

You

A novel by Chris Nicholas

*“The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you.
You just got to find the ones worth suffering for.”*

Author Unknown.

Chapter

Cassandra Young tucked a thin strand of hair behind her left ear and tried to swallow the nerves that were clawing at the back of her throat and making her want to be sick. The move was an anxious tick that she had developed as a small child, and despite her many attempts to overcome her fidgeting, she had carried it, along with a handful of other frustrating habits with her into adulthood. When she was eight years old she had lied to her parents about crashing her bike into the side of her father's car, blaming the damage on a boy who lived two blocks over rather than admitting that she had disobeyed their instructions to stay off the footpath.

The boy had been unawares of his incrimination; his only crime had been that he had been nearby when she had careened wildly off the footpath and pushed in the car's rear door with her handlebars. But her parents had seen through the rouse. As she had spun her tale of fractured truths, she had grown nervous and began tucking her hair behind her ears and adjusting the hem of her skirt, just like she was right now...

...*Shit*...

Letting go of her hemline, she shoved her hands underneath her legs and sat on them while she waited patiently for the hulking man before her to break his stoic silence. As a young girl, her dishonesty and nerves had cost her three weeks' worth of pocket money and double chores for trying to blame Noah Waters for the accident. As an adult, she wasn't prepared to let those same nervous twitches negatively influence her career.

The man before was every bit the cliché that she had been warned about. Her peers had often described him as a businessman who invested far too much time in his professional affairs, and too little in his own wellbeing. In person Maximilian Hurst was profoundly overweight; his wrists were so thick that the thin gold watch on his right arm pinched his skin, and the buttons on his business shirt struggled to contain his bulging stomach as he sat slumped in his chair. His complexion was blotchy, and the office was filled with a sour stench that suggested it had been some time since he had considered opening a window to let some fresh air in.

"How long have you been working at Gibson and Hurst Miss Young?"

"It will be eighteen months next Tuesday, Sir."

"Eighteen months," he repeated flatly, as though her response bored him. "And in that time, you have been assisting Margo Synder in managing her portfolio of clients?"

"Yes. That's correct Sir."

Silence filled the room as Hurst dropped his eyes towards a thin dossier that he had been handed by his secretary shortly after Cassandra had entered the room. She watched the man in a silence as his eyes moved along whatever was printed on the crisp white pages of the document concealed within the straw-coloured folder.

The notoriously private Maximilian Hurst was part owner and managing director of Gibson and Hurst; one the largest publishing houses in New York City. Whereas Hurst was often touted as the brains behind the business, his partner Arthur Gibson was the face. A high-flying socialite who frequented day spas and private gyms, Gibson was notorious for attending literary events and swooning new talent, while Hurst avoided the spotlight and buried himself within the day to day operations of their literary empire. Although he spent more than double the time that Gibson did at work, his office was half the size and considerably less extravagant than the one that belonged to his flamboyant partner.

“I went to college with your father,” the managing director said without looking up from the file. “When I realised that his daughter had been working for me for quite some time, I almost fell out of my chair.”

“And why is that?”

“Your father is arguably the most proficient lawyer in the city,” he said, glancing at her over the rim of his glasses and rubbing a thick palm against the stubble on his chin. “And he is also a friend. When we met at Harvard I knew that he was destined for great things. He had a hunger to learn that few men ever possess; it was remarkable to watch. We fell in with different crowds after graduation, but I knew that he had a daughter. Though I never imagined that she would end up working here. I thought that the apple would have fallen a little closer to the tree and you would have followed him into a career in law.”

She opened her mouth to respond but his eyes had already returned to the document in his fleshy hands. She hated being compared to her father and the legacy that he had created. Lawrence Michael Young was a success story made for the headlines. Born in Brownsville, Brooklyn to a single mother, Lawrence had risen through the public education system with a near genius intellect. After ranking in the top percentile of high school students in the nation for his final exams, he earned a scholarship to Harvard University where he had graduated with a degree in law and secured an associate position at a top-tier firm. Three decades later, Cassandra’s father had solidified his place in New York City folklore as managing partner of Augustine, Young and Morris.

“Sir, if I may-”

-Hurst held up a thick finger to silence her, finishing what he was reading before slowly raising his eyes to meet hers once again.

“There is a young man that we have just signed to a three-book deal,” the portly managing partner said, closing the dossier and leaning forward to hand it to her across the desk. “His name is Ryan West. He has just written what can only be described as a harrowingly beautiful romance novel. I’m hoping that he can produce another two stories of a similar vein.”

