

## Chapter 1: “The Weekend That Changed Her Life”

Maya closes the door to her bedroom, and collapses on her bed without bothering to change. It was over. Finally, after a long day she was back in her room where she felt safe. Today was a shit show, to say the least. They got a new student, Mark, who was immediately popular with everyone, which only seemed to boost his already high ego. He noticed Maya was quiet and kept to herself, so it seemed like he made it his personal goal to talk to her as much as he could. Eventually she had to start ignoring him (using her headphones as an excuse) to avoid talking to him. The teacher also announced presentations coming up, which particularly upset Maya.

But now it was finally the weekend, and Maya could stay in her room and do what she enjoyed most. She finally gets up, changes into her usual at-home attire and hugs her plushie. She feels comfortable with him, almost like he is some sort of barrier for her social anxiety. Of course it didn't completely cure it, but it felt a bit more manageable with him around. She got him when Coco and Mymy first came to live with her, as a sort of apology present for losing her cat. She never truly got over him, but her plushie did help bear the pain. Feeling a little less shit from her day, she sits in front of her computer and opens Youtube. She spends the next few hours browsing the site, clicking on a video here and there.

Around 7 PM, she hears her mom call her for dinner, but she doesn't bother answering. She knows that being with her family would overwhelm her too much, and she's too tired to bother. Apart from a couple of complaints from her parents, Maya was able to skip meals if she wanted to, which was something she appreciated.

Hours passed as she grows bored of Youtube, and decides to hop into bed. She notices a notification from Coco, which was odd since her family rarely texted her. She opens it and it reads:

**Coco - 21:12 PM**

goodnight maya

Maya feels confused and annoyed. Why would she suddenly care enough to wish her goodnight? Does she have an ulterior motive? Thoughts like these flood her mind as she tries to get some sleep. She finally drifts off, dreaming

about random things such as school. She only manages to sleep four hours, which in her eyes was more than enough. She hears commotion downstairs, and thinks breakfast is ready, so she drags herself down the stairs to the dinner table, where a big surprise is awaiting her.

“SURPRISE!”. Soei, Ravi and her sisters are standing by the dinner table with a big cake. Maya freezes from the shock. She completely forgot it was her birthday today. Usually everyone ignores her birthday, which she preferred, but now that her family was actually celebrating it she didn’t know what to do. Maya is still frozen from the initial shock, trying to process all her emotions at once. Fear quickly fills her thoughts as her overthinking takes control. Before anyone could say anything, she turns around and bolts back upstairs, slamming her door closed and hiding under her blanket with her plushie. Tears form as she sobbed, her mind filled with anger and fear. Why would they do this? Do they hate her? Was this an elaborate scheme to embarrass her?

A couple minutes pass and Maya is hyperventilating under her blanket. She heard a soft knock on her door. Coco is standing in the doorway, and whispers: “Maya?...”. Maya shoots up, rage and fear consuming her as she yells “FUCK OFF! YOU RUIN EVERYTHING!”. Coco tries to reason with Maya, telling her they were trying to do something nice for her, but Maya hides under her blankets again, tightly hugging her plushie while trying to drown out the sound of her sister. Eventually, Coco gives up, and heads back downstairs where her parents and Mymy are waiting. “She’s really upset...” Coco says with tears in her eyes. Mymy looks like she’s about to say something, but Coco quickly shuts her up before she can. She knows what Mymy wanted to say and she didn’t wanna hear it. Not right now.

It takes Maya several hours to finally calm down from her panic attack. She wipes her teary eyes on her sleeve as her breath shakes. She looks on her phone and sees messages from her mom and Coco.

**Mom - 9:36 AM**

Hey Maya...

We were only trying to make your birthday special.

Please come downstairs so we can celebrate your birthday.

You’re being ridiculous.

Maya's eyes fill with tears again, the words of her mom stabbing her like daggers. Of course that bitch wouldn't understand... She doesn't even bother responding to her, as she switches to Coco's message:

### **Coco - 9:28 AM**

Maya?... I'm so sorry for what happened... I didn't know your anxiety was that severe. Please let me know if you need anything okay? Come down when you're ready ❤️

Maya turns off her phone, and lays on her back, staring at the ceiling. She knows Coco was just trying to be nice, but she still feels angry. Tears start falling as the words of her mom and sister race through her mind. She turns her phone back on to try and distract herself, but the events of today keep playing over and over in her head. Throughout the day, she hears soft knocks on her door, but she ignores every attempt at communication. She rips a piece of paper out of her diary, and makes a makeshift birthday hat and puts it on her head. She hugs her plushie as she softly sings 'Happy Birthday' to herself while quietly sobbing. After she's done she lays down, buries her face in her plushie and falls asleep while the same thoughts replay over and over:

"My family hates me..."

## **Chapter 2: "A broken family"**

**Disclaimer: I'm not that familiar with the American schooling system as I grew up in The Netherlands. Therefore the dream sequence might not make much sense.**

It was Sunday afternoon now. Maya lays on her bed, curled up against her plushie. Despite her family's continuous attempts to get her to leave her room, Maya stayed locked up in her room all weekend. Earlier Coco opened her door to put some food down for her, but Maya just quickly hid under her blankets before she could say anything. That's how she was laying now, hiding from the world. A loud rumble from her stomach wakes Maya up from her thoughts. She hasn't eaten since Thursday night, and it started to show. Maya was already skinny for her age, just barely being above underweight on the BMI scale, but after days of starvation it seemed like she was even skinnier. She had no urge to eat however, as she felt super guilty about everything. How school is going, her anxiety, and mostly how she treated her family.

As she rolled over to stare at her ceiling, she noticed she really had to use the bathroom. Normally, she would quietly sneak out of her room to quickly use the bathroom, but it felt too overwhelming for her. As she was contemplating if she should quickly rush to the bathroom and risk being seen, she heard her family leaving, closing the front door behind them. She took this opportunity to quickly head to the bathroom to do her business there. While washing her hands she looked in the mirror and noticed how shitty she looked. Her hair was tangled and she had bags under her eyes. As she headed back to her room, Coco's door suddenly opened. Coco looks at her dear sister, who quickly averts her gaze. "Are you okay?..." Coco softly asks Maya, raising her arm out as a sign of support. Maya looks up at her sister surprised, and tries to say something but can't find the words. Before Coco can say anything else, she bolts back into her room, closing the door.

Coco slowly lowers her arm again, thinking about what just happened. She stands in the hallway in front of Maya's door for a couple seconds before deciding to talk to her other sister, Mymy. She walked to Mymy's room, and knocked on her door. Coco knew Mymy was probably her worst decision right now, but she had to tell someone close. Mymy opened her door to see her sister with tears in her eyes, and quickly let her in. Coco sat on Mymy's bed as Mymy collapsed on her office chair. An online game was visible on the screen, which Mymy was playing with her friends moments before. Before Mymy could speak, Coco tells her everything she saw, and how worried she is about Maya. For the first time, Mymy doesn't feel like making a joke or insulting Maya, but instead quietly listens while tears start to form in her eyes too. Guilt washed over her as she thought back at all the horrible things she'd done to Maya. Why didn't she see the signs? They come up with a plan to try and help Maya, but decide to leave their parents out of it for now.

As dinner rolled around, Coco took some leftover pizza her dad brought to Maya's room, softly knocked and put the pizza inside her room. Pizza was always her favorite, and she hoped it would at least cheer her up a little bit. All three sisters had trouble sleeping that night, each feeling guilty along with personal emotions. Maya only slept 2 hours that night, and although she slept throughout the weekend, she felt exhausted the next morning as she rolled out of bed for school.

Maya barely managed to pull herself out of bed. Tired, starved and dehydrated she slowly got dressed. It has become somewhat of a routine for her: Get up, check her phone for messages (there never were any), quickly go to the

bathroom while everyone's eating breakfast (although she didn't have to go today), get dressed, and stay in her room till it was time to leave. As she grabbed her phone, she noticed a message from Coco:

"Hey maya... I'm really sorry for what happened, but I wanna help you. You don't have to, but if you ever need anything we can always text okay? Love Coco"

As Maya stared at Coco's message, she didn't know how to feel. She felt angry, but also guilty for how much she resented Coco and pushed her away when she was just trying to help. A thousand scenarios flashed through her mind, most more negative than positive. She decided not to respond, and grabbed her outfit for the day. After changing she grabbed her headphones, and put on her favorite playlist. She knows it's rude to wear headphones, but it helped her so she didn't care. She looked at the clock: 8:26 AM, time to go. She pulled her hood over her head, hiding most of her face and head, and carefully left her room and went downstairs to their bikes. Her dad already left for work, and Coco and Mymy already left for school. Her mom was cleaning dishes in the kitchen, but didn't seem to notice Maya. Maya quietly leaves the house, grabbing her bike and paddling towards her school. For some reason she felt like today was gonna be a bad and stressful day for her, which she tried to ignore.

Finally arriving, she quickly parked her bike before entering the school. A faculty staff member yelled "Just on time, Maya. Leave the house sooner next time!" as she walked past her to her first class: Biology. Maya didn't bother answering, and entered her classroom seconds before the bell rang. A little out of breath, she quickly sat in her usual seat all the way in the back, and relaxed. Coco and Mymy were sitting near the front near their friends, happily chatting about their weekends and stupid things like that. Maya lays on her arms on her desk, and closes her eyes, trying to calm herself down. A couple seconds later the teacher enters, telling everyone to be quiet so he can start the lesson. Maya doesn't bother paying attention, and almost immediately falls asleep.

She's in a big field wearing a flower dress, just relaxing on the ground. A sudden voice breaks the silence. "You really think you deserve a life like this? Think of what you have done to everyone around you." Maya suddenly falls, her dress being replaced by a black pair of pants and t-shirt. As the voice continues to insult her, she sees different moments from her childhood. Moments she's tried her best to forget.

She can see herself in 6th grade, as she steals another kid's lunch to give to some bullies in her class. The student tattles on the teacher and Maya gets detention. The scene becomes blurry before showing her in 9th grade, recess. She's sitting in the shade doodling as the other kids are playing soccer. Some of the kids invite her to play, and she accepts. When the ball gets passed to her, she gives a hard kick and accidentally hits another student in their face. He starts crying as she tries to apologize but the other kids push her over and she quickly returns to her spot in the shade. A few minutes before recess ends a teacher comes with the crying kid, and Maya is sent to the principal's office where her parents are waiting. She gets a week detention and is grounded. She tries to explain it was an accident but nobody listens to her. Her vision goes blurry again and the memories start passing by quicker. She sees herself rejecting someone harshly who had feelings for her, completely ignoring a new student who just transferred to their school, as she tries to befriend her, the time she tried cutting herself and got caught by her mom, and became a long discussion that never seemed to end...

"STOP! PLEASE STOP!" Maya yells as she closes her eyes. Her vision suddenly goes black, and she sees herself in her current bedroom. A calendar on the wall showed the date: August 2nd. "No... please no... anything but this..." Coco knocks and walks into Maya's room, with Coco behind her. "Hey Maya!" Coco excitedly says, "Are you ready to go?". She watches her past self quietly nod, and follow her sisters outside. Maya is screaming now, trying to warn herself not to go, but it doesn't matter. Tears start forming as she keeps yelling things that her past self doesn't seem to hear.

Suddenly she wakes up from her dream, her eyes wet from tears and her breath shaking. She looks around and notices everyone is staring at her, even the teacher. People around her are whispering and looking at her like she is insane. She immediately gets up and bolts to the school bathroom.

Maya sits on the toilet seat as she's heavily shaking. Memories from the past flooding her mind, memories she tried so hard to forget. She hears the bathroom door open, and two pairs of footsteps walk in. She hears them softly whispering something before one of them speaks up. "Maya?... Is everything okay?..."

