

# BEAST

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For Jenny,  
who always believed



# 1

**F**or the rest of this story to make sense, you have to know that Davey and I had been best buds forever.

My first memory is of the two of us sneaking out of kindergarten to play in the pouring rain. In the chaos of post-snacktime washing up, I tugged Davey's shirt and tipped my head toward the door, and his face lit up with a conspiratorial grin. We snuck down the hall and out into the deluge.

We'd just transformed a muddy patch in the yard into a makeshift Slip'N Slide, laughing and sputtering with our inevitable falls, when the door thudded. "Boys!" Mrs. Mitchell yelled.

She marched us inside, muttering about calling our parents. I was too giddy from the adventure to care. My dad would probably just tweak my ear and call me a rascal in the tone that told me it was a compliment.

Standing there dripping by the row of cubbies, Davey started to shake. His eyes welled up, and my giddiness faded. I remembered what I'd seen of *his* dad: the rough snap of his voice, the clench of his fingers when he hustled Davey out of the room.

"It was my idea, Mrs. Mitchell!" I said. "Davey

shouldn't be in trouble. It's not fair."

Mrs. Mitchell's eyes narrowed. "The two of you are about to lose your computer time for the rest of the month. Should I make that two months just for you, Max?"

I raised my chin. "Yes. He didn't even want to come—I made him. It's all my fault."

That wasn't true, but I meant the words with every fiber of my five-year-old being.

I would have done anything for Davey. I'd have died for him, if it could have made a difference. If you believe any of this, believe that.

## 2

The lake was the best place to party, hands down. Getting out there was kind of a hassle, so everybody moaned when I told them the plan, but it was the middle of May and already sweltering. No one wanted to be packed into Reuben's apartment or someone's parents' house, bumping against each other and swapping sweat every time they went to grab a beer. I reminded the girls that they'd be able to dance under the stars, and the guys that they might be able to talk the girls into skinny-dipping, and that got them all on board.

Saturday evening, I told Mom I needed the car to "take Vicky for a moonlight picnic" and swung by the liquor store with my doctored license. When I honked the horn at Davey's, he came out of the house halfway through a sneeze. Pollen season was in full swing. His eyes were red and his hair was sticking out like he'd taken a shower followed by a nap, but at least he'd picked a shirt that made him look more slim than scrawny. Sometimes he got the attitude that there was no way he'd be getting lucky, so why even try. I maintained that you couldn't win a game unless you were playing it.

“Spring sucks,” he said as he climbed in. He snuffled. “Screw trees. Screw flowers. I vote that our next war be declared against all plant life.”

I snorted and pulled away from the curb. “You look like a flower with that hair. My mom keeps a comb in the glove compartment—make yourself presentable, man.”

He grimaced at me, but he got out the comb. “I spent the last half hour trying to find the allergy pills. Stupid cat swatted them under the dresser.”

After a few quick swipes at the rumpled brown strands, he slumped back in the seat and tugged a piece of paper out of his pocket. A small smile crossed his face. “Hey, I thought you’d like this one. Remember how Mr. Peck ripped into Reuben for touching his car yesterday?”

I glanced over and cracked up. Davey’s comic doodles were something else. He’d drawn Mr. Peck like an evil Elmer Fudd, which wasn’t far from the reality, with a foot-high comb-over and sparks shooting out of his mouth. Our teacher jabbed a finger at the shaggy-haired Reuben ’toon, who was standing beside the car gazing obliviously into the distance. The glints on the car’s windshield formed eyes, which it was rolling at its owner.

“Good one,” I said. “You gotta show Rube that. And Vicky, when we pick her up—she’ll get a laugh.”

“How long have you stuck with her now, Max?” Davey said. “I’m starting to think you’re settling down.”

“It’s only been three months,” I said, which admittedly was some sort of record. “We’re not getting *married*. She’s just got a little more to her than some. No point in cutting a



good thing short.”

“Not like you’ll have any trouble finding a replacement when you want to.” Davey shook his head. “What about that girl you said you’re setting me up with? Is she going to be there tonight?”

“Patience, my Padawan. That sort of delicate operation takes time.”

“So why am I coming? I hate these things.”

“Because you always come,” I said. “I’ve got to have someone there making me look good.”

He glared at me, and I knocked his shoulder with my fist. “I’m the only thing standing between you and a lonely life of online porn. Shut up and enjoy yourself, all right?”

