel anymore. I was still in denial and I was painfully aware of that but I didn’t know what to do about it, as ironic and backwards as that was. Or maybe I didn’t want to do anything about it. I wanted my friends back, I wanted my life back, I wanted myself back. I was only a shell of my former self.

My mother looked at me with worry filling her hazel eyes but I wasn’t worried. I was too numb inside to be worried about anything. I asked her to give me a few more moments alone in order to collect my thoughts, or try to anyway. She nodded her head and grabbed my picture frames on her way out. I sighed in exasperation. They were the only things I had left other than bittersweet memories.

My eyes darted back and forth from wall to wall, trying to find a distraction. The lilac walls of my room were adorned with picture frames, award certificates and ribbons as well as letters and artwork that my friends had sent to me. I surrounded myself with things and people I loved and while most people thought it was childish to do so, it was really the only way I could cope.

I pulled up my plain white bedsheets over my head and wrapped myself up with my purple and black plaid blanket. I couldn’t hide from myself, and especially not from reality. A few seconds later, I got back out from under the covers and sat on the edge of my bed, unsure what to do with myself. I examined the rest of my room to distract myself for a few seconds. The fake parquet wood flooring was scratched but it was still my favourite floor in the house.

My bedroom window was large on the north side and although the sun didn’t directly come in through it, the neighbour’s window made the sunlight reflect directly into my room. To some people my beige curtains looked like could have previously been a bathroom carpet and my closet doors were the same colour as the floor, a beautiful natural pale wood colour, even though it was fake. Most of my furniture was black which created a contrast with the pale walls and other decor.

My room was large and had enough space to comfortably fit two large dressers, a computer desk, a large bookshelf, a small cabinet, my queen size bed and two night tables without making it look like a game of Tetris gone bad. I could easily rearrange all the furniture and my room was still just as cozy and spacious. It was my own personal sanctuary away from the world.

Dear Anderson,

I just can't cope. Why? WHY? I don't know. I just don't. I don't understand a damn thing anymore! I was convinced that I would be able to walk into that building again today and face whatever demons were left in there but I failed miserably. I even PUKED just to add insult to injury. I think it was really Mr. Pasquale that triggered me. That jerk! I'll never forgive him for what he did, well, what he didn't do at least. I never thought I hated him this much until I saw his ugly face again today.

On the good side I saw Jennifer and that was really nice. She introduced me to the Petrov sisters or whatever their names are. They appear to be Russian or Ukrainian and they seem nice. One of them kind reminded me of you somehow. I still don't know how to really feel about that but my gosh I miss you! My feelings are so messed up and I just don't know what to make of them. I don't know anything anymore! I never thought that things would end up this way.

Are you happy where you are? Because I sure as hell am not happy here! Your presence still lingers around here and sometimes I just wish you'd go away once and for all. I don't know Anderson, I just don't know.

Aly

I eventually went downstairs when I couldn't find any distractions in my room and found my mother still at home, sitting all by herself in the kitchen. She worked part-time with the disabled from eleven to two on weekdays and did freelance photography on her own time and although she should've been at work she didn't look like she was going anywhere. My father worked twelve-hour shifts at a coal mine just on the outskirts of town.

I didn't get to spend too much time with my dad during the day but on the weekends we always got together to spend some quality time. He was my best friend, and had always been, but despite our closeness I also felt a disconnect between the two of us. Nothing had actually changed between the two of us, but *I* had changed inside.

Last but not least, I also had a ten-year-old little brother, ironically named Anderson. I missed him so much even though he hadn't gone anywhere. I was the one who couldn't be around him. There was actually nothing wrong with him, it was me, there was something wrong with *me*. I knew that it deeply saddened him to no longer have his big sister like he used to, but I no longer had the life I used to either.

I sat at the kitchen table across from my mother but neither one of us spoke a word. Basically all of the furniture in the house was made of wood, including the kitchen table and the matching chairs. The kitchen had royal blue floor tiles and plain white walls. All of the cabinets were also made of woods with the countertops made of granite. The appliances were all matching stainless steel, creating a contrast similar to the one in my bedroom.

The kitchen and dining room were merged together, creating one big open space near the staircase to go upstairs. The impressive kitchen was the first things people saw when they walked in through the door. My parents had worked hard for what we had, and I knew that they had financially suffered after putting me in intensive therapy. Once I turned eighteen I'd put a stop to that, in part because I felt guilty that it was so expensive and in part because I felt as though it didn't help anything.

