



CHAPTER ONE

I didn't want to die. Being only fifteen, I knew I hadn't experienced much. My life was dull and sometimes just plain miserable, but I didn't want to die. Though, it looked like I was going to anyway.

I was lying in the grass, in a puddle of my own my blood, waiting for death. Then I heard a voice, which startled me out of my thoughts. "Get up," he said. I couldn't see him in the darkness. Just his silhouette standing between the trees. I forced myself to sit up and winced. Searing pain shot through my stomach, and I placed a shaky hand over the wound. "It will heal," said the stranger. "Just apply pressure."

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice quivering. The air was freezing. I couldn't stop myself from shivering, though it was partly out of fear and pain. Was the man going to

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help me? Hurt me? Leave me for dead? “Who are you?!” I repeated, louder this time.

The man didn’t respond. He simply turned and walked away, his footsteps hardly making a sound.

Still trembling, I collapsed back onto the ground where I waited for the pain to subside. The grass was damp, and sent a shiver down my spine. *It will heal*, the stranger had said. “Not if I die first,” I muttered to myself. Blood trickled out of the open wound, but I forced myself to apply more pressure, grimacing as I did so. I exhaled a long, heavy sigh as a thought entered my mind.

I shouldn’t have gone to that fucking gas station.

It all happened when I got home from school...Well, “home” isn’t the best word for a *homeless* person to use, I suppose. I just got back to the alley my friend Kaiden and I lived in when he asked if I’d go with him to the gas station down the street.

“I’d feel better if you went with me,” he said with pleading eyes. “Please, Crispin?” There had been a lot of vicious animal attacks and random killings lately, so I couldn’t blame him for not wanting to go alone. It was way too dangerous.

I groaned, knowing I wasn’t going to make my best friend go alone. “All right, I’ll go.” I grabbed my backpack—never went anywhere without it—and zipped up my faded black jacket. We crossed the busy street. I shoved

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my hands into my pockets as we narrowly missed getting hit by a speeding car.

My friend yelled at the car, waving his fists in the air like a madman. “What a dick.”

Kaiden Davis-Smith had been my best friend for a long time, ever since he moved to my alley a few years ago. He and his mother were the only people I knew personally who were also homeless. It wasn’t a great thing to have in common, but it certainly brought us closer together.

His skin was dark, and his hair was short and brown. He was my age, fifteen, but was much taller and skinnier. He had dark circles under his brown eyes, and two of his fingers—pointer and middle—were fused together on his right hand.

Like me, Kaiden had some battle wounds from our fights with the other kids. On the bridge of his nose was a small scar from a fight with a couple of older kids with class rings, and we had similar scars near our eyes. Also like me, his clothes were faded and worn, falling apart at the seams. However, Kaiden’s had far fewer holes in them.

Of course, I was a lot rougher than Kaiden. I was always climbing into or out of something. I had an excessive amount of energy, even after a full day of exercise, and always felt like doing something. I was always itching to go on an adventure while Kaiden was happy just sitting around doing nothing. It kind of drove me crazy.

“You okay?” Kaiden asked as we walked.

“I’m fine,” I said miserably.

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He raised his eyebrows. “No, you’re not. What’s wrong?”

Sometimes I hated how persistent he was, but I couldn’t blame him. I was the same way. “I’m just sick of everyone at school. The things they say. . .”

I didn’t need to finish my sentence; I knew he understood.

We continued our walk in silence, which was fine by me. When we reached our destination, Kaiden opened the door and held it for me. “You coming in?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ll wait out here.” I just needed to be alone for a bit.

He shrugged. “All right. I’ll only be two seconds.”

I decided to take a seat on the bench at the very back of the store by the dumpster. I leaned back and gazed up at the stars twinkling above. The sky was clear, though the smell of rain still lingered in the air. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

I found myself imagining what my life would’ve been like if my mom were still alive, if my dad had never walked out on us when I was a baby, or if anyone found out I was an orphan living on the street.

