

REVIEW COPY

ANDREA

SURVIVING HIGH SCHOOL

NEKIĆ

IS JUST

IS NOT

THE BEGINNING

FINE

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Fiction/YA fiction

Trigger Warning: This book contains references to sexual assault, self-harm, depression, anxiety, and suicide.

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For those who were silenced. I hear you. I see you.

I believe you.

CHAPTER ONE

The Case of the Disillusioned Maths Professor

June 5th, 2006

My parents thought this hole of a school was a good idea. I did not. I darted out of the way, narrowly missing the speeding twenty-cent coin. An outraged shriek sounded behind me.

I slid my arm out of the backpack loops and hugged the bag to my chest. I blame my primary school. They had held a future planning day in Grade Six and the teachers told my parents I would benefit from a smaller school to reach my full potential. But Dad knew best and decided he didn't need some pompous principal's advice, and I was sent elsewhere.

But in Year Ten, I had an encounter with a girl who slapped me for looking at her boyfriend, and after a stint in detention, which, by the way, never happens to me, Dad changed his mind.

Fast-forward a year and a half. Here I was at Deanell High School, which, according to the brochure, was *super* exclusive and *super* specialised. One look at the peeling paint on the shabby walls of the portables confirmed it was neither.

I'd managed to get through all of Year Eleven without incident, made a few new friends and kept my grades high on

the shiny A+ scale.

But now the pressure was on. I was halfway through Year Twelve and desperate for this painful experience to end, and despite the angry teachers, snotty students, and snide remarks about being an emo (long story, don't ask), I'd kept my head down and grades up.

I smiled, I nodded, and I did whatever was asked of me. At home, at school, at piano classes and at tennis...

I sighed and stopped at the school's looming gates, looking up at the sign welcoming the "Leaders of Tomorrow".

'Andy!'

I looked up and smiled, waving my best friend over. Hailey was blonde, bubbly and loved all the same things I did. She welcomed me into her life when I found myself hyperventilating in the toilets one day during my first week at Deanell.

'Did you watch it?' she asked, raising her blonde brows.

'If Vaughn or Sydney die this season, I might die too.'

'Vaughn won't die. It's not even his real name. And there's no way Syd would die.'

'I hope you're right.' I shuddered, walking through the gates towards the locker bay.

Alias was our show. It was one of the things we both watched and talked about religiously, and it was kind of the only reason I got through every single week. The show was ending soon, which filled me with so much dread I could barely think about anything else. It was stupid. But every week for one hour, I wasn't Andrea Nekić. I wasn't a half-

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Bosnian, half-Croatian girl living in a country where I felt like a massive outsider who did more extracurricular activities than all my classmates put together. I could be a *normal* teenager, dreaming about two characters' romance and then talking about it with her best friend.

'Want me to come over? We can watch reruns before the next episode,' Hailey asked.

'Ah, no,' I said, quickly trying to think of an excuse not to let Hailey come over.

She looked at me suspiciously, one blonde brow disappearing into her hairline.

I hated having people over. Embarrassment of the very ethnic way my family lived was just part of it.

'I could come to yours,' I suggested.

Hailey shook her head. 'Mum's got something on, and I have to be out of the house...'

She hated having people over too.

'What's on tonight?' she asked, changing the subject.

'Tennis first, then piano.'

'Oh, tennis and piano nights mean pizza, right?'

'Yep.'

It was the one time my dad allowed us junk food. He hated spending money on things he could make cheaper at home. The number of times I cringed when he brought out homemade *ćevapi* instead of pizza at my birthdays was another reason I stopped inviting friends over.

Reaching the portable locker bay, I took the rickety wooden steps two at a time and dodged two Year Eleven guys shooting spit balls at each other through straws.

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I was wrong about this year. It wasn't just bad. It was hell.

'Six months until graduation.' Hailey opened her locker, revealing a poster of Tom Welling from some red carpet event promoting *Smallville*.

'Can't come quick enough,' I muttered, opening my locker.

There were no posters, no stickers, nothing that could possibly show anyone how nerdy I was.

I'd only ever once brought one of my pencil cases to school and that was in my first week. Daniel saw it and we bonded over *The Matrix*. He was nerdy too and liked most of the same things me and Hailey did.

Everyone else made fun of me all week. I never brought it back again.

It was hard to explain to my family why I didn't want to use any of the cool *Matrix* stationery they'd bought me. I lied and said it was too special to ruin, and my guilt ate away at me every time I pulled out the ugly tartan pencil case instead. But I'd learned early on that the only way I could survive was to blend in, be invisible. Be completely *normal*. Goodbye *Buffy*, goodbye UFO documentaries—at least in public.

I shoved my bag into the barely functioning top locker and rummaged into its depths searching for my pencil case.

The unlucky ones stuck with the bottom lockers had to get on their hands and knees and make peace with the squashed pieces of food from Home Ec on the floor just to get their books out.

I had a top locker this year, but I shared this set of lockers with a girl I'd seen maybe four times during term one and

then never again. Elle Smith. She was pretty, well-liked by most people. She'd dated the hot guy from our year level, Julian Valesco, and I was eternally jealous and secretly relieved when she left. It meant he was single again—not that I'd ever have a chance with him.

'Hey, did you see your psych this week?' Hailey asked beside me.

I nodded, struggling to pull free the giant fifth-hand *Mathematics Methods* textbook.