"Aren't you going to work mom?" I asked just to break the silence.

"No," she replied in her usual gentle voice, "I'll be staying with you today."

"I'm eighteen years old mom, you don't need to babysit me anymore. Plus you can just send me back to school for my next class."

“Honey, after your reaction this morning I don’t think it’s such a good idea. You know, if you’re incapable of returning to school we can try homeschooling you Aly.”

Homeschool. That was really the only thing I hadn’t yet tried. I’d tried virtual school but hadn’t been able to last more than two weeks. The general concept of school had sickened me to the core and being away from it entirely was the only way I’d been able to take a few baby steps towards my recovery, a recovery that I wasn’t sure was ever possible.

“No mom, I *want* to go to school. I can’t stay in here and dwell over my former life for eternities at a time!”

“Why don’t you want to go to another school?”

“And travel one hour to get there and one more to come back? I don’t think so. Twenty minutes to go and another twenty to come back is enough.”

Her and I both knew that it was just a pitiful excuse and a vain attempt at deflecting from the real problem but my mother also knew better than to push the issue on me. My mother nodded in agreement and left to sit in the living room to let me cool off, seemingly holding back tears. I knew that deep down inside she had loved Anderson too even though she had never been willing to admit it.

From the corner of my eye I saw my three picture frames lying facedown on the massive granite counter. I went over to pick them up and brought them back up to my room on the second floor. They were intact, just like they had always been for the past year and a half. I placed them back on my night table in the same position they’d always been so I could look at them while I was laying in bed.

The black frames contrasted perfectly with the lilac backdrop of my wall. In my blank state of mind I didn’t feel any sadness because they were dead or any anger towards Anderson because he was beyond dead. Death was something weird. I figured I never really understood the full scope of it because I was alive and I’d only seen *others* die and I had never really come close to death myself. At least not close to me actually *dying* as in *dying* as a verb, not me being *dead* as in a state. I’d been around *the* dying, but that was different.

*Dying* somewhat weirded me out. I could not comprehend it in my state of mental and emotional blankness. My mentality since the whole ordeal had been one of willful ignorance if one could call it that. That state in which a person convinces themselves they if they just ignore the problem long enough it will go away on its own or someone else will take care of it.

*But let me tell you, it doesn’t work that way.* Any rational person would know that in order to get rid of a problem you have to eliminate it, resolve it somehow and a problem couldn’t be resolved the same way it had been created. I knew about the *problem* but not much else. It had come to a point where I’d given up with problems and death and dying and let *life* take its course.

My daydreaming was interrupted again when I heard the phone ring. I picked up the little purple cordless phone from my desk under the window and slouched in the big leather computer chair that accompanied it. It was time for business, time for the real world.

“Hey Jen.”

“Hey Alyson! Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me, I promise.”

“Okay Aly, I’m just worried about you. I know it’s hard, I feel for you girl! And I’m sorry that I didn’t call earlier, I didn’t get the chance until now.”

“Don’t worry about that Jenny, I’ll see you again tomorrow.”

We said goodbye and I let the phone flop onto my desk. I hadn’t spoken to anyone over the phone in months, possibly even years! I didn’t want to talk to anyone, and for that reason my parents had come to the conclusion that I was severely depressed, was in shock, and had to deal with grief in the middle of that so they’d sent me to therapy. The day I turned eighteen I’d terminated the sessions and I didn’t regret my decision.

I knew that my choice worried my parents because the therapist was the only person I actually *talked* to, but I enjoyed writing letters on good old pen and paper and sending them out to my two

penfriends in Malta and Australia. Writing letters was the only way I felt comfortable expressing myself, and that was also the reason why I still wrote letters to Anderson even though he was dead.

My snail mail to both the living and the dead still hadn't solved the problem though. I still felt as empty inside as I always had and I still hated talking on the phone even if it was Jennifer calling out of genuine concern for my wellbeing. It all just reminded me too much of the last words Anderson and I had exchanged over the phone.

"Hello?"

"Don't come to school tomorrow."

Click.

There had been an unusual sharp edge in his voice. That was unlike him. His voice was usually calm, soft and gentle. He had the deep voice of a seventeen-year-old young man but there had always been an element of gentleness to him. What was even worse than his hoarse voice that night was that I'd actually gone to school the following morning and it was the worst decision I'd ever made.

It still made me feel so stupid. Time hadn't erased, or even eased, that lingering feeling of failure and stupidity for doing what I'd done. Anderson had given me a clear warning and I had been too stupid to listen. I showed my face at school the next morning. I'd always made myself believe that I'd gone just because I wanted to see him. Well, that I most certainly had.