Maya tries to stay quiet, but her shaky breathing gives her away. There's a soft knock on her stall, which startles Maya. She tries to steady her breathing, and quickly says: "I'm fine.. just a b-bad dream.."

Outside the stall Coco and Mymy look at each other. Not wanting to push her, Coco quietly says: "The teacher called our mom... and you're allowed to go home if you want. Just come out when you're ready, okay?" Coco and Mymy go back to class, and Maya quickly leaves the bathroom and heads to the front entrance of the school where all the bikes are parked. She finds her bike, and quickly heads home. As she's biking, a thought hits her that almost makes her hit the breaks. What is her mom gonna say? What are Coco, Mymy and her dad gonna think? Dreading the inevitable, Maya bikes home, thoughts of the upcoming events racing through her mind.

The bike ride home went by too fast in Maya's opinion. She knew the ride couldn't last forever, but she wished it did. She put her bike in the shed, and slowly walked to the front door. As soon as she walked in, her mom walked up to her and bombarded her with questions. Maya tried mumbling she's fine, but her mom didn't let her off the hook that easily. She made her sit down at the dinner table so they could talk. Maya reluctantly sits down in front of her mom. Maya's mom immediately starts speaking: "What's going on Maya? I don't want any of this silent bullshit. You are my daughter, and I wanna help you, so no more silence or secrets, got it?"

Maya stares at her mom in shock. It was worse enough that she had a nightmare and verbally yelled out in class, now one of her greatest fears has come true: her family sticking their nose in her personal struggles. Maya quietly mumbles something, but her mom cuts her off again. "I want you to tell me what's bothering you right now, or you're going to a therapist". Maya overweighs the options for a few seconds. Obviously she doesn't wanna talk to anyone, but if she had to choose she can't decide if talking to her mom or a complete stranger is worse. Her mom sighs and stands up. "Fine Maya. I want you down here for dinner so we can discuss this with your dad and sisters." Maya is frozen in her seat, barely able to comprehend what her mom just said. She goes straight to her room and slams the door closed. She feels cornered, her life crumbling apart in front of her. Her mind is working on overdrive trying to find a solution, any way out of her situation. Her mind wanders to two solutions: running away, and... suicide. That last word makes her freeze, her hands trembling. Has it really come to this? Would she be able to go through with it? She thinks of finally being free from her burdens, but then fear kicks in. What if she fails? What would her family say? She decides to choose the other option: running away from home and from her problems. Her heart beats hard as she makes plans. She grabs her backpack, and fills it with a couple things: a notebook, her money, some clothes, some candy bars she had

stashed away, and her pillow. Maya hesitates, and decides not to write a letter to her family. They would be better off without her anyway. When she hears her mom going into the bathroom, she takes her chance. She grabs her plushie, and runs downstairs, taking her jacket off the hook and quickly putting it on, before running out. She keeps running until she's a couple streets away from her house, then stops. She has just realised she has nowhere to stay. Opening Google Maps, she looks around and finds an underpass that seems suitable, and starts heading there.

Her mom leaves the bathroom, unaware that her biological daughter just ran away from home. When Coco, Mymy and her husband return back home, she sits them at the dinner table, and explains her plan to help Maya. Coco and Mymy look at each other, as they both think the same thing: "Maya will not make it easy for us". Their mom asks Mymy to go get Maya, but Coco quickly volunteers and gets up from her seat. She softly knocks on her door, but there's no response. She slowly opens the door, but only sees an empty room. Fear fills Coco as she yells "SHE'S GONE!"

### **Chapter 3: "Maya's New Life On The Run"**

Everyone freezes for just a second, before collectively running up the stairs towards Maya's room. Her mom arrives first, and pushes past her daughter and enters the room. It looks just like it always did: Her bed was messy, covered in stains from food, her curtains were shut, making the room look dark and depressing, just the way Maya likes it. Her desk was full of random junk, and her floor was covered in unwashed clothing. Maya didn't own a lot, but what she did own seemed to be thrown everywhere. Most concerning, there seemed to be stuff missing, including her plushie. Coco softly gasps when she sees this, knowing that Maya would never let anyone touch him or come near him.

Meanwhile Maya is sitting under the underpass, tightly hugging her plushie and softly crying. She hadn't thought her plan through, and now wasn't sure what to do. She considered going back home, but then thought of what they would say. The attention would be overwhelming, and she decides to stay. To distract herself, she looks at her plushie, and thinks back to the time she got him:

Maya was 8 years old, and her new sisters just moved in. Maya was sitting in her room, her cat on her lap. Her mom softly knocks and walks in, and asks if she can talk to Maya. Her mom explains that Coco was allergic to cats, and

that they had to get rid of him. Maya remembers crying and screaming, doing anything in her power to keep her cat, but it was no use. It was the last time she openly conveyed her emotions to anyone. Her cat went to live with her grandparents, but Maya didn't visit them often so she saw her cat less and less, until he wasn't there anymore. Her parents tried everything to cheer her up, but she completely shut everyone out. In a last ditch effort, her parents bought her a blobfish plushie, and Maya finally seemed to calm down, even if it was just a little bit. She grew really emotionally attached to him. She named him "Greg" and since that day Greg gave her emotional support. She would vent to him after long days, and hug him tightly while crying.

Maya looks at Greg. He has definitely seen better days. He was a darker color than when she first got him, some of the stuffing had shifted from all her hugging, and he had a stain from when she accidentally spilled spaghetti on him. She took him to the bathroom, but couldn't get the stain out. It took her several days to get the courage to ask her mom to wash him, and by then the stain had permanently embedded itself into him. She felt really guilty, but over time she learnt to see the stain as a memory rather than a mistake, and now she didn't feel immense guilt when she saw it. Maya carefully puts Greg on her pillow, and grabs one of the candy bars. She doesn't feel hungry, but she hadn't eaten in days, so she had to eat something.

As the sun slowly set, Maya found a comfortable spot in the grass, and used her jacket as a blanket. She lays down, and tightly hugs Greg as she struggles to fall asleep. Every time a car drove past her, she got startled awake, having to take deep breaths every time to calm herself down. Eventually she managed to sleep for 3 hours, the bright sunshine making her unable to sleep any further. Packing up her things, she went off to find a better sleeping spot. She spends the day wandering the small city, finding a couple decent spots, but nothing that made her wanna stay for one night, let alone live there. Eventually she finds an abandoned shed just off-site of her old elementary school. She walks over to it, and luckily the doors unlocked. She puts her stuff inside, and decides to stay there for now. Maya quickly falls asleep, but is awoken a couple hours later by a bell and the sound of an army of children running and screaming. She realises the classes in the elementary school are finished for the day, and the children are being picked up by their parents. She covers her ears with her pillow, but isn't able to fall back asleep. She decides to leave her new home to get some dinner from the nearby Albert Heijn.

Maya enters the supermarket, and immediately heads for the bread section. Navigating around the store, trying to stay as invisible as possible, she manages to gather the supplies for sandwiches. At the checkout, she sees her mom and Mymy enter the store. Maya immediately freezes, seeing them talk to one of the managers to ask if they can put up a missing person poster. The manager inspects the picture, and tells them he saw Maya enter the store a couple minutes ago. Her mom thanks him profusely, and asks him to not let her leave the store, and if he sees her let her know immediately. He promises to keep an eye out, and walks to the customer service desk to make an announcement: "Can Maya Schoppenboer please come to the front desk. Your family is here looking for you and want you to return safely. I repeat, can Maya Schoppenboer please come to the front desk."

Maya drops her things and freezes, unsure of what to do next. A customer behind her starts quietly complaining, so without thinking she grabs the bread and runs out of the store. She can hear several voices yelling at her, but she can't make out what they're saying. Maya keeps running until her legs hurt, and she collapses on the sidewalk, clutching the loaf of bread. She clumsily gets up, and notices a wound on her knee. Maya stumbles back to the abandoned shed, clutching the flattened loaf of bread with both arms. She finally arrives back, carefully lays down and eats a couple slices. Tears start to form as her mind catches up from what just happened. What is gonna happen to her? Is she gonna go to jail? What would her parents think? Her mind starts to race as she feels a panic attack starting to surface. Trying to calm down, she takes deep breaths and holds Greg. After several minutes, she finally calms down and manages to lay back down on her makeshift bed.

Maya spends all night worrying about what's going to happen next, unable to sleep at all. In the morning, her thoughts are interrupted by a notification on her phone. She feels a shiver run down her spine: an amber alert. About her. Her parents must have reported her missing and the police put out an amber alert to try and find her. She realises she can't leave the shed anymore as anyone could recognize her.

Maya spends the next couple days in her new home, too afraid to leave. The bread had become stale by this point, but Maya wasn't feeling hungry anyway. Her phone died 2 days ago, and she couldn't charge it since the power seemed to be cut from the shed. Feeling more alone than ever, Maya stares up at the ceiling, and eventually falls asleep. She gets awoken by someone shaking her shoulders. Sleepy and with blurry eyes, she looks up and sees

Mymy yelling her name and shaking her awake. “FUCK, MYMY” Maya yells out, covering herself with her blanket. Mymy sighs in relief, and quickly leaves to alert the rest of the family of her location. Her mom comes running in first, giving her a big hug. Coco and her dad come in right after her, and Coco tries hugging her, but changes her mind when she sees her sister flinch. Her dad ignores it and hugs her anyway. Maya suddenly starts crying and profusely apologizes for everything. Running away, pushing everyone away, the bread. Her mom holds her daughter by her shoulders, with tears in her eyes listening to Maya. She finally understands how broken Maya is, and embraces her one final time. “It’s okay, Maya. I’m so sorry” her mom whispers.

After several minutes of crying and hugging, Maya calms down, and slowly stands up. She’s weak from the lack of sleep and food, but manages to stand up. She grabs Greg and follows her mom to the car parked nearby, as Mymy and Coco gather the rest of her things, and her dad sits behind the driver seat. As they are driving back home, Maya stares out of the car window, deep in thoughts. Her parents are quietly discussing something, but Maya doesn’t hear any of it. She wonders what’s gonna happen next, and what her parents will do and say, but for once, she doesn’t feel scared. It’s time to open herself up, and finally accept help.

## **Chapter 4: “The Long Road To Recovery”**

**DISCLAIMER: This one is for all the non-Dutch people: The “huisarts” (rough translation: “house doctor”) is sort of a medical office where you can go for small things, like weird pain in your arm, medicine, stuff like that. You can go there if you have medical questions that aren’t major or important enough for a hospital, and are always free because they’re covered by insurance.**

Maya stumbles up the stairs, and opens the door to her room. It looks just like how she left it, but it felt... different. She never noticed how depressing her room looked. She stepped inside, and put Greg on her bed before lying down herself. She was exhausted from the past few days, and all she wanted to do was sleep for the next 3 years. Mymy and Coco appear in the doorway, and look at Maya collapsed on her bed. They quietly put her stuff in her room, and close the door. Maya spends the day sleeping, and eating some poffertjes her mom made. After Coco checks up on Maya one more time, she and Mymy finally head to school. They got some time off from school to look for Maya, but now that she was back home safe, they had to go back to school.

That evening during dinner her family is surprised when Maya slowly walks down the stairs to join them. She sits in her usual seat, and quietly eats. Her family talks about random stuff like upcoming events, school, and so forth while Maya quietly listens. Still feeling hungry, she quietly asks her dad to pass her the potatoes, which startles him, but he gives her the bowl with potatoes. After dinner Maya goes back to her room to sleep, as she feels exhausted from being around people.