'How has it been?'

'Same as always. He asks why I'm anxious or sad, and I tell him I don't know.'

'Is that the truth?'

'Yep. All I know for sure is that I hate my life.'

'Is it school?'

'Maybe... I don't know.'

She frowned at me. 'You do a lot. It could be catching up with you. Maybe you need a break?'

I laughed, and she scrunched up her brows.

'I don't think you understand how my family works. They'd probably rather see me dead than take a break.' I yanked the book harder, and it finally came free. I slapped it on top of the bright blue diary with the giant school emblem and looked across at her. She looked disappointed. A small crease in her brow deepened, and her lips formed a tight line.

'What?' I sighed.

'Nothing.'

'You're looking at me like my mum does.'

She shut her locker and repositioned all her things, so her

Harry Potter pencil case sat on top. She wasn't afraid of being singled out like me. I envied her.

'You shouldn't say things like that,' she said.

I rolled my eyes, shut my locker, and replaced the giant padlock on it.

'I have to go. Class is starting soon, and Mr. Proctor hates it when we're late,' I said.

'I'll see you later.'

I waved and waited for her to go.

Luckily, my class was in the adjoining portable. I made my way through the locker bay and back down the steps, falling in step behind a group of girls I knew from my class but didn't talk to.

When Erica Frost and her boyfriend, hot on her way-too-high-for-school heels, rain past me, I had to practically throw myself into the bushes to evade them. Wearing a uniform was just a *recommendation* here. No one paid attention to the required polished look the school brochure stipulated. Well, some of us did. I continued weaving through the bodies, all while making sure my skirt was to code, my socks evenly drawn up at my knees, and my shirt tucked in neatly beneath my wool vest and blazer.

On the surface, everyone looked happy, smiling faces surrounded by native trees and a decent main building. Sure, they'd whacked a new coat of paint on the Performing Arts Centre, if you could even call it that. But they only did that because last week, a kid from Year Eight spray-painted a giant dick on it.

Kind of perfectly described Deanell High. Behind a

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rudimentary façade and fresh licks of paint, there were dicks everywhere.

There had been assaults committed by students from our school and the rivalry one that were swept under the rug, physical and verbal altercations that were hushed, and mental breakdowns the counsellors ignored. Teachers resigned without a word, and students just stopped coming to school. Whenever someone asked where they were, the response would be a sinister “they’re gone”.

It was safe to say that Deanell High was not what the shiny brochure stated. It was the last stop for kids who messed up at their previous schools, the kind who probably should have ended up in juvie.

My previous school was completely opposite to this one. Students lazed comfortably on perfectly manicured lawns with equally perfect grounds spanning the equivalent of two city blocks. We wore blazers and hats, played polo at school and tennis on the weekends (that’s where I picked up yet another one of my extracurricular activities), watched classic movies, and learned about music. The teachers were passionate, and the students cooperated.

A loud screech from the PA system announced the beginning of period one. I glanced at the clock loosely nailed to the faded yellow walls and sighed.

Proctor was going to be pissed. It was five to nine, and if you weren’t in class already, you were late and likely to be a victim of flying coin attacks and duster throws. The school board should have made it an interschool athletics event.

And as if the universe wanted to confirm it, he appeared

at the door to his classroom, red, heaving, and totally unimpressed.

‘Three minutes!’ he shouted, slapping his wooden ruler against the glass partitions that were installed a few months ago when a group of science students snuck in to make drugs with school equipment. Rumour has it they had a lucrative MDMA business. But now, the wooden walls only went three-quarters of the way up, and the top had glass panels running all the way around—privacy without too much privacy.

‘Two minutes!’ Another vein bulged out of his forehead. When no one heeded his warnings, the vein doubled.

‘Hurry up!’ Proctor shouted from the room at the end of the four-classroom portable, which was only meant to be a temporary shed until the government gave the school enough funding to build something new. Guess the budget was spent elsewhere. Probably painting over all the dicks.

Finally, people started moving with some urgency, the flimsy, hollow floor screeching and groaning underneath the weight of thirty Year Twelve students rushing to class before Proctor finally lost it. He had a sack of coins ready to throw. Just as I reached the classroom door, he threw one.

The coin clanged against a window in the back held together by grey duct tape and sheer will. This was nothing, though. Last week in science, he threw a duster at Gareth Haddish, who sat in front of me. He ducked, and the duster hit my shoulder. Proctor spent all afternoon apologising, and I spent all night telling my sister about it. She actually asked Mum if she could go to Deanell, too.

‘Get inside, now!’ Proctor yelled again. ‘You’re getting on every last nerve.’

It couldn’t be healthy, being this high-strung at his age. His face puffed with anger and turned redder. I shielded a grin as I filed in after the infamous twins, Anna and Anthony Walters. They were the bane of every teacher’s existence, and they knew it.

Last week, Anna threw a bag of flour in Proctor’s car vents, and it took him three whole days to stop coming to class with white patches in his hair. The week before, Anthony and a few of his friends stole his keys and hid them in the tree out front. When I say hid, I actually mean they punted them like a footy. It took two tradies from the construction site next door an hour to find them.

I found my seat up front and pulled my jumper over my nose, hoping to block out as much mould and Lynx Africa as I could. Josh sat down beside me, and Daniel followed suit. We were the three most law-abiding students in the class. Most people came and went as they chose. Not us, though. We stayed, listened, and participated like the good kids our parents knew us to be. The only addition missing from our quartet was Hailey. She didn’t see the point in suffering through this hell for some unguaranteed extra marks.