"Alyson!" My mother's voice interrupted my dark train of thought.

I was startled by her barging into my room like that again but at the same time I was so grateful for the interruption. I really didn't want my thoughts to wander into that rabbit hole but in moments of isolation, and maybe even madness, the insanity always seemed to find that open door in my mind.

I looked over at my mother in both annoyance and gratitude and waited for her to tell me what was wrong *this time again* as she would say. I just wanted to be left alone but nobody ever seemed to understand that. Apparently it was a symptom of depression, or even worse, insanity. Nobody ever seemed to realize that maybe I *wanted* to be insane just to not have to deal with reality either.

"It's your dad on the phone." My mom whispered in a soft voice and quickly bolted back out the door.

"Hi dad," I answered the phone in a somewhat embarrassed tone of voice because I had been so deep in thought that I hadn't heard it ringing.

"Are you okay sweetie?" His voice was deep and concerned.

"Yes dad, I just barfed in the parking lot, that's all."

"Okay sweetheart, I'm just worried about you. I can't even begin to imagine what it must've been like for you to go back to that place."

"I barfed dad, people barf when they're feeling sick."

"Okay, well I just wanted to make sure. You can call me anytime you need something, even if I'm at work. I'll drop whatever I'm doing and come to your rescue if it comes to that. I love you."

"I love you too dad."

And with that I hung up the phone. I didn't walk to talk on the phone with *anyone*. As much as I loved my dad and I loved speaking to him, *not over the phone please!* Phones just left a bitter taste in my mouth. I turned around in my chair to peek at the digital clock on my night table next to my pictures and was shocked to see that it was already the afternoon! I hadn't noticed all that time go by! Where had it gone? Had I really wasted away all of those hours by dwelling over the past again?

I went back downstairs to the kitchen to grab a few slices of bread and sat by myself at the island counter that also matched the rest of the room. I wasted away the rest of the day by myself until Anderson arrived from from school on his bus. I dismissed him and my father eventually arrived in his white company truck just over four hours later.

At the dinner table I sat in my usual spot without speaking a word. I stared at my pale spaghetti in my blue plate in awkward silence as the others seemed to be waiting for me to say something. I finally decided to grab my fork and shove the cold pasta down my throat as an excuse for not saying anything. It



wasn't good but I ate it anyway. After the dinner the rest of the day was just as bland and so was the night but thankfully, I'd had a peaceful night and a dreamless sleep.

## II

### DESERVE

My buzzing alarm clock woke me up in a cold sweat. I slammed it with my fist and it stopped. I suddenly felt uneasy at the thought of going back to school. It hadn't bothered me like that the first day, but then again I hadn't known what would have been waiting for me in there. My day obviously hadn't gone as planned.

After I got up I ran to the bathroom and opened the bathtub tap, stuck my head under the cold running water and drank it like a dog. I then sat on the side of the big white tub and let out a big exasperated sigh as I looked around the room seeking a distraction. The tiles covering the walls were adorned with little fishies and mermaids and other aquatic-themed decor because it was the only real way that Anderson would actually take a bath. He could pretend to be one of them instead of just sitting in lukewarm water with your parents' soapy hands all over you.

I washed my face in the sink and went back to my room to put on some half-decent clothes to return to school. I picked out a white Lacuna Coil band shirt and the first pair of pants I found in my dresser. They turned out to be designer jeans so I happily put them on and accessorized myself with a golden heart pendant and safely tucked away my stainless steel ring on a chain under my shirt.

I brushed my long, *very* straight hair that I wanted to tint with a hint of red over the weekend and debated for a moment whether or not I should pull it up into a ponytail but I ended up deciding against it. I put on a hint of dark green eyeliner to compliment my golden hazel eyes so I could look as presentable as possible following my previous little puking episode that undoubtedly every student came to find out about in the last twenty-four hours.

My mom drove Anderson to school and then dropped me off in the parking lot of that big white and grey building safely tucked away in a residential neighbourhood. I stepped out of the little burgundy Ford Fusion and stood on the sidewalk for a few moments, just looking at that nasty building. It looked a lot scarier in person than it did on the news. It had two floors unlike most of the other high schools in the area, a big flat roof, cement bricks painted white and big windows all around.