Opening the thin file, she saw a small colour photograph twice the size of a driver’s licence. Roughly thirty years of age, Ryan West was strikingly handsome with thick blonde-brown hair that was combed into a quiff and a small amount of facial stubble that had been neatly groomed. He was staring at the camera without the faintest hint of a smile, and there was a deep sadness in his eyes that seemed to draw her in. There was a pain buried deep inside of him that appeared to radiate through his endlessly deep gaze. His lack of emotion meant that photograph looked unsettlingly close to a mugshot; had the author not have been standing before the familiar cream coloured walls of Gibson and Hurst’s library, she could have been convinced that it was.

“West has written two other books prior,” Hurst continued. “Two thrillers that he self-published with minor success. And he curates a website that he used to update regularly. But it hasn’t been touched in over a year.”

“Are the other books any good?” She asked, tearing her gaze away from the heartbreakingly sombre photograph. “As in-”

“-No. He was quite adamant about leaving them in the past.”

She nodded her head and returned her eyes to the photograph, instantly captivated once again by the sorrow in the writer’s eyes. She had never seen anything quite like it before. It was as though the photograph was a portal into the soul of a man plagued by personal pain.

“He has really produced something remarkable in his latest piece,” Hurst said. “He used to write the occasional romance inspired post on his website, and they were always very well received. But then he vanished; choosing to fall off the face of the earth. He stopped self-publishing, and gave up blogging. A lot of his readers assumed that he had given up writing altogether, but last week he walked into my office with an incredibly touching manuscript that is going to make this company a hell of a lot of money.”

Cassandra flicked through the brief resume that was attached to the photograph of the author with a paperclip. The document was thin; just two single sided A4 pages printed on

with large spacing. The writer was largely unknown to the publishing world, having self-funded his two previous novels. But the website that Hurst had eluded to caught her by surprise. Ryan West had a subscribership of over twenty-two thousand people, and that number appeared to still be growing despite the author's extended leave of absence.

"So, what?" She said. "Since Margo is away on holidays, you want me to fill in and keep an eye on West until she gets back?"

"Not quite," Hurst said with a sly smirk that cracked his passive features. "When I first realised who you were twelve months ago I could have promoted you on the spot. God knows that your father wanted me to when I contacted him. But I didn't. I sat back and I watched from afar as you earned your stripes under Margo's tutelage. In that time, I have seen the positive impacts that you have had within Gibson and Hurst, and have heard first hand from our clients that you have been exceptional in your handling of their portfolios."

"Thank you, Sir,"

"Which makes this your promotional meeting. As of today, you are no longer an assistant publicist. You're the real deal, and Ryan West is your first client."

Breathing a soft *holy shit* under her breath, she stared down at the photograph of the strikingly handsome yet troubled looking man, feeling her pulse spike as she was encapsulated by his eyes once again. She had arrived at Hurst's office believing that she had been called upon to complete some form of menial task while her *mentor* was on holidays, and now she was a fully-fledged publicist for Gibson and Hurst, and the man staring at her through the photograph was her first client.

There would be no more making coffees or collecting dry cleaning for that ungrateful hack Margo Synder. From now on she would be responsible for the public image of a romance writer. Her mind began to race away from her as she plotted out book signings, television interviews and more. She couldn't wait to get home and tell her fiancé that all her hard work and sufferance working under Margo's tutelage had finally paid off.

"I have to warn you," Hurst continued, oblivious to the inner monologue that he had interrupted. "West is different to any other client that we have ever represented. Which is why I decided to give his portfolio to you. Someone like Margo, as great as she is, would not be an appropriate fit."

"Different how?" she said, her eyes rising to meet her boss's ominous tone.

"Ryan is a man with a few too many demons. He doesn't like to talk about them much, nor do many people ever see past his smiling veneer. But there's a sadness to that man that will become evident when you read his script. I need you to keep an eye on him."

Publishing can be a stressful experience for a writer, especially one who has poured as much of themselves into their script as he has. I want you to make sure that he is OK. And keep him out of trouble until the book launches. If you do that, then the three of us are going to have a very successful relationship.”

Cassandra nodded her head, smiling from ear to ear as she dropped her gaze to stare into the pain-filled eyes of Ryan West one more time. She had questions. Lots of them. Although she had never spoken directly with Hurst like this, she couldn't imagine him ever sharing such a meeting with someone like Margo Synder: the hardnosed publicist wouldn't have taken kindly to a man with *demons*. Whatever that was supposed to mean. She wanted to ask Hurst what he had meant by the comment, but he had already told her that the answers she sought lay within West's manuscript.

“You can count on me Sir,” she said as he passed her a hard copy of the script and promised to email her an online version.

“I promise that you won't regret this.”

Rising to her feet, she shook Hurst's fleshy hand and hurriedly headed towards the door, her stomach full of excitement and her mind full of wonder about what kind of trouble a romance author could possibly get himself into.