‘Did you and Hailey decide when we’re all going to the movies?’ Josh asked.

‘Not yet.’ I shook my head.

‘Unacceptable. We never miss a fortnightly catch-up,’ Josh muttered.

With all the extra classes and part time job I’d taken on

this year, it had totally slipped my mind. On top of that, my little sister Jelena was now old enough to start hanging out with her friends, so I was taking her out and picking her up when my parents worked. Given that I didn't have my license yet, it meant I had to walk her everywhere.

'I'm free on Sunday,' Daniel whispered.

Before I could reply, a loud bang up the front made all three of us jump. Proctor was throwing stuff again. He needed a chill pill, something strong like I'd been taking.

Mood stabilisers, the psychiatrist called them. To control even the toughest anxiety attacks. The only thing they did was make me a zombie, but even then, I still couldn't stop thinking about all the ways I'd disappointed my parents.

Proctor slapped his ruler against the dusty old blackboard again, setting off a puff of dust. That, combined with the sprinkling of plasterboard from the ceiling coming down with each turn of the overhead fan, was enough to make a girl wish she was anywhere but here. Every night, I had to brush the powder from my hair, and every night, I'd have the same complaints to Mum. She said it was just going to take some getting used to. But I didn't want to get *used* to asbestos poisoning.

Eventually, she stopped asking how school was, and I stopped complaining. Instead, I just gave her the updates of the standard As and A+s. She was content. Dad was content. We were all content. I took my pills. I cried in bed and repeated it all the next day with a smile on my face.

'Test results are in,' Proctor said. 'Some of you should be proud. Others very disappointed.'

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I shrunk into my seat while the twins sniggered like they couldn't care less. Sometimes, I wished I could be like that, but I was too hung up on pleasing my parents to get anything below 80 per cent. If I did, I would probably never hear the end of it—from Proctor *and* Mum and Dad.

I couldn't wait for the year to be over so I could start a new life. Maybe I could move to the city in a super cute apartment and have a housemate, buy loads of plants, and maybe have a cat—a weird, naked-looking one you had to dress in jumpers because they were skittish and delicate.

Proctor handed back the tests from last week. I watched as each student's reaction matched exactly what I'd pictured their results to be.

Kayla Singh, the typical teacher's pet, beamed and triumphantly showed her 87 per cent mark to her friend Simina, holding the paper up so we could all get a peek. Josh, the sports star, shrugged beside me. He did okay, but it could have been better. He grinned at me.

Daniel, the class clown and all-around nice guy, frowned. I caught a glimpse of the bright red 75 per cent on his paper. His dad was a hard ass and expected everything from him. I could relate.

'It's good,' I whispered, nodding down at the mark.

His eyes flicked to mine, and a flush of pink reddened his cheeks. 'I guess.'

He looked away, but I had already caught the small glimmer of sadness creeping across his eyes. His parents had been separated for almost a decade, but it didn't mean his father wasn't in his life. Daniel spoke highly of him even

though he was always on his case about school. But Daniel never complained; he took it in his stride. He was the only person at this school I felt like I could talk to openly, aside from Josh and Hailey. We'd all kind of bonded over similar interests. Daniel and I, though, had a little more in common. He was born here, but his family was Romanian, so he understood all my ethnic family nuances that many others didn't. It made whining to him about curfews or having to leave the movies before the film even finished to pick Jelena up so much easier. He just got it.

When my family moved to Australia twelve years ago, I was placed in ESL, an English as a second language class, where I was meant to learn English at a slow, steady pace. A few weeks in, the tutors decided it was too easy for me, and I was moved into advanced English. I picked up piano as a hobby and then tennis. By the time I was seven, I'd mastered three languages and basic math.

'Andrea.'

My head shot up. Proctor was standing at my desk, the paper held closely to his chest, gripped by long, bony fingers.

'Yes, sir.'

I couldn't make out the number, but I didn't have to. I already knew what it said.

'Could have been better,' he said, laying the test on my desk. My eyes travelled down to the top right corner. Eighty-two per cent circled in obnoxious red pen. 'Could you stay after class, please?'

'Okay,' I said quietly, keeping my eyes downcast.

I slid the paper into my giant binder, which was full of

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scribbles and dawdles of poetry and short stories. I wanted to be a writer—not a tennis player, not a piano teacher, not a math professor. I drew in a deep breath and returned my attention to the front of the class.

It didn't matter what I wanted. It never would.

Proctor handed out another quiz, and before too long, the class dipped into stress-fuelled silence. Everyone here was pulled out of Foundations and encouraged to join because their teachers had identified skills that needed nurturing. While I enjoyed the challenge, I missed the simplicity of Foundations—the simple tasks and tests I could do without thinking too much.

Not like here. In Methods, if you weren't nailing at least eighty per cent on each test, parents would be called, and meetings would be held. I finished the quiz and closed my book, remaining in my seat as the bell rang.

Usually, the hot flushes and the slight tremble in my left hand alerted me to the onset of an “episode” and it usually only came when I was worried about a test. Considering I'd done well and had no reason to worry, I frowned. Why was I stressing now?