The building seemed to loom over me in some twisted and menacing way that left me with chills running down my spine. I couldn't help but think that it had done the same thing to Anderson, and that it was part of the reason why he'd decided to not let it victimize him anymore. I took a deep breath and barged in through the door much like my mother had barged into my room just a day earlier. I walked down the same hallways I always had and made my way up to the second floor of the place and sat by the window not far from my locker.

"Aly!" Jennifer's gentle mousy voice shouted from the end of the hall.

I turned over to look at her and she and the Petrov twins waved at me and signalled me to join them. I got up and joined the three of them in an adjoining hallway. At the same time I had the chance to take a good look at the twins. Vera had long hair dyed a bright carrot orange that extended down to the middle of her back and Svetlana seemed to have a good bundle of it underneath her hijab as well. The two of them had jade green eyes, perfect oval faces and complimenting small noses centred in the middle. The two of them had dark eyebrows and Vera had a lip piercing on the bottom right side that she always bit.

Svetlana appeared to have the same taste in designer clothes that I did but Vera's clothes were still dingy old rags. They appeared less like rags in the sunlight than they did in the darkness but they were still a stark contrast to her sister's attire. The upper class would definitely have called them something worse than rags but I didn't because I had respect for others, especially after everything that had happened in the halls of the school just two short years prior.

"Hey Tammy!" Vera's voice was apathetic yet soft at the same time.

I turned around in a jolt, just praying that the person I would see wasn't the person I feared seeing. Yep, it was her. Tammy Davidson. I felt my body stiffen at the sight of her standing right in front of me. Her literally square head was covered with greasy bleach-coloured hair and two big round eyes the colour of diarrhea peered at me right in the middle of that ugly disgusting face covered with a mixture of pimples and creases.

She looked like a middle-aged woman going through puberty. She was the ugliest person I'd ever seen in my life. She wasn't ugly because she had pimples, because I had pimples too, but because her soul was ugly. Most people found her disgusting because she had started sleeping with boys in the fifth grade but I thought that she was disgusting for much more than promiscuity.

"Hi Aly," she greeted me in that annoying, high-pitched and self-righteous voice a lot like Pasquale's, "I haven't seen you in a while. I thought you had dropped out."

"You goddamn ugly whore! He should've shot you!" I snapped back apprehensively.

She hadn't been expecting that. Nobody had.

"He should've shot and killed you! He should've served you with what you deserve!"

Her eyes grew big like they were going to explode out of her head before she flipped me the finger and turned around and walked quickly back down the hallways to where she'd come from. Jen and the twins looked at each other in complete astonishment, not having expected that either. I wasn't sure I had expected it of myself. It had just really come out of nowhere.

No, it had come from *somewhere*. She should have been shot! People who only wasted oxygen did not deserve life. I tried to take a deep breath but anxiety restricted my airways so I let out another sigh of exasperation to try to alleviate the stress. I was beginning to sound just like Anderson. I felt like I was suffocating so I turned around to have my back to where she had gone.

Jennifer looked at me with a mixture of both shock and compassion on her face. She knew that I had always been a gentle and soft-spoken person myself, but the twins were completely bewildered. Vera and Svetlana looked at each other, both impressed and taken aback by my bold outburst.

"You knew him didn't you?" Sveta asked me in a gentle tone of voice, seemingly not wanting to provoke me further.

"Yeah, I did," I replied as I tried as best as I could to dismiss the question.

"Well, just know that I have a lot of compassion for that kid," Vera added softly as she put her skeletal hand on my shoulder.

"Let's not talk about this okay?" Jennifer interjected before anybody got the chance to say anything else.

Jen had known him too, and had also been there during the whole thing. We had all known each other since forever, or at least that's what it felt like to me. My forever had been wiped away from me right in front of my eyes and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

"Come on, let's go to class," Jennifer proposed, "I'll catch you up on that stupid junk you missed yesterday."

As it turned out, Jennifer, the twins and I would share all of our classes the entire first semester. That thought comforted me because I felt so alone and out of place in a big building filled with nothing but hate and selfishness. Thankfully, I didn't have any classes with Tammy but I knew that we were bound to run into each other at some point because we had classes in the same hallway in the morning.

In our first class together, I sat in the back row with Jennifer sitting on one side of me and Sveta on the other. Her sister Vera sat on the other side of her, similar to what we had done in the auditorium. Once we'd taken our seats Jen then caught me up on all the crap that Mr. Pasquale had rambled about the previous day.

He had basically just flapped his gums about the free counselling services available on campus as well as brag about the school spirit and all of that stuff about coming out strong after the whole ordeal. I knew that already. In other classes no lessons had been taught or assignments handed out. It was just the usual introductory stuff all schools did on the first day.