I imagined getting adopted and living in a house, having my own room and a bed. Not having to sleep in the backseat of a car anymore, and having a family, even if it were just a foster family. I knew I could probably have some of that if I just told someone my situation, but I never did. I guess you can say I’m kind of cynical. Trust never came easy to me, and rather than having people betray me,

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I preferred to keep to myself. You can't be betrayed if you don't trust anyone.

Besides, Kaiden and his mom were like family to me. I couldn't just abandon them. That was one thing my dad and I didn't have in common....

I inhaled the moist air, remembering the many times Kaiden and I had gone walking in the rain just for something to do. The memory sent a warm feeling throughout my body.

Then I heard a growl.

I turned toward the sound and saw big red eyes glowing in the darkness. I hopped to my feet and inched away with my arm outstretched, hoping to keep the creature at a safe distance. It took a few steps closer, and the lights from the front of the store finally illuminated it. My blood went cold. It looked like an extremely large wolf, though I hadn't heard of one being so big.

"Nice dog." My voice was shaky, and my throat went dry. "Gooooood dog. You don't wanna hurt anyone, do ya?" As I went to take another step back, the wolf lunged at me, and I ran as fast as I could.

My legs felt like jelly, but I didn't dare slow down. I could hear the creature behind me, and practically felt its hot breath on my skin. Beads of sweat ran down my neck, and I shivered. I was gasping for air by the time I finally came to our alley. Every breath sent a jolt of pain throughout my chest, but Kaiden's car was only fifty yards away. *I can make it.*

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Panting heavily, I rushed toward the car, dodging the wolf's outstretched claws. I risked a glance over my shoulder and shuddered. It wasn't far behind. I grabbed the handle of the broken-down car and yanked, but nothing happened. Kaiden must've locked it. "Shit!" After darting around the corner, I went for the forest across the street, hoping to climb a tree before the creature ripped me to shreds. That was my only hope for survival; there was no way I could outrun it.

He was closing in on me, and I was rapidly losing speed. I pushed myself to run faster, wondering how much more my heart could take. Black spots danced in my vision. The creature caught up to me, and pounced, knocking me down. I hit the ground hard, scraping my arm along the side of a tree root. Mud splashed in my eyes as I staggered to my feet.

But it was too late.

The wolf was only inches away, drool falling from its open mouth. It let out a low, terrifying growl and leapt forward, knocking me back down. I rolled on to my back, clutching my chest as I struggled to breathe.

The wolf met my gaze. Its eyes were wild but not filled with rage as I'd expected. Something about the wolf seemed familiar. I couldn't shake the feeling.

It growled once more and sank its sharp teeth into the side of my stomach, ripping away a huge chunk of flesh.

Blood gushed from the wound as I screamed in agony. I pushed the wolf's head away. My heart was racing so fast

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I feared it would explode. I squeezed my eyes shut, expecting the wolf to kill me, finish me off. But several seconds passed, and I was still alive.

When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing. The wolf was gone. Bewildered, I let out a quivering sigh of relief, and my body relaxed. It actually let me live. When I looked down at my stomach, I saw blood was still spilling from the bite, and suddenly felt dizzy. It wanted me to bleed to death, I thought. How cruel.

Then a million questions seemed to enter my mind at once. Why was the wolf so big? Was it actually a wolf? Why didn't it kill me? Was it alone? Were others nearby? I couldn't understand why it wanted me to bleed to death. That didn't strike me as typical wolf behavior, but I was no expert.

My whole body shook with exhaustion. I felt feverish and nauseated, my muscles tense and sore. The world spun around me, and I was sure I was going to puke. I didn't get up for a long while. Instead, I closed my eyes, trying my best to calm down.

My head was throbbing, and my eyes were heavier than they'd ever felt before. Cold sweat slid down the sides of my warm face. I did my best to keep my lunch from coming up, but that task proved to be rather difficult.

That was when the stranger appeared and told me to get up. That my wound would heal. But he'd also told me to apply pressure. Did that mean he cared? Surely if he did, he would have done more to help me. Was it his wolf

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that attacked me? Did he plan this? Could he be one of the killers everyone was so worried about?

The pain was starting to subside, but only slightly. It was enough to convince me that maybe I wasn't going to die after all. Then everything went black.