I focused on the fan spinning lazily above us: one, two, three... I looked over at the chaotic stampede of people rushing to get out of the small, wooden door blocking their freedom. Inhale and exhale, one breath after the other... Then, I collected my things and met Proctor at his desk.

‘You wanted to see me?’

‘I did. Have a seat,’ he gestured while tidying the pile of quizzes he'd just collected.

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I dragged over the heavily graffitied chair Daniel had been sitting on and tentatively positioned myself on the edge. I hated butt-warmed chairs.

‘Do you want to tell me about that test result, Andrea?’

‘Nothing to tell. I had an off day.’

Proctor’s wrinkled forehead scrunched as he watched me through squinted eyes. There had definitely been a spark of passion in there somewhere.

‘Why haven’t you applied for the math program yet?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t think it was mandatory.’

‘It isn’t. However, it would be beneficial for you.’

‘I’ve got too much on.’

‘I think you’re selling yourself short. I’ve already spoken to your father.’

My chest rose and fell with that stupid onset of an anxiety attack. ‘Why?’

‘Because you’re in Year Twelve. It’s crunch time. You can still earn extra points toward your enTER.’

‘But I enjoy this class.’

He chuckled. ‘I may be old, Andrea, but I’m not senile. Enjoyable is not the adjective I’d use to describe your opinion on this class.’

I frowned.

‘Now, when I recommended that you join my math program, your father was thrilled.’

‘So, it’s done then.’

‘Well, no.’ His brows furrowed, looking down at me through thin-rimmed glasses. ‘It’s your decision.’

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I almost laughed but quickly stopped myself. He clearly didn't know how Balkan parents worked. I did what Dad said. When he suggested this school, I started this school. When he suggested starting tennis, I started tennis. When he wanted pizza, we ate pizza. There was no discussion, no asking, no *choice*.

'Andrea?'

'Sorry.'

His expression hardened. 'Is everything alright?'

'It's fine, sign me up.'

'You don't have to if you don't want—'

'I do,' I lied. 'It'll help me get into Uni.'

'Alright then.'

Before he could say anything else, I curtly nodded and excused myself.

'I'll email over the details for the class,' he said as I closed the door behind me.

Next week, I'd be joining the math program for losers like me, designed to showcase my skill front and centre.

Perfect. Just what I wanted.

CHAPTER TWO

Looking for Andrea Nekić

I reached into my locker and rummaged around until I found the folder I was looking for. As I pulled it out, a bunch of loose paper fell and fluttered behind me.

‘You’d fall to pieces without me,’ Hailey chuckled, collecting them all and shoving them back inside my locker.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said sarcastically.

She grinned and linked her arm through mine.

‘What are we doing for your birthday?’ she asked.

‘My birthday isn’t for a few more months.’

‘It’s June now, and October will come around before you know it.’

‘Don’t remind me.’

‘But it’s your eighteenth.’

‘I know.’

‘So, we’re celebrating, right?’ she tried. ‘You’ve got your P’s then, too?’

‘Yeah. October thirteenth.’

‘Spooky! We definitely need to celebrate then!’

‘Yeah, like I need Freaky Friday to make my life any freakier.’

‘Come on, it’ll be fun.’

‘Maybe, if I don’t fail my test.’

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I still hadn't clocked up all the hours needed to get my license, and Mum was too busy to take me out more than once or twice a week, which usually was a short drive to and from work. I did not want to be at the mercy of public transport and asking for lifts for the rest of the year, so I had to get my butt into gear and make sure Mum took me out more often.

On top of that, it meant that the rest of the year would come upon us quickly, too. Exams would start in October. We'd graduate in November, and that was it. A hot flush spread through me. It was too quick.

I followed Hailey, and we hurried through the courtyard, which meant cutting across the oval to get to our next class. This was always a risk because the boys who played footy thought it was hilarious to punt a ball at any group of giggling, pretty girls who walked past in hopes of smacking one in the head. And that usually resulted in make-out sessions. I would never understand it. My eyes did coast today, though. That impossibly cute guy, Julian Valesco, was playing.

Hailey caught me looking. Unfortunately, so did he. I cringed and quickly turned back to the front, hurrying off the grass, but not before I was sure I caught him smiling. At *me*? Impossible. Probably smirking at how stupid I looked.

'Spill.'

'What?' I shot back.

'Who're you perving on?'

'You're a loser. I'm not perving on anyone. Keep walking, we'll be late.'

She looked back over my shoulder, and I chanced another

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glance. Nope. I hadn't imagined it; he was still looking and smiling. I whipped back around, shrinking into myself. He must have taken too many hits to the head when the ball missed the girls.

'Maybe we could go bowling,' I said quickly.

'Oh, you are not changing the subject.'

'Totally am, and oh look, the bell is about to ring.' I pulled my arm free as the bell rang and grinned at her. 'Too late.'

'This conversation is not over, Nekić.'

I smirked and led her down the busy hall to English. 'Kind of looks like it is.'

'Why're you so eager to get to class anyway?'

'Mr. Benson is awesome.'

'And you're not an English nerd at all.'

'Nope, not even a little bit,' I laughed.

Mr. Benson was already at the front furiously scribbling. Hailey and I grinned at each other as he continued jotting down instructions.

He was a stocky man with a short, full beard like a singer from an eighties rock band but long after their glory days, like when they had to get a day job in accounting or something regular like that. He was also fun, which made the banter even better.

'Movie report time, everyone!' he said, tapping the notes he'd made on the board.