The second day of class was much of the same story. I figured they took it extra easy the first week back at school because so many of the students were still so fragile and traumatized. I fell into both of those categories. Jennifer also seemed to be pretty shaken up by the whole thing. How could one not be? Unlike me, she hadn't been out of school for almost two years and she had to deal with being victimized and harassed on a daily basis because of her weight and her social status.

Even after brutal vengeance and retaliation, bullying and harassment was still rampant throughout the halls of the school. The building consisted mostly of multiple short halls put together like a maze and it was impossible for the administration to monitor them completely, but it wasn't like they ever made much of an effort to monitor them in the first place.

At lunch I sat with Jen and the twins in the empty halls of the second floor. The school let us bring food outside of the cafeteria except in the library, the auditorium and the computer room. Apart from that, you were free to eat wherever you wanted as long as you cleaned up after yourself. You weren't free to eat *whatever* you wanted though. The school had this stupid policy that you couldn't bring in food from the *outside*.

Unless you brought your own lunch, and there were restrictions as to what students could eat, you had to eat what was served in the cafeteria or not eat at all. You couldn't go out and buy food during lunch or the morning break and then bring it back. You had to eat it outside of school if you decided to go down that gastronomical route.

"Do they still enforce that stupid rule of no outside food?" I asked the girl.

"Yep," Sveta replied apathetically, "they do."

I grinned to myself at the memories of the better days I'd spent in that school. I was one of the biggest food smugglers in the school, a real kingpin in the business. After all, who would really suspect a good all-American middle class teenage girl who never got in trouble? Not the administration, which made me the perfect candidate for the job. I'd always hated stereotypes, but for once they had served me well.

The school was so afraid of people smuggling in drugs and trafficking them in the middle of a truly horrific boom in the narcotics business and the opioid crisis so they didn't let us bring in food from outside the school during our lunch hour. The polices were overly strict, extreme even, going as far as monitoring the exits during those short fifty minutes. It wasn't even a real lunch hour!

During the morning break I went around collecting the money of students who wanted the sweet treat of *outside food* and marking down their orders. They paid the price of the actual food, plus the taxes, plus the "trafficking" fee since the food trade was as notorious as the drug trade. My car needed gas to get that food, and I took a great risk doing that so I wanted my reward for making their tastebuds happy.

I had an online course during the second period which allowed me extra privileges that included ample opportunities for food trafficking. I still had to be in school but I didn't technically to be in class since all the course material was online and it could be accessed from anywhere. I always did as much

work as I could in a single burst and then quietly disappear from the various unmonitored rooms I was allowed to quietly do my work in so I could then go to town and collect all the requested food items.

I came back to school just before the lunch hour began and safely hid the food until my customers came to pick up their orders. Back in the day I drove my mom's car to school and ended up doing the larger part of my online class back home after school once my food smuggling business grew larger and consumed more time. The excuse that it was research for other homework always worked on my parents.

I made a pretty penny in the food smuggling industry and used the money to buy myself all sorts of thingamajigs as well as hide some in my room. I had a sort of stash of cash in a box under my bed that I could just dip into whenever I needed a dollar. It had since run bone dry in nearly two years and my high-end lifestyle had come to a rather abrupt end.

For a moment I thought of getting back into the food smuggling business since Sveta had just told me that the idiotic policies hadn't changed but part of me was afraid of getting caught. Back then I thought I owned the world, but I didn't anymore. I no longer had the energy or the boldness required to do that. The universe probably just dismissed me as an insane and traumatized young woman. I bit my bottom lip as one particularly close call in the food trafficking business came to mind.



I pulled up into the parking lot and parked my car in my usual spot, undetected. I reached into the backseat and dragged the grocery bags onto the front seat. I packed the caramel cakes into the large pockets inside my black oilskin trench coat and filled in the other pockets with candies and soda cans. I had too much food for all the pockets so I simply put the remainder of the food inside my coat and pressed my arms against my stomach so it wouldn't fall out underneath.

I walked in through the front door and greeted the random people loitering in the lobby like I did on any average day and walked down the left hallway passed the first stairwell over to the second one so I could reach the second floor without going down a maze of crowded hallways on the top floor. Once I walked passed the first set of doors the coast was clear so I took the food out of my coat and carried it in my hands. Nobody ever came storming down that hall anyway.

