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A WORK OF ART

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MELODY
MAYSONET

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MeritPress

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DEDICATION

For Dawn, my big sister and hero.

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CHAPTER I

Painting my dad was all about mood. Saturated blue for the sharp odor of paint. Muddy green for the faint whiff of mildew. Murky gray for the stink of ashes. A sparse room, textured like white noise, with crooked lines and lots of obtuse angles. Then in the center, the stretched shadow of a man. That was my dad.

Dad crushed out his cigarette and took the canvas from my hands. "This should be interesting." He held my painting at arm's length. "This is how you see me?"

"It's more of an abstract," I said.

"I don't like it." He turned the painting sideways and studied it some more. "It doesn't give off the right vibe."

I lifted the canvas out of his hands before he could launch into a full-blown critique. "What about that other one? The one where I'm, like, five years old, and you're watching me draw my own face."

"Yeah, much better. Is it down here?"

"In my room. I'll grab it when he gets here."

Dad looked around at the mess we'd made of his studio. The scattered piles of sketches, the canvases propped against walls. He liked things nice and neat. "I don't want your teacher coming down here," he said.

I swept some loose sketches into a pile and laid them on his desk. "I'll straighten up a little. I don't want Mr. Stewart hanging out upstairs. Mom's acting crazy."

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Okay, crazier than usual."

"Don't worry about your mom." He tapped the ends of his fingers together, each one ink-stained from his years as an illustrator. "She'll probably go hide as soon as he gets here."

I could only hope.

Dad pulled a sketch from one of the stacks on his desk. “What about this one?”

The paper was old and yellowing, the charcoal lines smeared. A man balanced a newborn baby on his lap like a cup of coffee that might spill. The baby lay naked and kicking. Tiny fists reached for the man’s face. My dad’s signature was scrawled in the corner.

“Is that you?” I asked. “And me?”

He grinned. “Not the typical father-daughter portrait.”

“But I like it.” I laid it on top of our growing pile. “They won’t have room for all these.”

“So we let them decide which ones to keep.” He rooted out a sketchbook from the bottom of his stack. “This one’s yours.” He held it up so I could see the bent cover, stained with grease. A child’s handwriting in black marker: *Tera Waters, age 9.*

Mine, yes. But how did he get it? I had a vague memory of throwing it away.

Dad rolled his office chair closer and folded back the cover.

“You didn’t know, did you?”

“Know what?”

“How good you were.”

His praise soaked into me like sunlight. I moved closer, stepping behind his chair so I could look over his shoulder.

He turned the pages, the paper so thick it fanned the air. When I was little, I sketched everything in my world. The giant stuffed lion Dad got from the Goodwill when he was too broke to buy Christmas presents. My friend Haley from across the street, before she ditched me for new friends. My black lab that ran away.

Dad paused when he got to a drawing of Mom digging in her garden. She looked like she was trying to kill the earth with her trowel. He turned another page, and there was my nine-year-old face crowding the paper with its gaping eyes and narrow jaw. An ugly kid, but I didn’t know it yet, so I drew myself true to life.

“Amazing,” Dad murmured.

They *were* pretty good, especially for a nine-year-old. But I didn't like them. They felt wrong, like the slick of grease staining the cover.

Overhead, Mom's footsteps thumped across the kitchen floor. Cupboard doors slammed.

Dad rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Crazier than usual?"

"Definitely."

"Does she know your teacher's coming?"

"I told her yesterday, but who knows if she remembers."

"She does, but she'll pretend she doesn't." He fingered the unturned pages of the sketchbook. "Am I in here anywhere?"

"I doubt it. Can we please look at something else?"

"In a minute."

He turned another page, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. The drawing in his hands sucked the air out of my throat.

I stared at the pencil sketch of my room, the details so familiar. The flowered wallpaper, the plastic reading trophies, the Powerpuff Girls bedspread.

And on the bed, a girl. Naked.

A naked girl crouched on all fours. Her whole body laid bare, her face pointed at the wall.

She could have been anyone or no one. But *I* knew who she was. My dad knew, too. The naked girl was me.

I stared at her. She should be long gone. Incinerated. Ashes. The drawing and the photo that went with it. I opened my mouth to say it, but then the door at the top of the stairs creaked open and Mom yelled down, "Tera!"

Now what? She sounded close to panic.

"What are you *doing*?" she screeched. "You should be gone already!"

Not now, Mom. I ripped the page from the sketchbook, felt the rip all the way to my bones.

Dad watched me, his eyebrows raised. “So not one of your favorites?”

“Tera!” Mom’s voice jarred me. “I need those groceries!”