'Any movie?' Kayla asked from the back.

'Yes. Any movie, any era.'

I flicked my diary open to today's date and jotted down a few movies I'd been dying to write about. Beside me, Hailey

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did the same. Aside from one or two different ones, we had the same list. We grinned at each other.

‘Let’s get started. There are only a few weeks until your SAC, and this will be good practice,’ Mr. Benson said.

‘I’m going to write about *Romeo and Juliet*. The original, though,’ Kayla announced.

I rolled my eyes.

‘The original was a play. *Not* a movie,’ Hailey muttered.

Benson chuckled, turning to Hailey. ‘You’re right. Be sure to reference the written material as well. You don’t want to rely on bastardised versions of classics.’

Kayla stiffened and hung her head. I shielded a smirk. I didn’t know why she irked me as much as she did.

‘So, if I do *Romeo and Juliet*, I can use the Leo film?’ Kayla asked.

Hailey stifled a snort before mimicking the way Kayla spoke—kind of stiff in her seat and head high, always running her long fingers through her hair. She was so pretentious.

‘Reckon she knows who actually wrote *Romeo and Juliet*?’ Hailey whispered.

‘She’s actually really smart. Maybe even smarter than me,’ I grinned.

Hailey rolled her eyes. ‘You’re no fun. Speaking of Shakespeare and plays, you’re coming to my rehearsals in a couple of weeks, right?’

‘When have I ever missed them?’

She grinned and returned her attention to the front.

‘Daniel, what’s your movie of choice?’ Benson asked.

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‘Oh, this will be good. I bet it’s something romantic. Something he can watch with you,’ Hailey whispered.

‘What are you talking about?’ I hissed.

‘I see how he looks at you.’

‘He does not.’

‘He so does, and you do too.’

‘I don’t look at him like that, believe me.’

‘Oh, my ass.’

‘Trust me, there’s someone else on my mind like that,’ I snapped back in a hushed tone. Someone who should have been in this class but, for some reason, wasn’t here today.

‘Oh, would that be the oval guy?’

‘Shh!’ I said, ignoring the burning in my cheeks as Daniel looked over at us.

He didn’t catch a word, though if he did, he didn’t show it.

On the first day of school, he’d introduced himself to me, and by lunch, we’d practically learned about each other’s entire lives. The girls here looked at him with hopeful anticipation, and I felt protective of him. He was cute, ridiculously cute, actually, but that wasn’t why I was staring with anticipation. Our minds worked the same way. It was nice. It was easy.

He turned, his eyes meeting mine as circles of heat spread across my cheeks. Thankfully, no one saw it, not even Hailey.

‘*Mean Girls*,’ said Daniel. ‘The *original*.’

Laughter broke out across the classroom. Hailey clapped him on the back.

‘Interesting choice,’ Benson mused. ‘And why, may I ask,

did you choose it?’

Daniel turned to the class and flashed a bright, white smile before he leaned back in his chair. ‘Well, sir, you might not realise this, but *Mean Girls*, directed by Mark Waters, is the most iconic movie of the decade.’

Kayla chortled. ‘You’re going to have to explain that one.’

‘Well, Kayla,’ Daniel said in a sickly-sweet tone I knew was a million volts of fake. ‘*Mean Girls* is a teen movie about social dynamics, self-sabotage and social currency all wrapped into one neat, plastic bubble.’

My cheeks flushed again. *Was I living the Mean Girls life?* Minus the hot plastics, the guy who was into me, and, well, everything else that kind of came with it.

‘I’m a little too keen to read your paper now, Daniel,’ Benson chuckled. ‘What about you, Josh?’

‘*Gangs of New York.*’

Kayla sniggered.

Josh’s shoulders sagged.

‘Enough!’ Mr. Benson looked at Josh, then back at Kayla. ‘I won’t tolerate that kind of rudeness in my class, especially if it is aimed at someone else, Miss Singh. Do you understand?’

She turned in her seat as though she was searching for someone to back her up but when no one did, she scrunched up her perfect little nose, before turning back to the front.

‘We’re all here to learn, and we all have strengths in different areas,’ Benson explained sternly looking around from face to face before settling on Kayla’s. ‘And shooting

down people while they're trying is about the worst thing someone can do in my class.'

'Josh,' Benson said after a little while. 'I look forward to reading your essay.'

'Thank you, sir.'

After a full period discussing interesting movie choices, the bell went, and everyone shot to their feet and darted for the door. As always, I was the last to pack my stuff up since I always took everything out of my bag at the start of class: diary, notebook, textbook, novel, folder, paper...

'You're such a dork!' Hailey chuckled.

'I like to be organised.'

'There's organised, and then there's *you*.'

I smirked, nudging her out of the way. 'At least all my stuff fits in my bag. You carry two.'

'Well, I also like to be prepared.'

'For what?' I looked down at the library bag hanging on for dear life. 'An entire movie marathon?'

She shot her middle finger up at me with a grin, hauled her massive collection of movies, books and comics into her arms and waved before leaving with the other students.

I grinned to myself and finally zipped everything up.

Daniel was with Benson at the front talking, so I hurried past, hoping I'd get out in time and catch Julian walking home. He was hands down the hottest guy in school. He'd never even looked in my direction until he smiled not once but twice at me today.

'See you next class, Andrea! Good work on the practice essay,' Benson called out.

‘See you!’