As I was walking down passed the two doors to the guidance counsellor's office, Mr. Jeff came storming out through the first door and bolted in the opposite direction. I literally froze on the spot, I was doomed. Caught redhanded with not only outside food in my hands, but a coat full of it too! Mr. Jeff didn't even notice me or even acknowledge that I existed. Without seeing me, he barged through the set of doors at the other end of the hall and disappeared from sight. I let out of a huge sigh of relief and tiptoed the rest of the way down the hall and up the stairs to where my customers were waiting.



"What's so funny?" Vera interrupted my daydreaming.

"Oh," I lightly giggled, "I was thinking back to when I smuggled food down this very hallway."

"You, smuggling food?!" Svetlana burst out laughing like she couldn't believe it.

"Yep, I did and I made a pretty penny too!"

"Would you be up to doing it again?"

"I'm not sure. You know, after everything I'm not sure I can trust anyone ever again."

The girls understood where I was coming from. At the same time I wasn't sure I could still trust myself. I had learned one hell of a lesson about trust with Anderson. My brain momentarily transported me back to history class and intrusively made me relive a particular lesson about Joseph Stalin. *I trust no one, not even myself*, Stalin had been famously quoted saying. Stalin had always been Anderson's favourite dictator and that had never been a secret.

Stalin's poems were said to have been great but poetry was something I understood nothing about. I'd missed the boat on art in general, though I enjoy it in specific contexts. Intrusive memories, on the other hand, were not part of those contexts in question. No matter what I tried to think about, memories of Anderson always found a way to come crawling back into the most innocent of situations. The guilt that I was burdened with simply wouldn't let me forget.

"And what's the deal with Tammy?" Vera asked in reference to my little outburst earlier.

Ugh, Tammy. I didn't want to think and much less talk about her.

"She's a big ugly hypocrite. One of the worst people I've ever heard of in my entire life."

"What did she do that was so bad that made her deserve to be shot?"

"How about ruining a person's life? Does that count?"

"I suppose, but I don't know. It must've had to be pretty bad."

"Being deceitful, manipulative and taking advantage of vulnerable people doesn't exactly land a person on my nice list."

"Man, I'm sorry about whatever happened that left such a profound impact on you."

"She only pretended to be my friend but she played one hell of a number on Anderson."

"Anderson? You mean the shooter?"

"Because of her he suffered a lot."

"I take it he's the one who had his life ruined in all of this."

"Well, yes and no. It's kinda weird now looking back on it after everything."

Vera didn't say another word on the subject. My face must've given away the intrusive memories creeping into my brain.

"You know there's a free group counselling session right after lunch," Jennifer commented in a little mousy whisper, "and I think I'm going to attend."

It sounded more like a request to join her than merely a comment indicating the reason for her absence from class. The twins both volunteered to accompany her, and since I was going to end up alone I decided that I might as well accompany them too.

"It'll be good for you," Jen tried to reassure me.

She knew full well that I hated therapy. I hated thinking about *it*, and I especially hated talking about *it* with others. *Especially* people I didn't know and *especially* people who weren't even there and knew nothing about the subject. It angered me that only a few months from the two-year anniversary people were still so insensitive.

They all just wanted to be *normal* again and although I wanted to me normal myself most of the time, I knew very well that things would never return to *normal*. I was angry at myself in the middle of that, in part for not doing anything more. Like I wasn't *normal*. I had nothing more to lose so I decided to make my way down the hall for some more meaningless talking to a counsellor who contributed nothing of value.

"Welcome! Come on it!" I was greeted by a female teacher in the doorway of the classroom used for the session.

At a grey metal desk in the corner of the room there was a social worker sitting quietly, looking menacingly at the empty chairs arranged into a circle. She looked menacing to me anyway. I got that bad therapist vibe from her sleek black blouse, her matching skirt and even the matching stilettos. Her bleach-coloured hair was neatly tied up into a ponytail and her brown eyes seemed to be glossy but it was probably just the light coming in through the window that created the effect.

The new teacher I had never seen before. I figured that was why she was *new*. Like many Americans, she was overweight but there was a gentle and friendly demeanour to her. She had long sandy hair as well as too much black eyeliner around her perfectly round piercing blue eyes shimmering in the sunlight. She introduced herself to me as Mathilda.

"It's nice to meet you Alyson." Her voice was gentle and calming.

"You too." I bleakly replied.

“For the first week of school we’ll be meeting every day at different times to give the most students possible the opportunity to come, and after that our meetings will be held once a week for the rest of the semester. You are more than free to attend whenever you want and don’t be shy to also speak to a private counsellor.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“If you ever feel sick or otherwise unable to continue don’t hesitate to walk out. Someone will come and see you to make sure that you’re okay.”