The sketch in my grip felt noxious. I wanted to rip it into tiny pieces, burn it, bury the ashes.

But Mom was calling me, and I knew better than to ignore her. “I can’t leave!” I called back. “Mr. Stewart is on his way over.”

“What are you talking about?” she yelled.

“He’ll be here any second. I’ll go after.”

“After *what*?”

Dad reached for his cigarettes. “You better talk to her. Get to her before she implodes.”

He was right. If I didn’t try to calm her, she’d ramp up to maximum shrillness, and that was the last thing I wanted Mr. Stewart to see. Well, almost the last thing. My hand stiffened around the sketch. I couldn’t look at it again.

“Tera!”

“I’m coming!” I crushed the sketch into a tight ball and stuffed it in the wastebasket under my dad’s desk. I thought he might look at me, say something, but he went back to sorting sketches like nothing had happened. Was I overreacting? Didn’t all artists draw themselves in the nude?

No time to ponder. Mom was waiting. I kept my footsteps light, my face cheery. I didn’t want her going off in front of Mr. Stewart.

She whirled on me as soon as I set foot in the kitchen. “Who’s Mr. Stewart?”

Half the cupboards hung open. The kettle on the stove leaked steam. An overflowing mug sat next to the stove, a teabag staining the counter. I smelled clove. One of her calming teas, but it obviously wasn’t doing its job. She was as frantic as ever, but at least she’d brushed her hair and changed out of the t-shirt she’d been wearing for the past two days.

“My art teacher.” I struggled to keep my voice calm as I grabbed a dishcloth and scrubbed at the tea stain. “He’s picking up those paintings for that article in *ArtWorld*.”

“He’s coming now?”

“Yeah, Mom, he’s—”

“Why can’t you send photos? You have photos of all that stuff.”

“Because they want originals.” I made myself stop scrubbing. “You won’t even know he’s here. You can go lie down until he leaves.”

“I don’t want to lie down. I want you to call him and tell him not to come. Call him from the car.” She scooped up her car keys and shoved them at me.

I didn’t take them. “He’s on his way already. He’ll be here any minute.”

“Why, Tera?” The keys rattled in her hand. “Why today?”

“They need pictures for the article.”

“You said they interviewed you already. You told me that last week.”

I clenched my jaw, trying hard to keep from snapping at her. “They want to show our *art*, Mom. The article’s about father-and-daughter *artists*.”

The door leading down to Dad’s studio swung open. Dad sidled up to us and leaned against the counter. “What’s going on?”

“Mom doesn’t want Mr. Stewart coming over.”

“Her art teacher won’t hurt you, Connie. If he scares you that much, you can go hide.”

I flashed him a look. Why did he always have to set her off? “He won’t stay long,” I told her. “I promise.”

I don’t think she heard me. I don’t even think she was aware of me. She was staring out the picture window that faced the street. A car was turning into our driveway.

“That’s him.” I touched her arm, hoping it would reassure her. “It’ll be okay.”

Mom bit her lip. I couldn't look at her as I crossed the living room toward the door. *Please, Mom. Please, be good.*

A car door slammed. Footsteps on gravel. Shoes thumping on the wooden porch. This was it. I pasted on a smile and opened the door before Mr. Stewart could knock.

For a second, I didn't know what to say. He'd been my art teacher and mentor since the beginning of high school, so in my mind he walked on a higher plane of existence. Greeting him on my doorstep brought him down to earth.

"*Bonjour!*" I finally said, my voice too loud. I always talked loudly when I was nervous. "*Comment ça va?*"

"Practicing your French?" The thick-rimmed glasses Mr. Stewart wore made his eyes look twice their size. It was hard to believe I'd had a crush on him my freshman year.

"I'm trying," I said. "But my accent's horrible. Any idea what I said?"

"Not a clue." He smiled to let me know he was kidding. "You'll do fine. Just think about painting the same gardens as Monet. Think about how wonderful it's going to feel to be immersed in that culture of art."

Like I could ever forget. It didn't seem real yet, the fact that I'd be studying in *Paris!* Whatever crappy thing was going on in my life didn't matter, because being at the art institute would make everything okay. Only a few more months and I'd be there—away from here—surrounded by people who understood me, making actual friends because everyone there would have the same interests as me.

Mr. Stewart gestured outside, to the mass of trees and bushes choking our yard. "This is worth painting, too. Who's the gardener?"

I followed his gaze, trying to see beauty in the tangled mess of green. "My mom. But not anymore. It's way overgrown."

"*C'est très belle.*"

“I guess, maybe.”