‘Oh wait. I’m coming with you.’ Daniel followed me.

I raised a brow at the grin on his face.

‘Got something for your birthday,’ Daniel said.

‘Why?’

‘Why? That’s not the response I was hoping for.’

I grinned. ‘What did you expect, a kiss?’

‘Uh, no, but I wouldn’t be opposed to it.’

‘Keep dreaming,’ I said pushing past him. ‘You know my birthday isn’t for another four months, right?’

‘I know, but everyone is going to be busy with exam prep and all that. I didn’t want this to get lost in all the other crap.’

‘That’s true,’ I sighed.

I gestured to the back gate, and we started down the path littered with lunch order bags and Samboy cartons. Daniel followed behind me, waving at the football coach, jogging with a few of the school’s big hitters. They’d played inter-school games and won more times than not. Some of the Deanell guys had a chance to go onto the AFL someday. Daniel was sadly not one of those guys. He was a great player with loads of promise, but last season, he broke his leg, and since then, his knee has never been the same. He still played friendlies, though, which reminded me that there was a game this weekend and practice tonight, which meant Julian would be there and not walking home...

‘Don’t you want to know what I got you?’

‘Ah, sure,’ I said, pulling my mind away from the way Julian looked in the Deanell High sports uniform.

‘A little more enthusiasm, please.’

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I cocked my brows again.

‘Come on, Nekić, I know there’s a smile in there somewhere.’

I felt my lips curl into a smile.

‘There it is,’ he laughed, handing me a small parcel. ‘And this is for you.’

‘What is it?’

‘Open it and see!’

‘Now?’

He shrugged. ‘If you want. Or you can open it at home and tell me what you think.’

‘Miss Nekić?’

I turned to the voice and saw the petite Mrs. Hayes trying to make her way down the path toward us.

‘I guess I’ll wait for your call tonight,’ Daniel chuckled, waving me off.

Damn it! I tucked the parcel into my giant binder and forced a smile.

Hayes reached me and, with a flustered breath, said, ‘Are you still attending the book club?’

‘Is that tonight?’

‘Yes, is that a problem?’

I sighed. Yes, it was a problem. A HUGE problem. I had tennis and piano tonight, the third lesson this week because I had a recital coming up and needed the extra practice.

‘Miss Nekić?’

‘Sorry, no... that’s fine. I’ll shift tennis but can’t cancel piano, so I might be a bit late.’

‘Oh, that’s fine if you’re late. Are you certain your parents

won't mind?'

'Believe me, they're wondering why I'm not doing more.'

She tittered and disappeared back into the crowd.

Yay, another busy night to look forward to.

Taking a shortcut behind the adjoining school, I stopped abruptly when I saw Julian Valesco standing beside the small gate that separated the schools. His jumper was slung over the gate behind him, and his white school shirt was only tucked in on one side with his tie haphazardly hung around his neck. His dark blond hair was casually swept to the side, not styled how he normally wore it. He must have just finished practice.

I noticed his school bag was overflowing with a change of clothes, a pair of football boots and a footy jammed neatly on top.

I drew in a sharp breath and swallowed the nerves that had been lingering all day and approached him.

He smiled, and I literally stumbled over a tuft of grass that hadn't been cut properly. *What were they paying the landscapers for?*

Julian chuckled when I muttered under my breath.

'Not going to practice tonight?' I asked coolly.

He had footy practice every Wednesday night and sometimes on Thursdays. *Wow, I sounded like a stalker.*

'Just finished.'

'Heard the team is doing well this season.'

'I didn't know you were a fan?'

'Sometimes.'

I hated football—in all forms. But I liked watching them

play, and I liked seeing him.

He chuckled, causing all sorts of gooey emotions to flutter inside me again.

Julian pushed away from the gate, collected his jumper, and stepped closer to me, ‘Well, there’s still a lot of time to fuck it up.’

‘I guess there is,’ I said, hyperaware of how close he was now. His eyes were a much richer shade of hazel than I’d thought, closer to brown. His jaw was speckled with a dusting of hair that had grown back between the mandatory clean-shaven look the school demanded.

When he moved beside me, I noticed that he smelled great, too. Not Lynx, but something more grown-up.

‘The coach thinks we have a shot if everyone puts in a few more training sessions before the big game,’ he said. ‘Unless we fuck up during the scout match.’

‘When is the big game?’

‘July twenty-seventh. Scouts come out on the twelfth.’

‘Bit more time to get ready, then?’

‘Coach thinks so,’ he said.

‘And what do you think?’

‘I think we lost a great asset when we lost Daniel last year.’

Daniel. Right. That’s how I knew Julian. Not because I was a weirdo who skimmed the term class breakdowns searching for his name. I spotted him when Daniel made me come and watch the game once, and I was immediately intrigued.

‘Do you guys still play together, or...?’

‘Not really.’

‘Why? I thought sports bonding or whatever was a thing?’

He laughed again. ‘Well, I guess sitting on the bench isn’t much fun. Plus, he can’t even hang with Josh since he’s always busy with the captain stuff.’

‘True. I thought Josh wanted to play soccer, though?’

‘He’s gunning for Melbourne Victory but hedging his bets.’

‘That’s fair.’ I scanned the surrounding area of the oval. There were a few stragglers, and a few, like Julian and me, just hanging out and talking.

‘What are you doing tonight?’ he asked.

‘Study, piano, bed. Oh, and book club.’