The next morning she wakes up around noon, and the house is quiet. Maya is confused for a moment, before realising it's Friday and her sisters are at school, and her dad at work. Her mom mainly works from home, but is sometimes called into work for meetings and important events. Maya doesn't mind the silence, and grabs her laptop to watch some movies. In the evening, her mom asks if she's okay to head back to school on Monday, and Maya reluctantly agrees. The weekend is very uneventful for Maya. She still spends most of her time in her room, but tries to speak up whenever she needs something. The weekend is almost over, and Maya feels more anxious about going back. What would her classmates think? What would her teachers say? Did she miss too much school to catch up? She didn't speak any of her fears out loud however, too afraid of what her family would say.

On Monday morning, Maya wakes up with a weird pain in her chest. She tries her usual methods, but nothing seems to get rid of it. Maya starts to panic, and stumbles into the bathroom, where she collapses on the ground. She hears a gasp behind her, as the rest of her family starts waking up. Maya tries her best to stand up, and manages to while clutching onto the bathtub. She sees Coco behind her, looking at her with worried eyes. Maya turns red in embarrassment, and forces her away telling her she's okay.

After slamming the door closed and locking it, Maya collapses against the door, and takes heavy breaths until the pain subsides. She does the rest of her daily routine, and leaves the bathroom. Coco is waiting on her, and is about to say something but Maya rushes past her back to her room. Maya lays on her bed for a while, trying to make sense of what happened, when her mom walks in. Looking worried, Maya knows exactly what she is going to ask, and unfortunately she was right.

"Maya?... Coco told me you collapsed on the floor, is everything okay sweetie?"

Maya turns red, and quickly says she's fine, just tired. She gives a nervous chuckle, but her mom doesn't believe her. She lets Maya stay home from school, but they're gonna visit the doctor later today. After her mom leaves Maya lays back down on her bed, as tears slowly form. She can faintly hear her mom telling Coco and Mymy that Maya is skipping school today, and to give the teacher a note. Maya lays back down on her bed. The pain in her chest has mostly gone away, but it was still there. She stares at the ceiling until she accidentally falls asleep. She's awoken a couple hours later by her mom, and suddenly seeing her startles her. She instinctively grabs her chest, feeling the pain come back, but thankfully not as strong as the first time. Maya remembers her mom is there, and quickly lets go of her chest, but it's too late. Her mom saw this, and recognized it as a (small) panic attack from her teenage years. She wants to say something, but decides against it. She'll inform the doctor so they can help her.

Maya slowly gets dressed, and she and her mom hop in the car and drive to the huisarts. As they're driving there, her mom notices Maya softly rubbing her chest, looking uncomfortable. She tries putting on some music, and one of Maya's old favorite songs plays. Her mind is immediately flooded with memories, good and bad, as the song's opening begins. Maya feels tears start to form, and quickly looks to the side so her mom doesn't notice it. She tries escaping into her mind, but her mom starts singing along to the song, making it difficult. As the song ends, Maya's mom tries to pat her shoulder, but Maya flinches, moving away from her. Looking ahead, she finally realises how broken her beloved daughter is. She feels really guilty for not noticing anything earlier.

They arrive at the huisarts, and her mom parks the car. Although it was only a 5 to 10 minute drive, it felt like it's been several hours for Maya. She puts her hands in her hoodie, and stares at the floor while they walk in. Her mom walks to the front desk and says something Maya can't quite hear. She's too busy trying to stay calm. Her mom ends the conversation with the receptionist, and sits down in the waiting room. Maya quickly follows, and sits down with a chair between them. After what feels like forever the doctor calls Maya's name, and they stand up and walk towards the doctor. He greets them with a warm smile, and shakes their hands and introduces himself as Doctor Beekhof.

They enter Doctor Beekhof's office, and they sit down in front of a big desk. Maya stares at her hands in her pocket while her mom explains to the doctor what's wrong. She explains that Maya is very withdrawn, rarely leaves her

room, and only leaves the house for school. The doctor switches his attention to Maya, and asks her: "What about at school?" which startles Maya, who wasn't paying attention. With a shaky and barely audible voice she answers: "Y-yes?..." The doctor smirks, realising she was distracted. He looks at Maya's mom and tells her he suspects she has social anxiety. He asks Maya's mom to leave the room, so he can talk to her one on one. Her mom hesitates, but leaves the room. Maya feels her anxiety rise as she watches her mom leave. What is he gonna do? Is she really gonna have to open up? No no no... Her hands start trembling in her hoodie pocket, and tries taking deep breaths but her throat feels like it closed up. Doctor Beekhof notices this, and tries calming her down by telling her he just has some general questions. Maya quietly nods, and Doctor Beekhof grabs a clipboard.

As he's writing something at the top of a piece of paper, he asks: "So, Maya, can you tell me if you feel like this when you're at school?" He looks up from writing and looks at Maya with a warm smile. Maya looks away, and quickly tries to think of a response. Her head spins with thoughts and memories from school. How she usually slept through her classes to avoid feeling anxious, how she spent her breaks in the bathroom, the constant anxiety she feels... Instead of answering Maya shrugs while staring at the floor. Doctor Beekhof thinks for a moment, and then asks: "Would it help if you wrote down your answers instead of speaking?" Maya thinks for a moment, then nods. Doctor Beekhof stands up, and gets her a pen and notepad. "Write down your answers okay? If you don't want to answer, that's okay too. Just shake your head." Maya grabs the pen, and starts fidgeting with it while Doctor Beekhof sits back down, grabs his notepad, and asks the same question. Maya quietly nods, and Beekhof writes something down.

The questions continue for 10 minutes. Doctor Beekhof tries to keep the questions surface level so as not to pry into Maya's personal life, but a couple questions get dangerously close. Overtime Maya feels her anxiety slowly lower, but it's still there. She tries her best to answer Doctor Beekhof's questions, but some are too hard for her to answer. Doctor Beekhof starts asking questions about her home life, and that's when Maya seems to close up again.

After failing to get more information out of her, Doctor Beekhof tells Maya that she's struggling with Social Anxiety Disorder, ADD, and maybe some childhood trauma. He tells her treatment will help her, but only if she wants it. Maya thinks about it. Treatment? That word makes it sound like she's broken..

Is she broken? Maya writes something down on the notepad, and Doctor Beekhof reads it: "What kind of treatment?" Doctor Beekhof thinks for a second, and then tells Maya: "You see, Maya, it depends on what struggles you wanna overcome. Luckily all your struggles can be fixed by a trained specialist. They can work together with you to fix your social anxiety, give you tricks on how to control your ADD and if you want, they can also help you with your trauma. The last one can be tricky, as you will have to open up to them more. I can also prescribe you medicine for your anxiety and ADD, but I believe treatment will be more effective. Should I get your mom back in the room so she can discuss it with us?" Maya quietly nods, and as Doctor Beekhof stands up, her mind is racing.

The Doctor and Maya's mom discuss something as Maya thinks about what she wants. Will this really help? Can she live a normal life? But... she's Maya. Maya isn't normal.. Maya can't be fixed.. Her mom agreed treatment would be best for her daughter, and when the doctor asks Maya's opinion, she softly says "I'll do it.." without realising it. On the car ride home Maya's mom is quieter than usual. Not that Maya was complaining, but it felt... weird. Suddenly her mom says: "It's gonna be okay dear. I know it might be scary at first, but this can really help you. I'm really proud of you for taking the first steps. I love you, Maya." Maya turns red, and stares at her feet, unsure what to say. S-she's proud of her? Maya? She hasn't heard that in years, and it felt good. She tries to ignore her negative thoughts flooding in, and slightly smiles the rest of the way home.

## **Chapter 5: "Small Steps, But In The Wrong Direction"**

It's almost midnight, and the Schoppenboer home is quiet. Maya is laying in her bed, softly snoring. Normally she would still be awake, watching one of her many "animes" or worrying about life, but not tonight. For once, she went to sleep at a reasonable time. Unfortunately her dreams were all but happy.

It was December 5th, 2017. Pakjesavond. The Schoppenboer family is sitting together on the couch, around a big bag. Coco is happily talking with her parents, Mymy is staring at the bag, ready to find out what's inside, and Maya is quietly sitting at the end of the couch, snacking on a bag of pepernoten. The only reason she was sitting here was because her mom always forced her to. Although, she did enjoy having a bag of pepernoten to herself, as she always had to share with her sisters.

“Okay Maya, it’s your turn to pick a present!” her mom suddenly says. Maya forgot what she was doing there, being lost in her thoughts. “H-huh?! O-oh r-right...” Maya quietly mumbles as she puts her bag of pepernoten to the side. She hated this holiday, as she was forced to spend it with her annoying family. Her parents never got her the presents she wanted, while Mymy and Coco got exactly what they asked for. That wasn’t unusual, as Maya would never ask her mom for the things she actually wanted. All she asked for was pepernoten.

Maya slowly gets up, legs slightly shaking. Mymy is staring at Maya with pure excitement. Every year Mymy only asked for one thing: a nerfgun. This year her parents finally gave in and told her they would get her one. She had big plans with that gun, and couldn’t wait for her sister to pick a present. As soon as Maya pulls out a present from the bag, Mymy launches herself towards her and snatches the present from her hands. Maya screams, and falls backwards into the table, knocking over her chocolate milk and spilling it on herself.

Mymy rips open the present, and sees it’s a new hoodie for Maya.

Disappointed, she looks at Maya, and sees her laying on the floor covered in chocolate milk. Mymy starts laughing and making fun of Maya, and throws her new hoodie on her as she says “Here, clean yourself up” Maya’s eyes fill with tears, as she scrambles back up and runs towards the stairs and up to her room. She slams her door shut, as Mymy’s laugh is still ringing in her ears.

Her family never came up to check on her. They never checked up on her. Maya suddenly wakes up, heart pounding out of her chest. Tears form as she thinks back to all the times her family hurt and abandoned her. The constant jokes and bullying from Mymy, Coco forcing her to socialize and do other shit against her will. And her parents. She hated them most of all. They never took her side. They never helped her. They suddenly replaced her with better children, took away her best and only friend, and never said anything when Mymy and Coco harassed her. Memories start flooding her mind, one more painful than the other. The time Mymy pushed Maya into a bush of nettles while biking home, and Coco just continued biking without saying anything.. The presentation where Maya completely humiliated her.. And... Coco’s 14th birthday. That particular memory hurt Maya the most. She feels a sudden pain in her heart, like someone was stabbing her over and over. She tries not to think about it, but the memory becomes clearer the harder she tries to forget. She buries her face in her pillow, letting the tears flow freely. Her family doesn’t care.. they never cared..

It takes Maya several hours to calm down. Unable to continue sleeping, she sits behind her computer, and watches one of her anime. She accidentally spends the whole night binge watching one of her shows. As the first sunshine shines through Maya's curtains, she finally breaks out of her trance and realises what time it is: 7:43 am. She quickly turns off her computer, and jumps into bed pretending to be asleep. A couple minutes later her mom knocks on her door telling her to get up for school. Maya slowly gets up, and starts feeling the consequences of her bad decision. She slowly gets dressed in her usual attire, and listens at the door. It's quiet... Without wasting a second Maya quickly rushes onto the hallway and towards the bathroom. Just as she's about to enter she hears a chipper voice behind her yell out "Good morning Maya!" Maya closes her eyes, and thinks to herself "goddamn it..". Before Coco can begin one of her long rants, Maya quickly enters the bathroom and locks the door. She hears Coco greet Mymy as they walk downstairs for breakfast.