*Yes, I know, thank you for the information. In case you weren’t aware, I’m the one who puked all over the parking lot yesterday.* I sat down on one of them cheap blue plastic chairs on the opposite side of the window so I could see outside. Jennifer sat on my left while Svetlana sat on my right with her sister on the other side of her. In my twisted little mind I imagined them doing that so they could restrain me just in case I flipped my lid.

“How long have you been attending this school?” The new fat one asked me as though I looked like I wanted the therapy session to begin with me.

“I was here when it happened.” I mumbled in response.

Nobody spoke a word. The silence was interrupted by somebody barging in through the door behind me. It was Theodore Hicks. Although I had never personally known him in the past, I knew who he was because he had the same face as his brother Steven.

“Hi Theo!” Jennifer greeted him.

He gave her a fake smile in turn and sat down as far away from us as he possibly could. The twins both gave him dirty looks like they held some sort of grudge against him but neither spoke. A few more students walked in and distracted me from whatever tension there was between the Petrov sisters and Theodore Hicks. All the chairs were filled up in no time with kids who wanted to talk about mental health, school violence and whatever else was on their hearts that day.

I didn’t know any of the other students who came to the meeting, they were all fresh new faces eager to make their voices heard. I knew that I too would have to face my demons someday, but for the time being I really didn’t want to talk about *it*. I filled my lungs with air and closed my eyes. I zoned out completely to the exception of dissonant voices in the near distance.

“I feel sorry for him more than anything.”

“Me too, you have to hurt a heck of a lot to be able to walk into a school with a gun in hand and kill innocent people.”

“It truly saddens me to think of what he must have felt to be pushed to that point.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“He murdered my brother.”

*I’m well aware, I saw him being shot.*

“It makes me angry that even after all this time nothing has changed!”

“I wasn’t here when it happened, but this place is a breeding ground for evil. Pure evil!”

“I have both so much anger and so much sympathy for him.”

“Maybe if someone had shown him sympathy or compassion when he was alive things would’ve turned out differently.”

For a moment I’d been unaware of it, but that last voice was mine.

*Silence.*

“Were you there?” One new guy asked me in a shaky, fearful voice.

“Yeah, I was with Steven Hicks, when, uh,” I was no longer able to speak.

“It’s okay Alyson, take your time,” I heard a voice way too familiar tell me.

I looked up and I saw him, Mr. Pasquale.

“It’s all your fault!” I shouted so loudly that I thought I was going to rip my lungs wide open.

Just as I had expected, I felt four hands grab my arms and squeeze them too tightly, restraining me. My entire body became rigid and eventually began to shake at the sight of the tall tattooed man





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God only gives us so much precious time.

Alyson

“Sometimes if I listen really closely, I can still hear the sound of his voice.” I blurted out.

If anyone said anything else I didn’t hear it. I wasn’t listening. I couldn’t stop thinking about Vera Petrov. Who was she? She occupied my thoughts to the point that I actually got up in the middle of the meeting and walked out, going straight to the newly renovated principal’s office Jen and Sveta didn’t try to restrain me either.

Too-Tight-Alyson greeted me and I demanded to see Vera. I knew that she was in there, shouting profanity like that at a staff member automatically landed you in his office. I quietly hoped that she’d told him that he deserved to be shot right between the eyes, but he wouldn’t’ve been able to understand a word either way.

When Ms. Alyson saw that I wasn’t about to go away she told Mr. Pasquale that I wanted to see Vera and he let me into his office. Vera was sitting on a bright blood red leather couch so I sat next to her and she grinned at me with a severely crooked smile, almost like one of her face was paralyzed, revealing an awful set of damaged teeth.

The first thing I saw on the wall was a memorial plaque, kinda like the one near the auditorium with *nineteen* names engraved on it. Twenty minus one. From the corner of my eye I could see Vera looking in my direction so I met her gaze and she grinned at me again. The both of us then directed our stares at Mr. Pasquale who was sitting right in front of us at his big mahogany wooden desk. He stared blankly at us the same way we both stared blankly at him. Finally, he decided to break the silence.

“Is there something I can do for you Alyson?”

I didn’t really know what to say. There was *too much* I wanted to say to him, or was there really? I looked over at Vera who kept on grinning at me, seemingly very happy that I had come to sit by her side. She didn’t look like the kind of person who had many friends, at the very least she didn’t seem to hang out with anyone other than her sister and Jen. I could only respect and admire that special twin bond the two shared.

