

Chapter One

The apartment was for James. The city was for James. I was a ringless househusband degrading himself in diner grease on alternating shifts. We didn't need the money. James made sure I knew that. *Idle hands*, I'd say.

He didn't understand the detriment – the destruction these hands begot when idle. I contemplated for a while on becoming a butcher, but the thought of cleaving flesh from bone excited me. I needed a way to busy my hands and not my creativity.

Somehow, the dirty commercial kitchen kept me at the perfect balance between busy and lustful. Mildred did not teach me how to make a pork roll egg and cheese, but she taught me respect for food. The nuanced flavor difference between pre-scrambled and cracked in the pan. Or, in this case, on the grill. I came home smelling like grease and salt.

James didn't get it. I was articulate, well-read, even intelligent by some standards. Why didn't I want more from my life?

He turned his overeducated nose up at the prospect that my place may just be in that kitchen, frying scrapple, pressing fresh cut bagels into pork roll grease before laying two slices of yellow American cheese on each side of soon-to-be-sandwich. For him, it was a waste. I was wasting my talent.

“Plenty of people go back to school these days, Michael. There's is a term for it,” he said.

The stench emitting from my work clothes offended me. It's always bad when one can smell oneself. I had just worked a double, and I longed for a three-hour soak and a giant furnace in which to throw my oil-pocked uniform. The bathroom door was within reach. If I stretched my fingers, I might've been able to escape.

“You're better than that place.”

excerpt from *Mildred's Monster* by Mason McKenzie

There it was. The real problem. How was he supposed to brag to his Harvard Law alumni colleagues about his short order diner cook boyfriend? “I’m not *better* than anything. I work for a living. Why can’t you be proud I don’t mooch?”

I held fast to the groceries I bought on occasion and neglected the car and center city rent and nice clothes and luxury vacations. I was the only fry cook I knew who drove a BMW, after all. James treated me well. I wasn’t trying to deny that, but I could fill the Great Lakes with information he didn’t know about me. He had no idea what I was better than. A hell of a lot less than he was better than.

Just go back to school was easy for him. A simple concept for any ordinary high school graduate. But I wasn’t a high school graduate. I didn’t know what kind of graduate I was. Besides, I couldn’t risk rising to any notoriety beyond Best Nameless Short Order Cook in Philly. No photos, please.

I retreated into the kitchen, grabbing a glass and filling it with tap water. James abandoned his role as sentinel of the bathroom door to wrap me in his apologetic arms. He cradled his body against my back, placed his hands over my ribs and rested his chin on top of my head. “I just want you to be your best.”

“I know.” *But I am being my best.* He didn’t understand how far I had come – the cravings I had pushed down. The impulses I had quieted over the past year. He was absent for the beginning of me and away for my rebirth. But I had grown. I woke up in a cold sweat most nights while his heavy breaths echoed against the bedroom walls. I feared the police, the news, and any talk of Florida. The mere mention of Georgia sent the hairs on the back of my neck into an erect position.

excerpt from *Mildred's Monster* by Mason McKenzie

He must have felt my exhaustion. He gave my ribs a squeeze and released me like an unfit fish back into the water.

I escaped to the safety of the shower, letting steam build up on the mirror. I scrubbed my hands, under my chin, my arms with a loofa. I shaved meticulously and washed my face with two different scrubs. Clean cheeks were the only thing hiding the real me these days. I brushed under my fingernails and let my hot tears mix with the water before turning it off and stepping out. I was okay. Everything was going to be fine.

A few days later, I found out I wasn't okay anymore. So did James.

I was nominated as designated driver that night, much like every other night out on the town. That's what happens to the runt of the litter. The different one, the quiet one, the one who appears to not fight back. The beta.

It was Carl's or Fred's or Allister's birthday. James' friend. They all looked the same to me. Legacy lawyers whose daddies owned this or that firm, who had never driven anything older than a preschooler or lower class than an Audi. I was never one of them, and they made sure I knew it. James laughed with them when they made a comment on the slightest southern drawl that escaped my tongue. God forbid they were over when I came home from work. "How do you deal with the stench," they asked James, as if it were the first time every time over sweaty glasses of rosé. Not that I ever made much of an effort. James didn't notice or didn't want to. These were his people. I wasn't their caliber of human, and I was definitely not their model of gay.

So, Carl or Fred or Allister was celebrating his fifth 30th birthday in a row, and he wanted to relive his law school days. Everyone came over to our apartment to start the night off like they

excerpt from *Mildred's Monster* by Mason McKenzie

were twenty again. They all piled into my X1, and we drove through New Jersey into the Big Apple. Five of us packed in, four of us were drunk before we made it to the bridge. A car full of lawyers, and I was the only one at risk of losing my license.

It wasn't my favorite thing to do, but I played along for James' sake. I had a small crisis every time a car came close to mine. It was New York, so that was always. Once we exited the tunnel, I followed the GPS's instruction which barely carried over the caucus cackling of the back row, open-mouth laughing with perfect white straight teeth and a bottle of Grey Goose clasped by the neck in one hand. I must have eyed them, because James squeezed my leg and looked at me desperately apologetic. He was always sorry he got me into these positions, which he knew made my anxiety flair up. Sorry after the fact. But I knew, in a week or two he would be sorry again. It never stopped him from putting me there.