The rest of the morning goes by uneventfully. Maya does her daily bathroom routine, and quickly heads back to her room to wait until it's time to leave. Everyday she hopes her parents will forget she exists, but every time the inevitable "Maya time to go to school!" comes from her mom. Maya mumbles something inaudible and heads downstairs. She's never in the mood for her family's socializing and happy moods, but today she was extra grumpy due to the lack of sleep. Her mom greets Maya with an enthusiastic "Good morning sweetheart!", but Maya just grumbles something back. "Well good morning to you too sunshine" her dad remarks, clearly joking about Maya's mood. Maya, who's already done with their bullshit, puts on her headphones and puts on one of the albums she had saved on Spotify. She quietly grabs her jacket, and follows her sisters outside to their bikes.

The sisters are biking to school, with Maya a bit behind them like usual. Her music is keeping her calm, but she's still in a bad mood. She tries to shake the thoughts out of her head, as she keeps peddling. Finally arriving at school, Maya parks her bike in a quiet place, and starts heading towards the main entrance of the school. "Hoi Maya!" Coco seems to have suddenly materialized next to Maya, which startles Maya. Mymy was walking a bit behind them while looking for something in her bag. "F-fuck! H-hi Coco..". Coco starts talking to Maya, forcing her to take off her headphones while they walk to their classroom. Maya pretends to listen, but in her mind her thoughts are somewhere else. She starts reminiscing about the anime she watched last

night. She couldn't remember the plot, with her mind being occupied by a certain scene where-

"...don't you think so, Maya? Maya is suddenly awoken from her thoughts, and quickly tries to remember what Coco said. "U-um.. y-yes?.." Maya stutters, unsure of what to say. She had no idea what Coco was talking about, but was too afraid to ask. Coco's eyes narrow as she looks at her sister confused, and even Mymy is staring at Maya. Maya starts to panic and quickly tries to fix her mistake. "N-no.. I- I meant n-no.." Maya mumbles, visibly shaking now. Coco looks at her sister, and a smile appears on her face as she goes back into her rant. "I'm glad you agree, Maya! It's always so..." Maya's mind starts to trail off again, but luckily they're at their first class of the day and Maya can sit in silence now. She quickly leaves Coco and Mymy behind by the door, as she takes her seat in the back of the class. Usually the class is talking loudly, but today was different. Students were having whispered conversations, and several students kept looking at Maya. She pulls her hood over her head, and ignores all the stares and laughs. Although it's unpleasant, she's used to it by now. Luckily the teacher walks in and shuts everyone up so he can start the class, and Maya lays her head on her arms for the first nap of the day.

The first bell rings, signaling the students it's break time. Everyone leaves the classroom but Maya. The teacher looks up and notices Maya sleeping on her desk. He knew Maya slept during his classes, but never bothered stopping her. Maya got pretty decent grades in his class, and he assumed her home life was rough right now and didn't wanna pry into her personal life. He walks over to her, and gently shakes her awake. "Maya, class is over. It's lunch time." Maya wakes up with a soft yelp, quickly gathers her things and rushes out the door. The teacher wishes he could help her, but decides against it. Maya walks to the restroom where she usually spends her breaks. The hallways are packed with students, happily talking and heading to the cafeteria or outside with their friends. She pulls her hood further over her head, and grumbles. She can't stand all these happy faces with their stupid friends. She finally makes it, and quickly heads into a stall and locks the door. She checks her phone, and notices she has several messages from Coco:

**Coco - 12:33**

hOI MAYA1

sorry the shout button was on

mom told us to keep an eye on you at school, where are you?

you can sit with me and mymy

Maya looks at her phone in disbelief. Her mom wanted them to keep an eye on her like she was some kind of troublemaker. She ignores her texts and plays some mobile games. The bell rings again scaring Maya, as she quickly gathers her things and heads to the next class.

The rest of the day thankfully goes by uneventfully. Maya spends the rest of her classes staring out the window, sleeping or listening to music. Thankfully Coco didn't message Maya again, but she dreaded the ride home as she knew Coco would want Maya to bike with her. Her fears are confirmed as she walks out of the building, and sees Mymy and Coco standing by Maya's bike, with their own bikes in hand. Coco waves enthusiastically at Maya, and yells "Hi Maya!" Maya turns red, and covers her face with her hood, grumbling something. She can feel the stares of her sisters and the other students as she walks towards her bike. After what feels like ages, she finally reaches her bike, unlocks it, and follows her sisters back home. Arriving home, she quickly puts her bike in the shed, and directly heads upstairs to her room without greeting her parents. As she closes her door, she can hear Coco and her mom happily chatting about their day. Maya lays on her bed and pulls her hood over her head, as tears start to fall. Why couldn't she be normal?

Maya doesn't leave her room for the rest of the day. Around dinner time she hears a soft knock on the door, and Coco slightly opens the door to put some food down. Maya quickly hides under her blanket to avoid having to talk to her, but Coco leaves without a word. Normally that would make Maya happy, but she felt even worse now. Coco is always trying to talk to Maya, why didn't she say anything? Does she hate her? Unable to bear her thoughts any longer, she starts pacing around her room. Thoughts and memories come and go, as she tries to make sense of it all. Suddenly one thought breaks her from her thoughts. Her first meeting with a therapist is in 2 days. She doesn't know how to feel about it. On the one hand, she's happy to finally receive proper help with her anxiety and ADD, but on the other hand the thought of leaving her room and opening up to a stranger were terrifying. As her food becomes cold Maya spends the next couple hours weighing the pro's and con's of going to therapy, and although she is scared, she knows it's for the best. She tries to keep that in mind as she heads to bed for some rest. Tomorrow she'll have to endure everyone all over again, and if she was gonna survive, she needed to sleep.

Friday comes and goes rather quickly for Maya, but sadly not without incident. Coco felt sorry for Maya, and proceeded to sit right next to her in their first

classes. This both angered and frightened Maya, as she preferred sitting alone. Thankfully she had her music so she could ignore Coco's many attempts and starting a conversation with her. In the first break however, everything went wrong. Before Maya could run off to her usual spot, Coco stopped her and half asked half begged Maya to sit with her and her friends. Maya managed to mumble something about the restroom, and quickly ran towards the girls restroom. However, she couldn't get rid of the initial shock and felt even more anxious the rest of the day. Thankfully Coco seemed to understand and didn't sit with Maya for the rest of the day.

It was now around dinner time (which Maya skipped again), and her parents had the brilliant idea of doing a movie night. Coco softly knocks on her door and enters, with Mymy following behind her. Coco shifts uncomfortably as she speaks: "Hoi Maya. Were having a movie night with snacks and popcorn and such, would you like to join us?" Maya's heart starts beating faster as her mind processed her sister's words. She already knew her answer, but something else was bothering her. Movie night? That was their thing.. Before these two showed up, Maya and her parents would do a movie night almost every weekend. She remembers always looking forward to them. Maya shakes her head and mumbles: "N-no.." Coco silently nods, and she and Mymy quickly leave Maya's room. Maya lays down on her bed, hearing all the laughter and talking downstairs. She suddenly remembered about the appointment with the therapist, and feels even more like shit. She had decided days before that it would be good for her, but she still felt anxious about it. She never had anyone to talk to.. anyone to open up to.. never had.. a friend. No longer being able to bear her own thoughts, Maya gets up and turns on her computer. She knows she won't be able to sleep much today anyways. She scrolls on Reddit for a bit, before switching to Youtube to watch her favorite Youtubers newest video.

## **Chapter 6: "Into The Unknown"**

Maya steps out of the car, as her mom turns off the engine. The air felt cool in the wind, although summer was quickly approaching. Maya took a deep breath to calm down the internal war that was going on, put her hands in her hoodie pocket, and walked toward the entrance behind her mom. She would do anything to just be at home right now in her room, but there was no way out. She had agreed to finally accepting help, and couldn't back out anymore. She had watched some videos on what actually happens during these therapy sessions, but they didn't seem to help her nerves. Maya sat down in the waiting room as her head filled with worst case scenarios, one more terrifying than the other. Her mom talked to the receptionist, before walking back to

Maya. "Will you be okay, sweetheart?" she asked. Unable to form words out of fear she would throw up, Maya quietly nods. "Good! I'll be back in a bit okay? And please do your best, they just wanna help you" with that Maya's mom hugs her and leaves the psychology office. Now alone, Maya felt her anxiety reach new peaks. With shaking hands she pulls out her phone, and goes onto Reddit to try and distract herself. It works for a little bit, until a lady walks in and calls her name. Maya stands up with shaking legs, and shakes the lady's hand. She introduces herself as Rebecca, and she leads Maya to her office.

As Maya walks in, she's surprised by how it looks. She was expecting a medical office like the one at the huisarts, but it felt more like a living room. The curtains were closed, and the room was only lit by a couple candles, making it feel cozy. The room had a desk with a computer, a comfortable looking couch, with an armchair opposite of it, a colorful rug, and on the side was a table with random toys, presumably for smaller children Maya thought. Rebecca sits down in the armchair, and gestures to Maya to sit down on the couch. Maya slowly walks to the couch, and sits down. She was right, it is comfortable. As Maya is getting comfortable, Rebecca grabs a notepad and a pen, and looks at Maya sitting quietly on the couch.

"So... Maya right?" Rebecca asks Maya. Maya gives a slight nod, and Rebecca writes something down. Seeing this Maya starts worrying that she did something wrong. Rebecca notices, and quickly assures Maya that she's only writing down some information about her. Still looking worried, Rebecca smiles and tells her she can ask to see her notes at any time, and she'll happily share them. This seems to calm Maya down, and they continue. "So Maya, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? It doesn't have to be personal, only share what you're comfortable with." Maya thinks for a few seconds, and then says with a barely audible voice: "U-um.. M-my name is M-maya.. I-I live w-with my two a-adopted sisters.. a-and my p-parents.. a-and I h-hate socializing.." She tries to give a nervous laugh, but it sounds forced and she quickly shuts up. Rebecca finishes writing, thinks for a moment, and then asks: "How is your relationship with your sisters and parents?" Maya looks away, and softly says "S-shit.." Rebecca looks up from writing, and asks Maya if she wants to talk about it, but Maya refuses. Sensing it's a sensitive topic for Maya, she quickly writes something down, and continues.

"So I got the notes your huisarts wrote, and it seems you suffer from ADD, social anxiety and possibly childhood trauma. Would you like to discuss these?" Maya thinks for a while, and Rebecca adds: "We don't have to discuss

it today, we can wait until you feel ready Maya.” This relaxes Maya, and she nods. Rebecca smiles at her, and asks if she wants to discuss anything else. Without thinking Maya mutters “I feel s-so alone..” Rebecca looks surprised, but quickly writes it down. Maya’s mind catches up on what she just said, and tears start forming. Rebecca cautiously asks “Would you like to talk about it, Maya?...” Maya’s first thoughts are not to open up, but she realises that if she never opens up, she’ll never get better. She takes a deep shaky breath, and although her mind was screaming not to, she nods. Rebecca says: “Go ahead Maya.”

It’s hard at first, but overtime Maya talks about her feelings more and more. She explains how she isolates herself, and how she had no friends. Rebecca quietly listens and writes down what Maya is telling her. Although she knows what Maya is telling her is very surface level, she already feels like Maya is making good progress. When Maya reaches her home life, she suddenly stops talking. Rebecca looks up, and notices she’s looking away. “I-I’m sorry.. I-I c-can’t..” Maya mutters as her voice shakes. Rebecca quickly assures her that it’s okay, and she doesn’t have to talk about it. Maya silently nods, and pulls her knees up to her chin. Rebecca sees the signs, and puts her notebook down. “If you want, we can end our session a bit early today.” Maya silently nods, and Rebecca smiles at her. “It’s okay, Maya. You did really well today!” Maya turns red and looks away.