“Your parents are home?”

“They’re in here.” I led Mr. Stewart to the kitchen, my stomach wired for the worst. Dad was nowhere in sight, and Mom had her back to us, staring out the window that faced the driveway.

“Mom?” I kept my voice gentle.

When she didn’t turn around, Mr. Stewart cleared his throat. “It’s been such a pleasure,” he said, “teaching your daughter.”

She kept quiet, still looking out the window. At least the silence was better than shrieking.

Mr. Stewart’s smile slipped, but it came back when Dad appeared from the hallway. Dad stepped in front of Mom and held out his hand to Mr. Stewart. “I’m Tera’s dad. Tim Waters.”

“So nice to meet you.” Mr. Stewart looked relieved as he shook Dad’s hand. “I’m a big fan. I love the *After End* series.”

“I’m surprised you’ve heard of it,” Dad said.

“Tera told me how popular it was, so I did some investigating.” Mr. Stewart shoved his hands into the pockets of his blazer. “I haven’t read graphic novels since my college days, but your work seems very fresh.”

I could tell Dad liked the praise, even though he acted like he didn’t. “Well, I’m a long way from being famous,” he said.

I chimed in: “But he signs autographs all the time.”

Mom made a choking sound from the window. We all ignored her.

“At comic-book conventions,” Dad added. “Not in the real world.”

“Well, you know the saying,” said Mr. Stewart. “Those that can, do. Those that can’t, teach.”

“Or starve,” Dad said. “I did plenty of time as a starving artist.”

Mr. Stewart shook his head like he didn’t quite believe that. “And now you’re sending your daughter to Paris. To what is arguably the best art institute in the world.”

“It *is* the best. I read it on their website.”

They both laughed. At least *something* was going well. Dad and Mr. Stewart chatted, and Mom paced in front of the window like a prisoner in a jail cell. Mr. Stewart was polite enough to pretend he didn't notice.

“Dad,” I said. “Why don't you take Mr. Stewart to the living room while I get those paintings.” I gave him a look and flicked my eyes toward Mom.

Dad took the hint. He led Mr. Stewart to the couch. I could still see them from the kitchen, but at least they weren't in the same room with Mom.

I squeezed her arm. “I'll hurry.”

Her eyes were locked on the window. “It's too late.”

Too late? I finally followed her gaze to see what in the world was so fascinating.

And that's when the first police car turned down the driveway.

CHAPTER 2

Another police car pulled in behind the first, then a third.

Three cop cars for one house. For *my* house.

“Mom?” I tried to sound casual, but my voice was too high. “Why are the cops here?”

And just like that, conversation in the living room stopped. Dad poked his head over the counter that divided the two rooms, a meerkat sensing danger. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Mom must have known they were coming, but she didn’t answer. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be good. Not with three police cars.

Voices from the porch, then a pounding on the door. Dad’s head disappeared behind the counter. Mom didn’t move.

“You want me to answer it?” I heard my voice, and it sounded so calm. Maybe because Mr. Stewart was sitting on the couch, watching the whole thing. If I acted like nothing was wrong, nothing would *be* wrong.

I crossed the room in silence. Everything felt hazy, like walking in a dream. The hand opening the door seemed like someone else’s hand.

And then the door swung wide, and the world became sharp and real. A black man and a pretty white woman stood frowning at me from the doorway. The woman held up the badge that hung around her neck. “I’m Agent Caine. This is Officer Jenks.” She gazed past me, into the living room. “Are your parents home?”

“Um.” I turned back to the living room, saw a blur of staring faces. “They’re right here.”

Dad rose from the couch. Smiling. But I saw how his neck tightened, his arms hanging like dead limbs. “Can we take this outside?” His voice polite. Friendly. Nothing in the world to worry about.

“No, we can’t,” Caine said. “You’re Timothy Waters?”

Dad’s eyes swept the room, like maybe one of us might swap identities with him. Mom had backed herself into a corner, her knuckles pressed to her lips. Mr. Stewart sat rigid on the couch, fingers digging into his knees. I still gripped the doorknob, my feet glued to the carpet.

“Yes, I’m Tim Waters.” He cleared his throat. “What’s this about?”

Caine pulled a document from her jacket pocket and handed it to my dad like she was dealing him a card. “It’s a warrant,” she told him. “We’re searching the house.”

Dad stared at the warrant, his face pale. Caine and Jenks stepped aside as three more uniformed cops brushed past me. They talked to each other in low voices as they pulled on latex gloves.

I gripped the door, solid beneath my hands. Real. This was real.