We found Vicky sitting on the front steps of her porch with Shannon and Tyler and a couple cases of beer. She had on the pink dress she’d modeled for me in private the week

before, that fit tight on top and loose at the bottom in just the right way, and her sun-streaked hair was pulled back in a ponytail, leaving her tanned neck and shoulders bare. When she leaned through the open window to kiss me hello, her mouth tasted like cherry lip gloss. I wondered exactly how pissed Davey would be if I called a ten-minute timeout and carried her upstairs to her bedroom.

She pulled back, smiling. “Hey, handsome.” Then she glanced past me. “Hi, Davey!”

“Hi,” Davey said, not quite meeting her eyes. He always clammed up when Vicky was around—his standard reaction in the presence of feminine hotness—but she never let on that she noticed. Like I’d said to Davey, there was more to Vicky than being hot. She was a sweetheart too. I’d lumped her in with the airhead types until a party around Valentine’s Day when Davey had spilled his cup of beer on her. She’d spent the whole time he was frantically apologizing reassuring him that it was no big deal instead of fretting over her clothes. So I’d asked her to dance and offered to drive her home. We’d spent quite a bit of time in this car since then.

Vicky slid into the seat behind me, Shannon and Tyler shoved the beer in the trunk and hopped in beside her, and we were off.

Once we got out of town, I pushed my foot down on the pedal and let the engine roar. The lake lay fifteen minutes down that straight, lonely road. For the first five, it was fields of corn or grazing grass. Then the trees started multiplying until there was thick forest on both sides.

The car was just slipping into the sharp shadows of the

pinetrees when Vicky gasped.

“What the hell was that?” Tyler said.

I eased off on the gas. “What’s up?”

“There was something back there,” Vicky said. “By the trees. I think I saw blood.”

“Probably a dog that got hit,” Shannon said.

“It was bigger than a dog,” Tyler said.

I switched to the brake. “Guess we should go back and take a look then.”

Tyler pulled a face. “You want to gawk at roadkill?”

“What if it’s a person who got hit?” I said. “You want to leave them to bleed to death?”

Naturally, there were no complaints after that.

The gravel rasped under my shoes as I got out. I squinted at the trees. Imagine if we did find a body in the woods. No one would ever forget this party.

“It was a little farther up, on the other side,” Vicky said. She and the others followed me as I crossed the road. The sun was sinking, making our shadows stretch out beside us like starved giants.

At about ten paces, the smell hit me: rancid and cloying. My stomach lurched. I knew before the buzzing of the flies reached my ears that we were too late to do anything for whoever or whatever was lying there.

Shannon stopped, coughing and shaking her head, and Tyler stayed with her. Vicky walked on beside me, tensed. Davey straggled along behind, like he didn’t really want to come but couldn’t think of an excuse not to. I pulled my phone out of my jeans pocket, my fingers tight around the plastic case. If it was a person, we’d need to report it.

We crunched along the gravel past a bunch of saplings all leaning together, and stopped dead at the sight of the carcass.

All that remained was a mess of meat and innards and skin. It was hardly recognizable as anything at all, but one leg jutted out: brown fur matted with blood, a hoof at the end.

"It's a cow," I said.

Vicky put her hand over her mouth and stepped back. Davey's breath hitched. "Something must've really wanted a hamburger," he muttered.

I'd started inhaling through my mouth instinctively, but the stink of decaying meat coated the roof of it and tickled up into my nose, along with something pungent and sour, like old sweat. I cleared my throat and spat on the ground. Nothing newsworthy about a dead cow. But now I was glad. To see a human being chewed up like that would have been...

I suppressed a shudder.

"What did that?" Vicky said, her shaky voice muffled by her hand. "A car wouldn't have torn it up that badly."

"Maybe a bunch of coyotes ganged up on it," I said. "Or a couple found it after it'd already gotten hurt."

"Well, that's a good enough look for me!" Davey turned and headed back to the car. Vicky grabbed my hand. She glanced back once as we walked away, and shivered.

"At least it wasn't a person, right?" I said, squeezing her fingers.

"Yeah," she said. "It just looked so... vicious, you know?"

No one said much the rest of the way to the lake, but as soon as I'd parked at the edge of the clearing, all memory of the cow carcass seemed to vanish. Shannon and Tyler raced across the sparse grass to the sandy patch at the edge of the water, giggling. Vicky and I hauled the coolers out of the trunk. A few leftover logs still lay on the fire pit. I dragged Davey over to the edge of the forest so we could scavenge for kindling.

A low cliff, pockmarked with caves, loomed beyond the trees. I nudged Davey. "Remember the time we went spelunking?"

"I remember how you insisted on saying that word every five minutes," he said dryly. "And that you convinced me to try to squeeze through the gap at the back of one of the caves."

I laughed. "Right. How long did it take you to wiggle out again?"