Outside of the office, Maya texts her mom to come pick her up. She arrives 10 minutes later, and Maya gets in the car. Her mom seems to be in a better mood, as she talks to Maya the entire car ride home. Maya tries to ignore her, but she’s forced to nod or shake her head several times. Finally back home, Maya rushes back upstairs to her room, and shuts the door. She gives Greg a hug, and lays down on her bed to think. She had this weird feeling she couldn’t explain. It wasn’t guilt, or fear, or any other emotion she usually felt. She felt... safe with Rebecca. She was the first person Maya had ever opened up to. She decides to start a diary, or at least a notebook where she would write down her anxieties, fears, thoughts, and so forth. She stands up, grabs a pen and notebook from her desk, and sits back down on her bed. She stares at the blank pages for a couple minutes, and finally starts writing:

*Saturday, February 9th*

“Hi.”

Maya stops writing, unsure of what to say next. All her emotions and thoughts come in at once, flooding her mind. She lays back down, and stares at the ceiling. She decides to just write down what happened today, and maybe add her thoughts and feelings. She sits back up, grabs her notebook and starts writing:

*“Big day today. Had my first therapy session today, and it wasn’t what I was expecting at all, but we’ll get to that. I spent the night watching Squidhappers again. I’ve seen it about 500 times now. It’s this really sexy interesting anime about”*

Maya pauses for a second, contemplating if she should write down the plot of her favorite anime. She decides against it, and keeps writing.

*“Anyways, I fell asleep around 4 am again. It’s the weekend, don’t judge me. When I (finally) woke up, mom was bugging me about getting up, so I did. Thankfully I had time for a quick panic attack (yay...), and then it was time to go. Thankfully on the drive there mom didn’t seem very social, so I had that going for me. At the therapy place I met Rebecca, and she seems nice. I told her about my loneliness. Weird huh? A couple months ago I literally said that loneliness is just a theory made up by my extroverts, and today I told a complete stranger I feel alone. Anyways, I told her a couple things, but when she asked about my family, I couldn’t answer. She doesn’t have to know how I truly feel about them... Thankfully she didn’t ask more and we ended the session. On the way home mom was unusually social, which of-fucking-course. I tried to ignore her, but she was talking to me and kept asking shit. (I’m sorry for my language). I just nodded or shook my head, which thankfully was enough for her. Now I’m sitting in my dark room, writing down how”*

Maya’s mom yells from downstairs: “Maya! Dinner!” Maya freezes, her hand holding the pen shaking. W-what? She was never forced to join her family for dinner.. She decides to stay in her room, but feels too anxious to keep writing. She puts her notebook back in her desk drawer, and lays down on her bed facing the ceiling. Suddenly her door swings open, and her mom walks in. “Maya, didn’t you hear me call you? Come on down, it’s dinner time”. Maya hides under her blankets, and mumbles: “I-I’m not h-hungry..” Her mom sighs, and yanks her blankets off, and pulls her out of bed. “Come on, your dinner is gonna get cold.” She grabs Maya’s arm and pulls her out of her room. Maya, shocked by her moms sudden actions, doesn’t fight back and reluctantly

follows her mom downstairs. Maya audibly gasps as she can feel her chest tighten. Coco and Mymy had friends over, and they were all sitting at the dinner table. There's no way out, and her mom leads her to her seat and sits her down. Maya is visibly shaking, bright red and her heart is going wild. She feels the all too familiar pain in her chest as her breath becomes quick and shallow. She closes her eyes, and takes some deep breaths. Thankfully nobody noticed her sudden panic attack, as they were all too busy talking, laughing and eating.

Maya manages to calm down enough so nobody notices, and puts her hands in her hoodie pocket. She suddenly hears her name, and gets startled. It's one of Coco's friends, Cleo, she thinks. She's handing Maya the bowl with potatoes, but she declines. Her mom, sitting next to Maya, says "Nonsense, you have to eat. Look how skinny you are." Maya turns red again, and looks at her feet, while her mom fills her plate with potatoes. "There you go! Now eat up, Maya." Maya keeps staring at her feet, and wishes she could disappear. She grabs her fork, puts a potato on it, and takes a small bite. She chews for a long time, before swallowing the piece of potato. She puts her fork down, and goes back to fidgeting with her hands under the table. Her mind is working overtime, trying to process everything that's happening. Maya sits in complete silence, looking down the entire time. Luckily nobody notices her. After what feels like years, everyone is finally done eating, and starts getting up to clear the table. Maya uses this commotion to quickly head towards the stairs, but her mom stops her. "Don't go yet Maya, you haven't had dessert yet!" Maya feels her anxiety spike again, and quickly mumbles "N-no that's o-okay.. I d-don't w-want any.." her mom sighs, grabs her shoulders, and leads her back to the table. Maya sits back down, now with tears forming in her eyes.

Everyone sits back down, and her mom starts handing out slices of cake. She gives Maya a big piece of chocolate cake, and tries to kiss her forehead. Maya flinches this time, and pushes her mom away. Her mom, surprised by this, tells Maya to grow up and gives her another kiss. As soon as her mom's lips touch Maya's forehead, something in her snaps. Years of anxiety, fear and most importantly rage suddenly burst out, as she stands up, and punches her mom in the stomach. Everyone goes quiet, as her mom clutches her stomach from the punch. Her dad gets up, and yells "Maya!" but Maya stares at him and yells "Shut up!" It's completely quiet at the table, and everyone is staring at Maya, but for once she doesn't feel fear, only anger. She tries leaving, but her mom grabs her arm and doesn't let her leave. "How dare you hit your mom?! We raised your ungrateful ass for 16 years! Is this the thanks we get?! You are

so incredibly ungrateful, Maya! You know how many kids would die for parents like us?! You are-” before her mom could finish, Maya punches her in the mouth, and blood starts falling. “Shut the fuck up you bitch! You think I asked for this?! You four are the reason I’m like this! You ruined my fucking life!” feeling her anger reach its peak, she decides to let it all out. All the years of built up loneliness, neglect and abuse. She feels her tears returning as she turns to Coco first, and yells: “You are a selfish asshole! You know how much I hate myself because of you?! You are always miss perfect, while I’m never even good enough for them! And your constant attempts at getting me to socialize! To fit in! I don’t fit in, okay?! Get that through your thick fucking skull!” Maya turns to Mymy, who tried to say something to defend her sister. “And you! The amount of abuse and bullshit you put me through all these years! Do you have any fucking idea what you did to me?! Or do you not fucking care, miss ‘I’m gonna take over the world with my bullshit Dutch fantasies! You are even more of an asshole than Coco!” Finally, Maya turns to her parents. The same people who neglected her all these years. The ones who would rather pretend Maya didn’t exist rather than help her. The ones... who let all the abuse by her sisters happen. “And you two! Don’t get me fucking started on the amount of bullshit you did to me! For fucking years, you just let Mymy and Coco treat me like shit! You never said anything! Never stopped them! And even when it happened right in front of your fucking eyes, you did nothing!” tears started freely falling as Maya continued. Everyone was in complete shock, and Coco, Mymy and her mom were crying too. “You adopted these two to make up for my failures! So you finally had someone you could be proud of! Do you know what that does to a child?! Well, I’m sorry I’m not perfect like them! I’m sorry I’m not social! I’m sorry I get shit grades! I’m sorry I’m not pretty! I’m sorry I’m addicted to weird tentacle hentai! I-I’m s-sorry I was n-never good e-enough for y-you t-two!” Maya started crying. After years of holding it in, she finally told everyone all her insecurities and how she felt. Maya wanted to say more, but her tears silenced her. She turns around, and runs up the stairs and into her room. Now crying freely into her pillow.

Meanwhile downstairs, everyone is still in shock of what just happened. Suddenly Maya’s mom coughs and blood splatters on the table. Her husband quickly takes her to the bathroom to clean her up, as Mymy and Coco stay at the table with their friends. After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, Coco finally speaks. “I- I think it’s better if you guys leave...” Everyone mumbled in agreement as they headed to the hallway to grab their coats. When everyone is gone, Mymy and Coco slowly head to their rooms. They

had a movie marathon planned, but nobody was in the mood anymore. Maya's dad manages to stop his wife's bleeding, and they go up to their room. They see Coco sitting against Maya's door, silently crying. Maya's dad hugs her, and assures her they'll get through this together. Coco silently nods, and heads into her room, as her parents head to their own room. None of them are able to sleep, Maya's words still haunting them. Mymy tries to play her games to distract herself, but Maya's words are stuck in her mind. Coco is silently crying in her bed. She wants to help so badly, but she doesn't know how. Maya's mom is sitting on the edge of their shared bed, as her dad is pacing back and forth. They are discussing how they can help their daughter, but they can't think of anything. Defeated, they both collapse on the bed.

**TW: Self-harm ahead. Please skip if you're not comfortable**

Meanwhile Maya is sitting on her bed, and staring at the knife in her hand. She hid it after her first try, and forgot about it. She felt extremely guilty for everything she said, and all the pain she caused her family. She takes a shaky breath, and brings the knife to her skin. She's just trying it... She drags the knife across her skin fast and hard. Immediately her arm starts bleeding, but it's not enough. She cuts her skin again, and again, and again. After about 5 times, she collapses on her bed. She looks at her arm, which is bleeding but the cuts don't seem too deep. She puts her hoodie back on, and stumbles to the bathroom to clean up the wounds. She manages to stop the bleeding, but the cuts are a dark red color. She tries to bandage her arm, but quickly gives up and throws the makeshift bandage in the trash. She crawls into bed, and as her guilt is slowly consuming her, she slowly falls asleep.

## **Chapter 7: "Isolation"**

The sun slowly rises over the Netherlands, as people are waking up to start their day. Coco stretches, and leaves her room to freshen up. Her makeup was a mess due to her crying yesterday, and although she didn't feel like it, she wanted to at least look presentable. As she walks past Maya's room, she freezes. Memories from last night hit her like a runaway train, and her hands start trembling. She softly knocks on Maya's door, and says: "Maya?.." There's no answer, so Coco slowly opens her door. Her room is an absolute mess, but it's always like that, so that's not what worries Coco. What worries her is Maya laying motionless in her bed, hiding under her blankets. Coco immediately worries for Maya's safety, but before she can do anything Maya exhales audibly. Coco sighs relieved, and quietly closes her door. Soei appears behind her, and worryingly asks Coco how Maya is doing. "She's.. okay. She's just

sleeping.” Coco says. Soei sighs and hugs Coco tightly. “Let’s go eat some breakfast, okay?” Coco nods, and they head downstairs for breakfast.

It’s quiet at the dining table. Nobody knows what to say, and even Mymy, who would go on some rant about the V.O.C was silent. Finally Soei says: “Maybe it’s better to leave Maya alone for a bit...” The others quietly nod, and silence returns to the table. After breakfast, Coco and Mymy return to their rooms, as their parents clean up the table. Coco looks at her phone, and notices several messages from her friends. They’re all asking how Coco is doing, and if Maya is okay. Coco assures them that she’s okay, and that Maya just needs some time alone. She lays on her bed and thinks about everything Maya said last night. Did she really think that? Meanwhile, Mymy is behind her computer playing Fortnite with her friends. Normally, she would scream and insult everyone and everything, but she was quiet today. She told her friends not to mention last night, but that didn’t stop them from discussing Maya’s outburst. Becoming frustrated, Mymy closes the game and leaves the call, and starts watching a movie to distract herself.