‘Book club? Any good?’

‘I guess so if you’re into that sort of thing. It’s helpful if you want extra practice or credits.’

One side of his full lips quirked into a half smile. ‘And you go to nail the extra creds, right?’

‘Right,’ I agreed. ‘But how would you know that?’

‘I’m not completely oblivious. I know you’re really smart.’

‘Really lame, more like.’

‘Hardly. I heard you play piano last week in music. I was wagging, so I had to sneak around.’

‘So, you snuck into the music room?’ I cocked my brows.

‘No one checks there.’

‘That’s a good point.’

He picked up his bag and slung it over one shoulder. ‘I’ll walk with you.’

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‘You don’t have to.’

‘I want to.’

‘Why?’ I challenged.

‘Why not?’

I snapped my mouth shut, stuck for anything smart to say.

He started walking beside me as if my silence was my acceptance. My heart ricocheted against my ribs, and the onset of anxiety slowly crept up and settled between my bones.

We walked side-by-side in silence until he turned to face me. ‘Are you happy with your classes this term?’

‘I guess,’ I shrugged. ‘Didn’t have much choice.’

‘Heard you got sucked into the math program?’

Heard? From whom? Why was he interested?

‘Yeah. Apparently, I’m selling myself short,’ I muttered.

I knew it was true. I was advanced for most of these classes. But here I was, self-sabotaging again. Damn *Mean Girls*.

‘I think it’s cool. Especially so late in the year.’

‘Cool?’

‘You don’t want to blend in with the plastics. You’re better than that.’

Okay. Wow.

‘Besides, Proctor needs someone who gives a shit about what he’s teaching. Maths gives him life.’

He continued talking about his classes and mine as my brain kind of floated away alongside my logic. Whatever. I was allowed a few moments of feeling giddy around a super-hot guy.

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‘So, tomorrow night’s training is meant to be good. We’re taking on the rival school.’

‘Sounds interesting.’

He laughed. ‘Yeah, you seem really interested.’

‘Sorry,’ I laughed. ‘I’m not that into footy.’

‘More of a soccer girl?’

‘More of a single-player sport kind of girl.’

‘Ah,’ he said, nudging me. He was flirting; he was *definitely* flirting. ‘Sports where other people can’t take the credit?’

‘Sports where other people can’t mess up my game.’

‘Deep. I like it.’

‘Uh-huh, sure. This is me,’ I said, nodding to the bus at the stop. ‘Might catch you tomorrow.’

‘You might,’ he winked.

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A MESSAGE TO MY READERS...

Dear Reader,

I never imagined what Year Twelve would have in store for me. Amidst the monumental task of making new friends—*yet again*—remaining a perfect student, dutiful daughter and sister, I didn't see that my greatest battle was about to unfold.

As the years crawled on, so much about that period came into a strange new focus. PTSD and depression from the war in Yugoslavia, leaving Dad behind, and migrating to three countries—all before I was six, left an indelible mark on me, one I wish I'd known about earlier.

Part of me wonders whether the pain of those days shaped me, creating an almost perfect storm of vulnerability and naivete. A part of me wonders whether that's why Julian Valesco so easily subdued me. Another part still blames myself.

But as the years go on and the conversation around consent and coercion grows, so too do the discussions and support systems. We know now and understand with each passing day as the conversation becomes one of necessity and not of taboo, that these monsters don't just lurk in the dark; they hide behind kind smiles and respectable positions. It is never the victim's fault. Knowing all I do now, I would have perhaps had the courage to stand up to Julian and fight back, go to the police or at the very least, seek justice.

But like so many women, I didn't get my closure. I've had to live with the knowledge that he never admitted fault, never apologised, never acknowledged what he'd done. He took

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parts of me I could never get back, and so many years later, I still think about him. Did he ever feel bad? Did he ever regret his actions? Does he even know what he did was wrong? Part of me wonders, and another doesn't care.

But this story isn't a tragedy. It's a tale of love—the love of my friends, my family, and those who supported me.

Hailey and I are still close, and she still supports me on my healing journey to this day. We still talk about *Buffy* and *Alias* and Josh became a sports star like we all knew he would. We watch his games and cheer from the sidelines.

And after spending every single day together during my final summer as a student, I realised Daniel was the love of my life. We travelled the world together, made dreams together and married soon after. He still holds my hand when he drives, he still holds me after nightmares of that night chase sleep from me but most importantly of all, he shows me every day what love should be like.

I have the best relationship I could have ever hoped for with my family. Jelena became an artist and a musician. And I became an author, just like I'd always dreamed. It took a while to heal and to find a way to make it happen, but I did it.

I now help women who, like me, were betrayed and victimised. I shout for them when their voices have been taken.

I may have been attacked and betrayed, but I refuse to be a victim any longer.

So here this book sits in your hand, my faithful reader; a story I'd committed to the darkness of my mind, finally brought into the light so many years later.

Some days are still hard. Some weeks catch me

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completely off guard. But I stand tall, weather the storm, and fight like hell to get through it, and I'm forever thankful I didn't die.

Because even though there will always be Julian Valescos out there, I know there will also be Daniels, Joshs, and Haileys. And no matter how hopeless, how dark, and how uncertain life can get, we—*all of us*—can be warriors.

Stand tall because silence will not win.

Silence has no place where only the brave walk.