"Long enough that your parents were about ready to call the FBI by the time we made it home." Davey's smile faltered. No doubt he was remembering, as I just had, how his dad had freaked out too. The next time I'd seen him, not all of his bruises had been from the rocks.

I clapped Davey on the back. "Well, we both survived." And in a few months we'd be far away from that asshole.

"Is Ash coming?" Davey asked while we walked back to the clearing with our loot.

"Unless she's gotten too cool for her big brother's shindigs," I said. "Hey, last one to the pit has to get the fire started!"

I didn't even try to win. I loped over to the pit and

turned around, grinning. Davey came panting after me. He dropped his kindling beside the stones with a sigh.

“It’ll give you something to do while you’re working up the nerve to dance.” I gave him a little shove. “I’ll help. Go grab the lighter.”

By the time we had a decent fire going, the sky was dark except for the pale circle of the moon and a smattering of stars overhead, and the rest of the crowd had started to show up. I counted eleven vehicles as I set my phone in my speaker dock on the roof of Mom’s car and let the music blare. More headlights flashed from down the road. Ash and her group staked out some of the blankets by the fire pit. Reuben and Crystal roared up on her Vespa, the two of them already stoned and carrying baggies of pills. Bottles were clinking, hot dogs sizzling over the flames, and couples splashing in and out of the water. It was everything a Max Weston party should be.

Vicky danced with me, and then with her girlfriends, and then with me again. Davey sat slouched on a log near the fire, poking at the coals with a stick. After a while, Vicky tugged him to his feet and got him dancing too.

All Ash’s friends had stood up. Ash and Emmett, her boy-of-the-month, swayed to the music beside another couple. The other sophomores raced across the sand, shrieking, in a drunken game of tag.

Emmett kept trying to slide his hands up Ash’s loosely buttoned shirt. Each time she laughed and slipped out of his reach. She raised her arms in the air, her silver bracelets flashing and her eyelids dipping low as she lost herself in the song. Emmett watched her with a narrow stare. Then he

headed for the coolers.

I ambled over so I reached them just as he did, as if by chance. “Here,” I offered as he picked up a bottle sealed with a plastic rim. “I’ve got that.”

He glanced up, and I could see he recognized me—as his girlfriend’s older brother, as the host of the party, it didn’t matter. He gave me a short nod and a shorter smile.

I pulled out my Swiss Army knife, opened the blade, and applied it to the plastic. I took a little longer with the cutting than I needed to while Emmett waited. He was the type, all tattooed shoulders and ape-like posturing, to take any appearance of a knife as a show of force. I flipped it back into the sheath and handed over the bottle.

“Having fun with Ash?” I said lightly.

His eyes flicked away. “Yeah,” he said and stalked off.

Reuben ambled over, bobbing his head and trying to focus on me at the same time. “Max! The lake. Rockin’. Best idea ever!”

“Thanks, man,” I said. Every time I talked to Reuben I found it harder to believe he was the same guy who used to climb out onto his roof with me and Davey to discuss the state of the world, the nature of the universe, and whether any of us stood a chance at getting into the boobalicious school secretary’s pants. Somewhere in the last couple of years he’d lost track of the concept of moderation. It was like the more drugs he shoved in one end, the more everything else that used to be part of him emptied out the other.

“Look at that friggin’ moon!” he shouted. He spread out his arms and turned in a circle, his face tipped to the

sky. Then he staggered and caught his balance against a car. “You gotta try this new stuff Crystal picked up. Forgot it— she went back to the ’partment to get it. So awesome.”

“Sure, Rube,” I said, even though I never do pills at a big thing like this. Someone’s got to keep his head. I took a swig from the beer I’d been nursing for the last hour. “You let me know when she gets back.”

He might have said something else, but I glanced across the clearing then. Emmett was drawing Ash down onto his lap. Her expression would have been unreadable to just about anyone. Her lips curled in a coy smile, and her eyes were masked with smudges of dark blue shadow that matched the streaks in her hair. But I knew her. Her jaw twitched as he talked into her ear, and the angle of her shoulders was tight as she flipped her bangs out of her face.

I raised my beer to Reuben in parting and circled around the fire.

“Hey, Em,” I said from behind them. “Gotta borrow my sister for a second.” When she looked up, I raised my eyebrows at her. “You told me you put the bug spray in the trunk, but it’s not anywhere I can see.”

Ash hadn’t said anything about bug spray, but she didn’t show it. She sighed and scrambled off Emmett’s lap.

“It’s got to be in there somewhere. Be back in a sec, Em.”

Emmett scowled and said nothing.