Late in the afternoon, Maya finally wakes up, groans and rubs her eyes. She notices her arms and feels a shiver go down her spine. Those cuts... did she really do that? That... wasn’t a dream? She inspects them more carefully, and notices that they look fresh. Maya had almost no memory of what happened after her outburst. The outburst. Memories from last night start flooding Maya’s mind as tears fall. What has she done.. Her family will never forgive her.. she grabs greg, hides under her blankets and quietly sobs. She spends the day in her room, under her blankets, unable to face her family after what happened that night.

Monday morning rolls around, and Coco and Mymy are getting ready for school. As Coco leaves her room for breakfast, she stops in front of Maya’s door. They called the school saying that Maya was sick and wouldn’t come in for a couple days. They decided that it was best for her to stay in her room where she was safe. Coco wants to knock, but doesn’t wanna bother Maya. She ends up deciding to check on her, as she realises Maya hasn’t eaten since who knows when. Coco softly knocks on the door, but there’s no answer. Mymy appears, asking Coco what she was doing. “I- I couldn’t resist.. I have to know if Maya is okay..” Mymy sighs, and slowly opens the door. At first they don’t see Maya, and they’re worried that she ran away again, but then they notice her blanket rhythmically moving up and down. She was hiding under her blankets, sleeping. Sighing in relief, they quietly close the door and head

downstairs for school. Soei is sitting at the dinner table, booking an at home appointment for Maya with the therapist. As Coco and Mymy grab their jackets, she pauses her phone call to wish them a good day at school.

“Thanks, mom” Mymy replies, before leaving the house and grabbing their bikes. Soei ends the call, and starts getting ready for work. She can’t shake the immense guilt she felt. Before leaving, she looks back at the stairs that lead to the first floor, and softly whispers “I love you, Maya..” before leaving the house herself.

Coco and Mymy arrive at school after what felt like hours of biking. Although they were glad to have some distractions from the at-home situation, they were both dreading the same thing: questions. Word about Maya’s outburst spread quickly, and her absence only made the rumors more elaborate. Coco’s friends saw her entering the school, and quickly walked towards her to ask how Maya is doing. Coco brushes it off by saying she’s fine, but they keep asking more questions. “She’s fine, really! She was just.. exhausted from all the school work and tests. Now please drop it.” Coco finally says, done with all the questions. Mymy just silently walks a little behind the group, hands in her hoodie and looking at the floor. She felt the most guilty because of all the things she put Maya through. Mymy couldn’t think of one happy memory they shared, and that scared her and worried her. As the group enters their first classroom, people turn their heads and start moving towards Coco and Mymy. “Oh fuck..” Mymy thinks, trying to push past the crowd to her seat, but is unable to. As Coco is trying to answer every question being asked, Mymy forcefully pushes past the crowd and sits down. The teacher walks in, and everyone finally goes to their seats and the class starts.

The bell rings, signalling the break. For the first time, Coco and Mymy don’t sit with their friends, instead sitting in a calm corner of the school in silence. Coco looks at Mymy. Mymy is staring at her knees, deep in thoughts. She can see the guilt in her face. Coco hugs her, which breaks Mymy out of her thoughts. When Coco pulls away from the hug, Mymy asks her with tears in her eyes: “Maya will be okay.. r-right?..” Coco quickly reassures Mymy. “Of course! Once she’s ready, we’ll do anything we can to help her, okay? I promise she’ll be okay!” Mymy quietly nods, and the bell rings. “Come, we have history class.” Coco says while standing up. She holds out her hand to pull Mymy to her feet, but she stands up by herself, and they walk back into the school.

Maya groans and sits on the edge of her bed. Her headache made it impossible for her to relax. She listens at her door. Silence. She puts on her

hoodie, and carefully makes her way to the bathroom. She finds the pain killers, and takes one before heading back to her room. She realises that everyone's gone, and she has the house to herself. She heads downstairs, and drinks a cup of water. She stops in front of the pantry and contemplates eating something, but her guilt wouldn't let her as she was still punishing herself for her outburst two days ago. Maya heads back to her room, and lays back down on her bed. She checks her phone, no messages. That's odd.. usually Coco messages her almost daily, and she would have expected something from her mom, but there was nothing. Maya lays her phone back down, and fights back her tears. Her family hates her. She gets up, and heads to her desk. She opens her drawer, and grabs her notebook.

*Monday, February 11th*

*This is it. This is what rock bottom feels like. I said horrible things to my family that Saturday night. I haven't seen or heard from any of them since, and*

Maya's hand starts slightly shaking. The weight of her guilt and emotions crushing her.

*I'm scared.. I've never felt so alone. I ~~want~~ wish I could open up to my family, but what they did still hurts. I'm afraid I'll never be able to accept help, and I'll be stuck like this forever.*

Maya stops writing and buries her face in her arms, and just sits like that for a while. Eventually she puts her notebook away, and lays back down in bed.

The family returns to the Schoppenboer home after a long day, and everyone seems in a much better mood. Soei starts cooking dinner, as Coco, Mymy and their dad Ravi watch TV together. Maya hears them talking and laughing, and pulls the blankets over her head to drown out the noise. Still hearing their faint laughter, Maya feels worse and worse about everything. Soei finishes dinner, and they all sit down to eat. "So girls, how was your day?" Ravi asks the others. "It was alright! We got our grades back for our math tests and I got an 8,3!" Coco says cheerfully. "Wow, well done! I'm so proud of you!" her mom exclaims, hugging her daughter. Mymy grins, and proudly tells her parents she got an 8,7 for the test. Both her parents yell out in excitement, feeling proud of their daughters. "You just won't let it go, do you?" Coco asks with a smile. "You're just jealous I'm smarter than you" Mymy answers as if challenging Coco. "Alright alright, that's enough you two" Soei quickly says, trying to end

their little argument. “So mom, how was your day?” Coco asks. “It was good! There wasn’t much work to do, so I got to leave early and I got a cake for dessert!” “Omg yay thank you mom!” Coco and Mymy scream out in excitement. Maya hears this, and realises how happy her family was without her. It felt like nobody remembered the third Schobbenboer child, until Ravi finally said something. “Has anyone heard from Maya today? I hope she didn’t just lock herself in her room all day...” The mood instantly changes, and they admit nobody has seen or heard from her. “Should we check on her?..” Soei asks. “She probably just wants to be alone, it’s best if we don’t.” Ravi reassures his wife, hugging her. “Let’s finish our meal and enjoy some cake, okay?”

After dinner Ravi and Soei clean up the table, and Mymy retreats back to her room to play video games with her online friends. Coco stares at the half eaten cake, while feeling guilty about everything that happened to Maya. She cuts off a piece, and puts it on a plate. “I’m gonna bring Maya a piece of cake, is that okay?” she asks her mom, who smiles and says “Of course sweetheart, but please try not to overwhelm her.” Coco nods, and decides to write a little note for Maya. She then makes her way up the stairs, and slowly opens Maya’s door. Coco was expecting her to be in bed, but instead she’s on her computer. She’s watching some sort of anime, and is so invested that she doesn’t notice Coco standing in her doorway. Coco sees what seems to be a school girl and an octopus about to- “Fuck, I didn’t need to see that...” Coco thought while quickly looking away. She quickly puts the plate and her handwritten note down on the floor, and quietly leaves the room. She stands outside of Maya’s room for several seconds, trying to process what she just saw. So that’s what she meant with “weird anime”... Coco shakes the vision of Maya’s anime away, and heads back to her room.

Maya notices her door close, and looks behind her. She sees the cake and a note, and cautiously walks towards it. She grabs the note, and reads it:

*“Hey Maya...*

*I feel really bad for all the pain I put you through in your life. I know you have a hard time talking to people and opening up, but if you ever need someone don’t hesitate to talk to me okay? I know we’re not related by blood, but you are still my sister and I will always love you.*

*Love, Coco”*

Maya starts crying, and falls to her knees, all the emotions she's felt since her outburst releasing all at once. After hugging Coco's note for several minutes, she carefully puts it on her desk, and grabs the cake. Maya eats it slowly, making sure to enjoy every bite. After finishing, she grabs her phone, and for the first time starts a conversation with someone. She writes a quick but genuine message to Coco: "Thank you ^^" and turns off her phone. Maya feels a little bit better now. She can't quite explain why, but Coco's note made her feel calmer than she's felt in years. Maya carefully places the note back on her desk, and lays down on her bed hugging Greg. She hears her phone buzz, but she's too tired to check. She falls asleep with only one thing on her mind: Maybe things will be okay in the end for Maya..

## **Chapter 8: "Further Down Rock Bottom"**

Maya jolts awake, and rubs her eyes. She looks at her phone: 3:29 AM. She groans, and tries to go back to sleep, but notices several messages. Maya opens the app, expecting her mom to scold her again for who knows what, but sees they're from an unknown number. Confused, she first opens the message from Coco:

"You're welcome Maya! Sleep well! ❤️"

Maya slightly smiles, before opening the message from the unknown number:

**??? - 3:31 AM**

"Hey Maya. Coco told us what happened.. I hope you're doing okay. Come back to us soon okay?" - Roos

Maya turns red, and quickly shuts off her phone. She always had these strange feelings about her, but never told anyone and just buried them. She had forgotten about them, until just now. She turns her phone back on, and goes into the Youtube app. She doesn't know what this weird feeling is, but decides to bury it like she always did. After scrolling for a couple hours, Maya completely forgets about the message. Her eyes were glued to the screen, as she scrolled through random videos. As the sun came up, she heard her family get ready to start the day. She quickly turned off her phone, and pretended to be sleeping. Coco quietly opens the door to check on Maya, but sees she's sleeping and quickly leaves.

Coco finishes her morning routine, and heads downstairs for breakfast. "Good morning, sweetie!" her mom calls out to her. Coco yawns, and greets her

mom. Coco sits next to Mymy, who seems to be drawing some sort of battle tactic in her notebook. Ravi seems to have already left for work. "What's that?" Coco asks, but Mymy quickly closes her notebook and stores it away. "N-nothing! You wouldn't understand it" Mymy answers, hiding her notebook under the table. Coco laughs, and their mom puts their breakfast on the table.

After breakfast, they hear a knock on the door. Soei quickly gets up and answers the door. A lady walks in, and greets the family. Coco looks surprised, but quickly gets up to greet the lady. She introduces herself as Rebecca, Maya's therapist. Mymy is still looking at her suspiciously, and Soei notices her hand is on her nerf gun. She quickly cleans off the table, and tells Mymy and Coco to get ready for school. "Will Maya not join us?" Coco asks disappointedly. "She.. needs some more time. I'm sorry girls." Soei answers, a hint of sadness in her tone. Coco nods, and follows Mymy to their bikes. "Welcome Rebecca, can I offer you something to drink?" Soei asks. "No, thank you. I'd like to start with Maya." Rebecca answers with a smile. "Alright. Her room is on the first floor, second room to the left." Soei answers, smiling back. Rebecca thanks her, and heads towards the stairs. Meanwhile, Soei grabs her things, and heads out the door for work. Rebecca reaches a red door with "MAYA" written on it. She takes a deep breath, and softly knocks on Maya's door.

Maya accidentally fell asleep, but woke up when she heard a knock on her door. She assumed it was Coco again, so she just ignored it. Rebecca knocks again, and softly asks: "Maya?" Maya turns red and thinks: "R-Rebecca?! What is she doing here? Oh no, oh no..." Rebecca carefully opens the door, and checks inside. She sees Maya under her blankets, and quietly enters the room, Puts Maya's office chair near Maya's bed, and sits down. She gently places her head on the bulge in the blankets that's Maya. She flinches, and peaks her head from out of the blankets. Rebecca smiles, and says "There she is! Good morning Maya!" Maya turns red, and stuttered: "G-good m-morning.. R-Rebecca.." Maya sits up against the wall, but still hiding under her blankets. Only her head is visible, and she's still red. Rebecca asks her how she's feeling, and Maya stutters: "G-good.." Rebecca writes something down, and asks the thing Maya was fearing she would ask about. "I heard you had quite the breakdown a couple days ago... Would you like to talk about that?" Maya looks away, and tears start forming in her eyes. After a couple seconds she slightly shakes her head. Rebecca nods, and asks another question instead.