I turned left, then right, then tailed the cab in front of us for three blocks. The boys were pointing and jeering at passersby, likely tourists who didn't know any better. I knew it was coming, but my spine still crawled when the birthday boy stuck his head out of the window and announced it was his day, bitches, to cheering strangers. The real New Yorkers barely reacted. I envied their stolid expressions. I even tried to emulate them. James grabbed a bottle out of one of their hands and gulped at least three mouthfuls. They went crazy for this.

James was the one that slipped away. He denied this, of course. But I could see it in their hungry eyes, lingering just a little too long over his arms, his chest, and when it was his turn to get drinks, his ass. I couldn't begrudge them their glances. He was, after all, an extremely fit and attractive man.

He could have been a model if he had cared a little less about what people thought about the intelligence of models.

excerpt from *Mildred's Monster* by Mason McKenzie

“Almost there, ladies,” I said, sweating to hold back the accompanying eyeroll. They slugged back their vodkas, checked themselves in their compacts, and sat up straight trying their best to appear well-behaved. James smirked at me and gave my leg another squeeze.

One last turn and we were there. I handed the keys to the valet and took our ticket. The garage was four or five blocks from our final destination. It was the closest one.

“Okay, Papa. Don’t forget where we parked!” All the others cackled like a gaggle of high school mean girls.

I would not articulate exactly what led me to that moment. I was a man of action. My knobby knees deceived the best of them. I always appeared a bit peaky. I was not emotionless. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a more emotional man on the planet.

So, I kept my lips pursed, and James was enveloped in their grasping claws with my death glares and plain black turtleneck in tow. I was an obligatory sore, but one that faded into the background like an old image painted over on a canvas upon which a newer, more vibrant, appealing version of the portrait had been commissioned.

The club did not quell this feeling as I was almost abandoned at the entrance. James finally realized I was left behind and rescued me only to release me again at the call of his boys. I shrunk into the corner, sipping my single allotted bourbon and ginger. I watched them disappear into the crowded dancefloor, fleshy youth sweating all around me. I kept a weather eye in the direction of James, who did not so much as glance around for me.

I don’t know how many songs it took before I snapped. Wandered onto the dancefloor and shoved the credit card into James pocket before kissing him sloppily, ensuring the others saw our tongues dance around each other’s. It was childish, I know that. But he was still mine and they needed to be put into their rightful places.

Having emotions had never been the problem for me, at least I thought these were emotions. Controlling these emotions, however, had always been a Herculean task. Somehow, I found myself sitting alone at 2:23am in the 24-hour diner where I worked.

I don't remember the drive back, but I became acutely aware of my body as I sipped stale coffee with too much sugar. I stared at the stray fry under a booth on the other side of the dining room.

My phone began to buzz, jumping off the edge of the table and crashing onto the linoleum floor. I leaned down, slid the phone into my jeans still buzzing and gave a wave and an appreciative, albeit forced, smile to Kate, the waitress with her elbows on the till counter.

"Where were you?" James was paper white with worry. His flannel shirt sagged over his muscular body.

I walked to the bedroom and dropped my keys on the bedside table. I switched on the lamp and took off my boots. It was March, but I always wore boots. It was one of my many intricacies that irked James, and probably one that bothered him the most. Other trespasses included the consumption of orange juice after midday and refusal to eat lunch before two in the afternoon.

I tried, in vain, to escape to the bathroom, but James was in hot pursuit. He took my arms in his construction worker's hands. "Talk to me." While he held me, I did not struggle, but I maintained better eye contact with the carpeting than my boyfriend. Was he my boyfriend? My lover? My life partner? We weren't married. He wasn't my husband. Lately, I had as much confidence in my affection for him as what label to use when I referred to him. For the past month or so, he was just *James*.

excerpt from *Mildred's Monster* by Mason McKenzie

After a deep breath, the air around me changed. I could do that. “I don’t know why you’re fussing,” I said. “I just went to the diner for a bit. Kate was on duty.” I smiled with my whole body, and James relaxed his grip. He ran his open palms up and down my triceps, still inspecting my face.

“Are you sure? When you left you seemed...”

“I promise,” I said before he could continue. I didn’t want to talk about how close I came to exposing the old me again to the world. James released me completely. He walked into the other room. I could hear the distant clacking and shuffling of tomorrow’s lunching being prepared.

I spent the next twenty minutes arranging my t-shirt and jeans for the morning, straightening my boots to align perpendicular to the chair upon which my clothing was folded, laces lain out on the respective side straight on the floor toward the toe. I removed my watch, placed it on the bedside table in the corner furthest from the mattress and closest to the wall. I inhaled *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight*, cracked my index and middle finger knuckles pulling them down with my thumbs and stretched out each finger individually in a wave before making fists with both hands.

I stripped naked, folding each piece of clothing before removing the next. I placed the folded pile in the laundry basket and strode through the living room to the shower.

I lay awake in the darkness next to James. His heavy breathing fills me with anxiety the way it used to drain me of it. I shift my body away from him, still staring at the ceiling. The projected time changes: it’s 2:16.