When it came to the friendship situation, I was basically in the same boat. I didn’t have anyone other than Jennifer and the twins. There were a few people that I’d known before the shooting but things had become too awkward between us. Everyone just wanted to forget about it and part of me wanted to as well, but the bigger part of me wanted to be haunted by it for the rest of my life because twenty people paid with their lives for everyone’s collective failure.

“Mr. Pasquale!” A voice shouted from behind the couch.

Vera and I turned around at once and then I saw him, Mario Bartolucci.



I was quietly doing my schoolwork when a code red was announced over the airways. We knew what to do, we had been trained for this. In case of a school shooting or other imminent threat everyone was to crawl under their desks or tables, and the teacher was to lock the door and close the lights. Nobody was to say a word, send a text or even post an update to a social media profile.

Nobody took that crap seriously anymore after practicing it time and time again like it was a morning ritual to hide under your desk from the bad guys in the hallway. My classmates and I were in no hurry to hide our things under the tables and then crawl under ourselves that morning and neither was the teacher in a hurry to shut the door and put out the lights in the computer lab for that matter.

She had been at her desk quietly reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* but all of a sudden an alarmed look covered her face. She abruptly dropped her book onto the desk, got up and went into the hallway, seemingly searching for something. During that time the students, along with myself, crawled under the tables of the computer room and told each other jokes to entertain ourselves during another boring and routine code red drill.

I was crouched under the table, at the very edge of it, so I was able to peer into the hallway during the whole thing. I could hear voices in the distance but couldn't quite make out what they were saying. They seemed to be confused though, by the tone they were speaking in. Mario was crouched next to me and rambling about the slouch code red procedures.

"It would be awesome and so much more realistic if they hired a pretend shooter!" Mario exclaimed, seriously thinking that he was funny.

Less than a fraction of a second later screams echoed in the hallway as loud pops rang out. Everyone looked at each other in confusion, and then it sank in. It was no practice drill. That was the reason the teacher looked alarmed just a few minutes earlier, it was just clicked in her brain that she knew nothing about the drill, because it wasn't a drill!

Just as soon as it all registered in my brain, he walked in. All I could see were his black combat boots covered in dust from walking outside and the tip of a double barrel shotgun. I covered my eyes and ears with my arms and hands but each loud blast sounded like the sky was falling. All I could hear was glass breaking and horrific screams, one probably being my own.

My ears were ringing and my heart was pounding to the point that I thought it was going to explode right out of my chest. His boots stopped right in front of me, I thought I was going to be killed but for some reason he turned around and walked out of the classroom. I couldn't bring myself to look anywhere else other than down through my knees at my own shoes. I had never loved my shoes so much.



"Oh dear!" Vera exclaimed. "Alyson, you're so pale!"

I felt lightheaded and confused. Somebody handed me a cold bottle of water and I gulped down nearly half of it at once. I could hear more voices behind me but couldn't quite make out what they were saying either. Something like *call your parents*. Call my parents!

"No!" I protested.

I was an adult and I didn't want my mother to have to come pick me up from school yet again because I had crossed paths with another survivor. I was a survivor too, weren't I? I couldn't understand why certain things and people brought back the horrific memories but others didn't. Most of the time Vera behaved exactly like the shooter had but it never rubbed me the wrong way.

Maybe it was because she hadn't been *there*. She hadn't actually been there, huddled under a table with some brainless sophomore wishing that there could be a real shooter in the building when one actually walked right through the door and opened fire, killing several people.

“I’m fine I promise!”

It was Ms. Alyson who was next to me holding the remnants of the water bottle that I had mostly spilled on myself, the couch and the floor. Upon realizing what I had done I immediately apologized and offered to help clean up the mess. I sighed as I tried to compose myself now that my little episode was over. I then made the mistake of looking at the wall and catching a glimpse of another memorial plaque.

*Elaine Frechette*

*Frances Mason*

*Steven Hicks*

*Tobin Davies*

*Amanda Andrews*

*Roger Smith*

*Katy Henderson*

*Lynne Taylor*

*Michael Hazen*

*Trevor Bradford*

*Corey Nickels*

*Eric West*

*Gary Lewis*

*Natasha Blackburn*

*Annie Michelle*

*Daniel Jonas*

*Dylan Cardwell*

*Katherine Price*

*David Hoban*

But not *Anderson Massey*.