As Maya answers Rebecca's questions, she starts to feel less sacred and more comfortable. After several questions, she quietly says "I-I wanna talk about t-that night.." turning red again. Rebecca looks surprised, but quickly agrees. Maya starts talking, slightly stuttering: "M-mom forced m-me to come d-downstairs for d-dinner.. My sister h-had their friends o-over, and it j-just overwhelmed me.." Rebecca looks at Maya, and sees she's shaking. She stops writing, and asks if Maya wants to continue talking about it. Maya nods, and continues. "T-they never cared about how I feel.. or w-what I'm g-going through.." Maya starts crying as she finally breaks and tells Rebecca everything. She tells her how she's been feeling alone and useless for years, how nobody cared if she was okay, the abuse Mymy and Coco put her through.. Rebecca silently listens, occasionally writing something down, but mainly focusing her attention to Maya. When she's done, Rebecca asks if she wants to share what Mymy and Coco did to her. Maya thinks, and decides to tell Rebecca about one of the most traumatic events for her: Coco's 14th birthday party. "W-well.. one of the w-worst was Coco's birthday party..."

It was December 16th. Maya went downstairs and saw her parents decorated the entire house for Coco's birthday. They never put in this much effort for Maya. Feeling herself become angry, she runs back upstairs and slams the door. She refuses to leave her room the rest of the day, which is mostly accepted by her family, until the visitors arrive. Maya hears the commotion pick up downstairs, as more and more of Coco's friends arrive for the party. When everyone is here, they sit at the table, and bring Coco's birthday cake. Everyone erupts into "Happy Birthday" as Maya hides under her blankets trying not to get a panic attack. It was already hard enough that Coco was getting a better birthday than she ever had, but all these people being downstairs was overwhelming her. As they finish singing, they clap and cheer. They watch as Coco opens her presents, and she keeps yelling out in excitement, and thanking the person she got the present from. Maya can't stand it anymore, and puts her headphones on to blast her music. She puts on her playlist, and puts up the music until she can't hear the commotion downstairs anymore. She closes her eyes, and finally starts to calm down, until...

Maya's door suddenly swings open, and her mom and Mymy enter. Soei takes Maya's headphones off, and tells her to come join them downstairs. "N-no.. I-I'm g-good.." Maya stutters, but Soei grabs her wrist and takes her downstairs. Before heading downstairs, she hands Maya a gift to give to Coco. "Here, give this to Coco. She'll really appreciate it." Soei says, before

lightly pushing her towards the stairs, and Maya heads downstairs with shaking legs. She finds Coco, smiling and laughing with friends. She shuffles towards her, and softly says “H-here y-you go C-coco..” One of her friends looks at her, and whispers to her friend “She can talk?” They giggle as Coco thanks Maya for the present, and opens it. It’s some cute socks, and Coco says “Awwhhh thank you, Maya!” Mymy appears out of nowhere, and says “That’s cool and all, but I have a better present for you!” She gives Coco a big present. She opens it, and it’s matching hoodies for her and Coco. Coco screams out in joy and thanks Mymy. They both put their hoodie on, while Maya watches. “Whatever..” she thinks, as she tries to head back upstairs to her room, but Soei blocks her way, and tells her to stay for Coco’s party. Maya spends the rest of the party standing in the corner, trying to stay calm.

Rebecca stopped writing, and just listens to Maya with tears in her eyes. She asks if Maya wants a hug, and she nods. Rebecca hugs her, and Maya closes her eyes. It feels... nice. They continue talking as Maya slowly starts opening up to Rebecca. After two hours, Rebecca tells Maya the session is almost over, and if there’s anything else she would like to talk about. Maya thinks for a couple seconds, then shakes her head. Rebecca smiles, and thanks her for her time. Maya nods, and Rebecca leaves the room. Maya feels tired after talking so much, and lays back down to take a nap.

She wakes up from a notification from her phone. Half asleep, she unlocks her phone and reads it. It’s from Coco:

**Coco - 12:12 PM**

Hey Maya, We miss you. I hope Rebecca can help you, and you feel better soon. Love Coco.

Maya groans, and puts her phone away. She knows Coco is trying to fix her mistakes, but her constant messages were making things worse. She feels angry, and tries to go back to sleep but is unable to. She hears her family return to the house, and start dinner. Maya hides under her blankets, and puts on Youtube with her headphones on to drown out all the noise.

Coco checks her phone, and sees no response from Maya, and starts worrying. Mymy starts one of her long rants about the VOC again, and Coco forgets her worries about Maya as she listens to Mymy enthusiastically explain why the VOC was the best company ever. Mymy hops up from her chair, and stands on the table as she ends her speech, which makes Coco laugh. Ravi

yells at Mymy to get off the table. Soei shakes her head, and starts clearing the table for dessert. After dinner Coco returns to her room, and hops behind her computer. Her friends were annoying her about trying out a new game all week, and she finally bought the game and joined the call with her friends. "Coco! Who is cuter, Albert Einstein or Keanu Reeves??" Chloe yells. Coco laughs, and she joins in on the weird conversation.

Mymy heads back to her room, and sits behind her computer. She sees her friends playing one of her favorite games, so she messages them. They instantly start a call, and Mymy joins. "Mymy hii what's good!!" Kiki asks her, excited to see her best friend. Mymy grins, and starts one of her self-written speeches about the VOC. Kiki laughs, as her other friends tell her to shut up. Mymy joins their party, and they start the game.

Maya is sitting alone in her room, trying to ignore the laughter and talking coming from both her sisters' rooms. She sits behind her own computer, and turns on one of her RPG games. She logs on, and starts grinding for items to create a powerful staff. She puts a Backrooms explanation video on her second monitor, and spends the next few hours grinding away in her game. She feels calm, almost happy as she forgets her worries and just enjoys her game. She ends up grinding late in the night, and goes to sleep at 5 am. She yawns, saves her game, and leaves. Maya hops back into bed, and tries to fall asleep, but a certain thought keeps worrying her. "Mymy and Coco have friends to play with, while Maya plays alone." She starts feeling down, but manages to fall asleep after a couple minutes of stress and worry.

Morning rolls around, and Soei carefully walks into Maya's room to check on her. She wanted to see how her daughter was feeling after she met with Rebecca last night, and see if she was ready to go back to school. She sees Maya was sleeping, and is about to leave before she sees the scars on her arms. She loudly gasps, and calls Ravi into Maya's room. Coco and Mymy wake up from the yelling, and come to Maya's room to see what's happening while Ravi quickly enters. They all gasp in shock as they see Maya's arm, as Maya slowly wakes up. "Wh-whats happeni- OH FUCK" Maya shoots up, and quickly hides under her blankets. "W-what the fuck?!" Maya screams out in anger and fear. Soei's eyes fill with tears, as she asks why she did that. "D-did w-what?.." Maya asks angrily, pretending not to know what she was talking about. Soei pulls her arm out from under the blankets, and points at the obvious scars. Mymy, Coco and Ravi start crying too when they see her arm. Maya yanks her arm free, and hides it again. "S-so what?! I-it's not like y-you

care.. J-just leave m-me alone p-please..” Soei tells Coco and Mymy to get ready for school, and she and Ravi pull up chairs next to Maya’s bed to try and talk to her. “Please talk to us sweetheart.. We just wanna help you” Ravi says softly. Maya jumps up, and runs to the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

Her family tries desperately to get Maya to leave the bathroom, but she stays put. Eventually, they have to give up and head out for work and school, and Maya is finally alone again. She quickly goes to her room, and locks the door behind her. She feels scared of what her family were going to do to her once they returned. This fear quickly turns into anger as she screams out, and starts destroying everything in her room. Maya flips over her desk, throwing her keyboard against the wall, pushing over her bookcase making her books fly everywhere, she grabs Greg, and without thinking throws him out the window and punches her wall. The sudden pain in her hand makes her stop her rampage, as she realises what she had done. Maya lays down on her bed, but realises Greg is gone and starts panicking. She runs downstairs, out the door, and grabs Greg from the lawn. He’s covered in dirt, and Maya feels a strong sense of regret fill her. She goes into the kitchen, and washes Greg as best she can, before going back upstairs and laying down on her bed. Wave after wave of regret, anger and fear wash over her as she cries in her bed.

## **Chapter 9: “Maya’s Friend”**

Maya lays on her bed, and stares at the ceiling. It’s been a couple days since her family saw her scars, and she feels much worse than she already did. Her family’s constant attempts to talk to her weren’t helping either. Maya’s phone buzzes, as someone tries to call her again. She ignores it, but her phone goes off again. Annoyed, she looks at who’s calling her, and sees it’s Roos. Maya turns bright red, and fumbles, knocking her phone on the ground. Before she can reach it, the call ends, and a text message appears:

**Roos - 22:28 PM**

Hey Maya.. Are you okay?  
You didn’t answer your phone..

**Maya - 22:29 PM**  
im fine, thank you.  
fine\* fuck

**Roos - 22:29 PM**

Yeah, you totally seem fine girl

I know you're very closed off.. but what's going on?..

Maya writes a message, but quickly deletes it. She's mad at herself for not knowing what to say, and stares at the wall thinking of a response, when she hears another notification.

**Roos - 22:32 PM**

Maya?..

You there?

**Maya - 22:34 PM**

I-I'm fine..

**Roos - 22:34 PM**

Maya...

Stop lying to me, I'll just keep pestering you until you answer me.

Maya puts her phone down again, as her mind starts swarming with thoughts. "Why does Roos suddenly care?.. Is Coco controlling her? There's no way she would message Maya.. Is Roos just trying to get information from her to embarrass her?.. Does she know.. Maya has a crush on her- No that's impossible.. Is it?.." Maya feels her panic build up as she frantically looks for an answer, but none comes. She starts hyperventilating a little, until she hears a notification.

**Roos - 22:42 PM**

I went too far.. I'm sorry

I know how isolated and lonely you are.. but you seem like a cool person, and I wanna be your friend.

Think about it okay? Goodnight Maya.

Maya stares at that word: 'friend' "She wants to be... Maya's friend? But why?.. What are her intentions?.. It's probably Mymy trying to embarrass her or something.. Right?.." Maya doesn't respond, and spends the next hour thinking about Roos' messages. "...Does she want friends?.." That thought makes Maya tear up. Of Course she does, she never had anyone. Yet.. she never tried, and when someone else tried she shut them down instantly. "Is this.. an opportunity to make a friend?.." Maya whispers to herself, turning onto her side, and burying her face in Greg.

Coco is looking through the private messages between her and Maya. She just realised how one-sided their conversation was. Maya almost never replied, and when she did, it was a short answer like she didn't wanna talk.. Coco turns off her phone, and thinks about what happened two days ago. Roos pulled her to the side during lunch, and with a red face told her she might have feelings for Maya. Coco was super surprised, but immediately supported her friend. Roos had asked Coco for Maya's number, and to please not tell anyone. Coco promised she wouldn't, not even to Maya, and quickly gave her Maya's number. But now that she was thinking about it, was it such a good idea?.. Maya has never shown an interest in anything. Never tried socializing, let alone making a friend, and now.. Roos had promised her she would first befriend Maya, and try to help her come out of her shell before confessing her feelings, but Coco was worried her attempts would only make Maya isolate herself more. She grabbed her phone again, and sent Roos a quick message:

"I really appreciate you wanting to help Maya, but please don't rush and take it slow, okay? I'm scared she's only gonna isolate herself more.."