“Why’re you letting him piss you off?” I asked as we walked to the car.

Ash swiped her palms past her eyes. “He says he doesn’t like the crowd here. He wants to go to some stupid

party one of his friends in town is having instead. His friend who always looks at me like he's about to eat an ice cream sundae off me."

The bit with the knife had done more than I'd expected. Which meant Emmett was an even bigger wimp than I'd guessed.

"So let him go. Who needs him? There are plenty of rides."

"I know, I know," she said. "I was just... I don't want to be a total bitch."

"Sure you do." I knocked my elbow against hers. "Bitches rule the world."

She laughed. "It's stupid, right? I still get thinking like a loser sometimes. But I know how to handle it. If I don't want to do it, just don't."

"Exactly."

Ash sauntered back to Emmett to tell him what was what. His scowl deepened. He touched Ash's arm, but she shrugged him off and walked down to the water. *Good girl.* A few minutes later, he and a couple others from her gang took off.

The rumble of the engine had just faded when another sputtered out of the trees. The light of the fire wavered over the windshield of Jena's dad's ancient jeep. She hopped out alone.

I couldn't help grinning. "His Royal Scholarliness couldn't make it?"

She gave me the quintessential Jena look, the one she'd been making at me for ten years: head cocked and left eyebrow slightly raised. In the darkness, with the breeze

ruffling her dark brown hair and her tank top showing off her lean arms, she could have been a warrior princess. The kind of warrior princess who'd wear ripped jeans and read Nietzsche for fun.

"Joss had to do some extra research for his bio report," she said, as if Lover Boy would have lowered himself to mundane pastimes like dancing and drinking if he'd only had room in his schedule. The number of times her boyfriend of one year had accompanied her to one of our crowd's parties was exactly zero.

"No problem," I said. "I can show you a good time."

Her eyebrow arched a little harder, like I'd known it would. "Oh really?" she said. "What have you got up your sleeve tonight, Max?"

"What more do you need?" I asked. "We've got a full moon and a starry sky, the biggest bonfire the beach has seen since last year, more alcohol than a whale could drink, and a lake I hear is the perfect temperature for swimming... if you're interested in getting wet."

I smirked at her. She laughed and smacked my shoulder. "You never change, do you?"

"You wouldn't want me to," I told her, but who really knew, these days? Jena and I used to be almost as tight as Davey and me, but ever since she started dating the indomitable Joss, she was hardly around.

Vicky came up beside me and hooked her hand around my elbow. "Hey, Jena!" she said. "I was starting to think you weren't going to make it again."

Jena glanced around at the thinning crowd. "I guess I'm kind of late, aren't I?"

“What’s late with these things?” Vicky smiled. “Come on, I saved a couple of the lemon spritzers for you just in case.”

We sat on the sand to talk, and somewhere in there a joint ended up in my hand. I let myself take a couple of tokes before passing it on: just enough to relax a little. Time stretched in a haze of color and laughter and the stars creeping overhead. After a while I noticed I was lying on my back and the sand was making my shirt damp. The breeze had gotten almost cool.

I pushed myself upright. The only cars left were mine and Jena’s jeep. The fire wasn’t much more than a few flames flickering over the embers, and the last song on the playlist was fading out. Vicky and Jena were standing by the water, still chatting. Reuben had splashed right in with his clothes on and was trying—and failing—to float on his back.

Ash’s gang had all departed except her and her friend Sofia. They sat on the blanket shoulder to shoulder as if propping each other up. Sofia’s dark eyes followed me as I walked over. I winked, and her lips curled upward.

Davey was hovering over the fire on the other side. “‘Bout time to get going?”

I glanced toward the lake. Jena was checking her watch. It couldn’t be that late, could it? There was still so much night for us to own.

“Let’s get the fire really going one last time,” I said. “Go out with a bang.”

I turned back toward Davey, but he wasn’t looking at me anymore. Ash was stretching her arms over her head, her chest rising, and he was all but ogling her across the fire

pit.

“Davey!” I said, and he startled. “Wake up, man. More firewood. There was tons over by the caves. I’ll make sure we don’t lose the flames completely.”

He stood up. “Right, right.” He sounded a little woozy, though I hadn’t seen him drink much. Maybe the walk would clear his head.

As he headed off toward the trees, I took his spot by the fire. I prodded the one log that wasn’t totally burnt through until the unblackened end touched the flames. Somewhere behind me, Reuben sloshed out of the lake. Vicky and Jena’s voices grew louder as they ambled over. I got up to tell them we were going to hold out a little longer.

Before I opened my mouth, Davey started screaming.

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