A warrant meant they were looking for something. But what? Drugs? The only drugs I’d ever seen were the legal kind, the ones for Mom’s depression and anxiety. Did Dad steal something? I couldn’t imagine what, since he hardly left the house. And it wasn’t like we were rich.

“Mom, what’s going on? What are they looking for?”

She swallowed, turned her head the other way.

“Dad, what does the warrant say?”

His shoulders tensed, but he didn’t answer.

I let go of the door, took a stumbling step toward the closest cop. My eyes found his badge. *Jenks*.

“Please.” I heard the fear in my own voice. “What are you searching for?”

He didn’t look at me either.

Caine pointed at two of the cops. “Go search the bedrooms,” she told them. When they disappeared down the hallway, she turned to Dad. “Where’s your office, Mr. Waters?”

Dad said nothing.

Caine's eyelids fluttered, annoyed. Her eyes darted past Mr. Stewart on the couch, landed on my mom, still in the corner. "Ma'am?"

Mom seemed ready to talk, her first words since they arrived. "His studio is downstairs," she said. "In the basement."

And suddenly I knew what was happening. Mom had called the cops to get Dad in trouble. That was why she wouldn't look at me. She had probably planted something in his studio.

I cleared my throat. "Wait! If my mom called you here, it was a mistake. Tell them, Dad."

Dad shot me a look. Gratitude? Hope? "She's right. My wife's off her meds. She doesn't think straight when she's off her meds."

Caine gave a faint smile. She didn't believe us.

"Mom, tell them it's a mistake." If she told them now, this could all go away. But her lips stayed pressed together. She wasn't talking anymore.

When Mr. Stewart cleared his throat from the couch, it suddenly hit me that he was *here*, seeing this. Shame fell over me like a black sheet.

"Tera," he said. "You should sit down. Wait for it to be over."

I pretended not to hear. I didn't want to sit and wait. I had to do something.

I lurched toward my dad, but Jenks blocked my way with his arm. Stop.

"Why?" I pleaded. "Why can't I go to him?"

Then one of the cops searching the bedrooms came tromping back with my green laptop under his arm.

"What'd you find?" Caine asked.

"Just a laptop. I think it's the girl's."

It *was* mine. I reached out, knowing it was useless. "What are you doing with it?"

No one answered me. The cop with my laptop started opening kitchen drawers. Another cop searched the antique desk in the hallway where my parents kept important papers. I heard voices

from Dad's studio, things being moved around. Then silence. The silence went on for a long time. Jenks gave a questioning look to Caine. She shrugged.

The two cops searching my dad's studio came stomping back up the stairs. One of them carried the hard drive from Dad's computer. The other had a sheaf of sketches thrown into a cracked leather binder. Dad hated when his drawings got creased, but his head was down, so he didn't see. He didn't see the crumpled drawing on top.

The sketch I had wadded into a ball not ten minutes ago. The sketch of the naked girl. They thought Dad drew it. They thought he was some kind of perv.

Jenks stepped around me. The next thing I knew, Dad's arms were being wrenched behind his back. I saw his face as the handcuffs snapped around his wrists. Eyes squeezed shut, lips pinched tight.

"Timothy Waters," said Jenks. "You are under arrest for possession of child pornography."

What?

My vision zoomed out, and for a split second, I saw my dad the way a stranger might—a creepy, sullen-faced thug who deserved what he got. But this was my *dad*, and he didn't deserve this. *I* was the one who drew the naked girl, not him.

I reached out a hand. "Wait a minute!" But when Caine looked at me, my throat closed up. The old secret clawed at my gut. If I said something, they'd know. I threw the photo out years ago because I didn't want anyone to see it. But maybe the digital file still haunted Dad's hard drive. Was that why they took his computer?

I finally found my voice. "You can't do this!"

Jenks gripped Dad by his elbows and led him toward the door. Dad stumbled like a sleepwalker.

"Mom, tell them!"

Still, she wouldn't look at me. No one looked at me.

"Please!" I cried. "He didn't do anything!"

They were out the door. I stumbled after them, squinting in the bright sunlight. Dad's feet got tangled on the porch steps. I couldn't help him, but I reached out anyway.

And that's when I saw Haley across the street. Watching.

Our eyes met as she tossed a lock of dark, waist-long hair over her shoulder. I felt myself shrink into a tiny speck. If the wind blew, it could carry me away.

Dad craned his neck to look at me. Scared. Not the Dad I knew. "Go back inside," he told me.

I didn't go back inside, though, even when he kept stumbling and the cops had to help him down the driveway. I watched his humiliation. Because turning my head felt too much like abandoning him.