Love,

Andrea Nekić

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mum & Dad, you had your hands full with a teenager like me. I didn't thank you as often as I should have, if at all. I apologize for young Vikica but present Viki appreciates you. You gave everything up to come to Australia, you fought in a war that had no winners, to come to a country that made us feel alienated. But even when we had close to nothing, I was the richest kid in the world. Your love and your compassion were more important than the things you wish you could have given me. Thank you.

My Vanessa, you endured much more than any kid should have because you had to live in the shadows of my chaos. Your fierce, determined personality saved me more often than I can count and you helped in more ways than one. You were just a kid, but you were far beyond your years. I'm eternally grateful for your support, offers to play Nintendo, watch Anastasia and Swan Princess. Whenever I need you, I know you're just a message away. Hvala, Seko.

Sorin, you quite literally saved my life. How do you top that? I don't even know where to begin but to say that you were brave enough to stand beside me, generous enough to care for me, and fierce enough to love me. Without you and your steadfast love, I'm certain I wouldn't have survived that year and, more recently, when everything came to light. You were my rock then and forever will be. I love you, what you do for us, how you make me feel about myself, and what we are together. We are the ultimate love story; Ace and Illarion got nothing on us.

Adele, you were the first friend I openly talked to about

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what happened. I still remember our drunken walk to the station from JCDecaux (I know you said it the same way I did!) when I burst into tears, recalling the event. You stood with me at Richmond station, telling me I was strong and brave. I didn't believe it then, but I do now, and you have been right there beside me every step of the way, watching my journey, cheering me on and supporting me. You're always there, always listening, always patient. I love you and I cherish you. Nine-Nine!

Angeline & Daniel (Daniel, you and I go way back; you were always a gentle and caring soul in school, and I'll never forget your kindness). Ange, you came into my life in a series of weird, cosmic coincidences. When we met, I presented my world to you in a bag full of tiny, shattered pieces and *so* many tears (did I cry every session? Probably). Girl, not only did you put those pieces back together, but you did so with cement, superglue and pure magic. You gave me the validation my heart so desperately needed, and I can never thank you enough for giving me my voice back.

Tegan, my dear friend. Since I was eleven years old, I looked up to you as the rising star at school. You were always kind, always encouraging and when I was too scared to take on my first big role (a Grade Six play) you refused to let me quit! And now with Andrea, with all the things I fought through, you reminded me like you did then that I could do it, and that I would. You read the first version of this book, helped me navigate the feelings and process the emotion. Our morning walks and early coffees have saved me countless times. I am eternally grateful to you.

Sifu Damien, the universe has a funny way of bringing people into your life when you need them most. We've

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known each other for close to two decades now, but when I needed help the most, you were there to walk with me and guide me. You taught me to find my strength.

My beta team: Tara, Crystal, Louise, Lana, Cat, Diana, Richard, and Rena. You've all read the very first versions of this book so many years ago and without your constant commentary and updates as you read, I wouldn't have been as confident with this book as I am today. You helped bring something powerful to life. Thank you.

My incredible team at Dragonfly Publishing, Lisa and Rebekah. What can I say that will suffice? You took on a massive project, which was hard enough to begin with. Your job was to edit and perfect this story, but you went above and beyond. You approached each conversation and edit with such care and empathy, making me feel safe and heard every time we met. That is a testament to your values and who you are as people and what DP stands for. I cannot thank you enough for taking a chance on me and Andrea and bringing this book to life.

Finally, to you, the reader. You embarked on Andrea's journey, which would have been hard at times, wonderful at others, but most importantly, honest and raw. Just as Andrea's pain and suffering are reflected in the eyes of countless women around the world, so too is her strength and resilience. Too often, stories like Andrea's—like mine—are censored to make people comfortable, but I'm not here to make you comfortable; I'm here to make you think.

So, while Andrea's story is not a carbon copy of mine; it is a glimpse into the journey I overcame. I didn't get the closure I sought; I didn't receive the apology I hoped for, yet I did gain something far more important: belief in myself.

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NEED TO TALK?

Lifeline provides 24-hour crisis counselling, support groups and suicide prevention services. Call **13 11 14**, text 0477 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au.

Suicide Call Back Service provides 24/7 support if you or someone you know is feeling suicidal. Call **1300 659 467**.

Beyond Blue aims to increase awareness of depression and anxiety and reduce stigma. If you or a loved one need help, call **1300 22 4636**, 24 hours/7 days a week or go to beyondblue.org.au.

MindSpot is a free telephone and online service for people with anxiety, stress, low mood, or depression and provides online assessment and treatment for anxiety and depression. MindSpot is not an emergency or instant response service. Call **1800 61 44 34**.

Kids Helpline is a free 24/7 confidential and private counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5–25. Call **1800 55 1800** or visit kidshelpline.com.au.

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When everything shatters, can Andrea piece herself back together?

Seventeen-year-old Andrea Nekić has her whole life mapped out: achieving top grades, a spot at university, and a career as a writer.

But surviving high school is just the beginning, and Andrea is about to find out how even the best laid plans can be destroyed in an instant when popular, magnetising Julian Valesco drags her into his orbit.

One day, she's stressing over earning extra credits; the next, Julian's devastating betrayal throws her life into chaos.

With her world crumbling around her, Andrea must fight to survive the aftermath. Can she find the strength to overcome her trauma and reclaim her future, or will the weight of it all pull her under?



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