She presses send, and puts her phone down. A couple seconds later she hears a notification, and she checks her phone. Roos responded almost instantly, reassuring Coco she would do her best to not overwhelm Maya. A second message comes a couple seconds later, explaining she has other shy friends, so she knows how to handle them. Coco smiles, and sends:

"Thanks Roos, sleep well!"

Roos wishes her good night too, and Coco puts her phone away and heads to bed.

Maya wakes up, and looks at her clock: 13:49 PM. Jesus, she must really be skipping a lot of sleep... She yawns, and notices some new messages. Curiously, she checks the app. The first is from her mom, saying there are pancakes outside of her door. Maya suddenly realises how hungry she is, and quickly grabs them. They're cold and a bit stale, but Maya still devours them. When she's done, she puts the plate on her desk, and checks the other messages. She has two from Roos:

**Roos - 9:55 am**

Good morning!

**Roos - 12:02 PM**

Still sleeping? Are you waiting for a prince to kiss you or something?

Her comment makes Maya blush, and she giggles a little, but stops because she feels guilty for not answering sooner. Maya quickly replies:

**Maya - 12:03 PM**

I'm sorry..

**Roos - 12:03 PM**

There she is! It's okay sleeping beauty

Maya blushes deeply. "B-beauty? H-her?"

**Maya - 12:05 PM**

You must have me mistaken for another sleeping beauty.. Haha..

**Roos - 12:05 PM**

Nah, don't think I do

Maya starts to relax more. Talking online wasn't so bad, and Roos was funny. They spend the day talking, and although Roos is at school she manages to respond fairly quickly throughout the day. Although her thoughts kept telling her she was annoying Roos, she managed to drown them out for once, and enjoyed talking to her. Roos never tried to pry in Maya's personal life, or force her to talk. This was a refreshing change from her family's constant nagging and questions about her life. Sadly, the day can't go on forever.

**Roos - 14:24 PM**

Anyways.. the school day is almost over.  
Will I see you tomorrow?

Maya is surprised by the question, and thinks for a moment before answering

**Maya - 14:25 PM**

I don't know..  
My mental health is still shit.. haha..

**Roos - 14:25 PM**

Don't worry, I'll protect you from those

meanies lol

**Maya - 14:26 PM**

My knight in shining armor ❤️

Maya freezes, realising what she just sent. She sent it without thinking. What was Roos gonna think of her now?! She sees Roos write a message several times before deleting it, and finally she sends a response.

**Roos - 14:28 PM**

Alright Juliet, calm down

Maya's mood instantly changes. Roos sounded angry.. She starts worrying she ruined her first chance at a friend, and quickly types an apology.

**Maya - 14:29 PM**

Sorry..

**Roos - 14:29 PM**

It's okay, Maya. I'm heading home now, I'll see you later today, or otherwise tomorrow, okay?

**Maya - 14:30 PM**

Okay..

As Roos steps out of the school with Coco and her friends, she keeps glancing at her phone. She hopes Maya says something else, but no more messages appear. Feeling guilty, she puts her phone in her pocket, and quickly joins the group in their goodbye's, before heading home herself. At home, she greets her mom, and quickly heads upstairs to her room. She hops behind her computer, and opens the messaging app. No new messages from Maya... disappointed, she goes to her friend group, but stops. Maybe... Maya wants to play something? She clicks back on their dm's, and thinks of what to write. After a couple seconds she starts writing:

**Roos - 15:03 PM**

Hoi Maya

Would you like to play a game with me?

She waits for a response while watching Youtube, but no response comes. Feeling defeated, she joins her friends in the call and they start playing games. Coco notices Roos is less energized than she usually is, and private messages her.

**Coco - 15:39 PM**

Hey Roos, everything okay?  
You seem down

**Roos - 15:42 PM**

Yeah, I'm fine  
Just Maya

Coco looks worryingly at her message, and excuses herself before muting herself. She quietly heads to Maya's room, and opens her door. She's under her blankets, and Coco assumes she's sleeping and quietly leaves, but Maya is wide awake. Coco returns to her computer, and goes to Roos' messages.

**Coco - 15:47 PM**

I think she's okay.. just sleeping

**Roos - 15:48 PM**

Already?..

**Coco - 15:48 PM**

Yeah..  
She doesn't sleep a lot.

A sudden scream from one of their friends scares Coco and Roos, and they quickly return to the game, pretending like they were AFK.

Maya looks at Roos' message, before putting her phone away. Although she wanted to talk to Roos, she was afraid she would mess everything up again.. She pulls her blankets completely over her head, and sighs. Roos must hate her. She gets another text from her mom, telling her she has to go back to school tomorrow, she missed too many days and she could get kicked out if this continues. Maya feels her chest tighten, as a panic attack starts coming up. She tries to breathe, but she can only take quick shallow breaths. Tears fill her eyes as she tries to calm herself down, but nothing works. She closes her eyes, and takes deeper breaths, but it's no use. Her mind is filled with worst-case scenarios. "What if her class questions her absence? What if Roos hates her? What if Mymy or Coco tell everyone about her mental health?"

What if... she has another outburst.. or a bad dream.." The thoughts start to slightly fade, as Maya starts feeling more and more lightheaded. No matter how hard she tries, she can't control her breathing. Maya wants to scream, yell out for help, punch the wall, anything that would help. With a shaky breath she mutters over and over "I don't wanna go.. I don't wanna go.. I don't wanna go.." while her breathing becomes faster. She closes her eyes, and feels around for Greg. Her hand brushes him, and she quickly grabs him into a tight embrace. A couple seconds later she hears her door open, nothing, then close again. Maya instinctively holds her breath, trying not to draw attention to herself, but as soon as they leave she desperately breathes for air. She closes her eyes again, and presses her face into Greg, inhaling his smells. After a couple minutes, she finally calms down, and she lays on her back, staring at the ceiling. Although her breathing slowly went to normal, her chest still hurt, and she was drenched in sweat. Maya wipes the last tears from her eyes, and opens Youtube on her phone.

She hears her mom yell something, and Coco and Mymy's door open. Dinner time. When everyone's downstairs, Maya quickly heads to the bathroom. She locks the door, and slowly gets undressed. She sees her slender figure in the mirror, and quickly looks away. Maya turns on the water, and waits for it to warm up. Once it's to her desired temperature, she steps inside, closes her eyes, and lets the water hit her face and body. Although she hated showering, it did feel nice once she was actually in the shower. She lets the water wash away her worries and the filth from days of isolation. With a sigh, she turns off the water, and starts slowly washing herself, making sure to be careful with her arm. Once she's done, she washes away the soap, steps out of the shower, and gets dressed. Feeling a little better, she quickly heads back to her room, and locks the door. Back in the safety of her room, Maya lays down, and grabs her phone.

**Maya - 18:40 PM**

Sorry.. family stuff

Guess I'll see you at school tomorrow.. haha..

Roos was chilling in her room, waiting for her friends to return from dinner. While scrolling Tiktok, she gets the message from Maya. She turns her computer back on, and clicks on Maya's messages.

**Roos - 18:42 PM**

Can't wait!

Do you still wanna play something?

Maya looks at the message, and thinks for a moment. Her mind was screaming at her to say no, but a small voice within told her to try. With shaky hands, she responds:

**Maya - 18:43 PM**

O-okayy

**Roos - 18:43 PM**

Omg yay! Do you wanna call or just play?

**Maya - 18:45 PM**

C-call.. I n-need practice.. haha..

Almost instantly, Roos starts a call, and with shaking hands Maya picks up. She immediately mutes herself out of instinct, which surprises Roos. "Are you sure you wanna call, Maya?.." She asks, concerned. Maya sends her a message saying yes, and that she just needs to get the confidence to unmute. They start up Minecraft, as Roos talks to Maya while she responds in their chat. After starting a new world together, Maya takes a deep breath, unmutes, and softly says "H-hi.." "Oh my god, hi Maya! I'm so proud of you!" Roos says, making Maya blush. Maya mutes herself again, but occasionally unmutes herself to say something. About thirty minutes into their world, Maya fully unmutes, talking to Roos directly instead of using text. Roos makes sure Maya is comfortable, and does her best to give her encouragement to build her confidence. Feeling more and more confident, Maya starts talking more and a bit louder. Although her overthinking keeps flooding her mind with bad thoughts, she tries not to show it and be strong for Roos. Maya is almost talking at normal volume, when she hears her sisters come back upstairs from dinner. She immediately mutes herself again, scared of them hearing her. Roos notices Maya isn't talking anymore, and sees she's muted. In the chat she asks:

**Roos - 18:39 PM**

Hey, is everything okay?...

Maya stares at the message, thinking of what to say, and decides to be honest.

**Maya - 18:40 PM**

Sisters back from dinner..

**Roos - 18:40 PM**

Ohh right... Do you wanna stop playing for today?..

**Maya - 18:43 PM**

No.. Just hold on..

Maya takes a shaky breath, and unmutes herself again. "S-sorry.. I'm b-back.." she stutters, feeling like she ruined everything. Roos quickly reassures her that it's okay, and she can do what she wants. Maya feels a bit better, and quickly mumbles "I w-wanna keep p-playing.." Roos smiles, and quickly agrees. Although Maya is barely audible, they still have a good time. Roos goes out exploring the area for items, while Maya uses the wood from nearby trees to build them a little house. The whole time, Roos is making jokes making Maya laugh. She starts calming down again, and engaging more in the conversations, although she still stutters sometimes. When she's done with the house, Roos comes to check it out, and praises Maya for her amazing build. Although she knows it's very basic, she smiles from Roos' compliment. Sadly, Roos has to hop off because of school tomorrow, and she still has homework. Maya feels sad, but they agree to play again soon. "Bye Maya! Thank you for an amazing time today! Sleep well and see you tomorrow!" Roos says, and Maya answers: "T-thank you.. S-sleep well, s-see you t-tomorrow!" They both leave the call, and Maya lays back down on her bed. She feels... good. She finally made a friend.. Her thoughts of doubt seem so far away, while Maya slowly falls asleep.

Before starting on her homework, Roos sees several messages from her friends asking why she wasn't picking up. She ignores them, and messages Coco:

**Roos - 20:03 PM**

Just played a game with Maya, and we were in vc!!

**Coco - 20:04 PM**

No way!!!

Tell me everything!!

**Roos - 20:04 PM**

That's between me and Maya :p  
But we played Minecraft, and talked in vc.  
She was scared at first, but she spoke which is HUGE

But I have homework to do now, so I'll see you tomorrow, alright?

**Coco - 20:05 PM**

No worries! Cya tomorrow!

Coco turns off her phone, and stares at the ceiling with a slight smile. Maya did it. She made a friend. She feels so proud of Maya, and falls asleep with a smile.

## **Chapter 10: "First Day Back"**

**Please read Chapter 0, Part 2 before this so you have some context**

"A-and that's how I I-lost my first and o-only friend.." Maya says, finishing up her story. Maya was sitting on the couch, and across from her Rebecca was sitting in her chair. She had been listening to Maya and taking down notes, while Maya was telling her about that one field trip that ruined everything. She curls up in a ball on the couch, and buries her face in her knees in shame. She told Rebecca about everything that happened, except... her feelings. Maya was too afraid she would dismiss it, or think she was weird. "But... how did you feel about Emily, Maya?" Rebecca suddenly asks. Maya looks up surprised, but quickly turns red and mutters "I I-liked her a-as a f-friend.. n-nothing more.." Rebecca puts her notepad down, and moves her chair closer to Maya. "Maya... you don't have to lie, it's okay. This is a safe place for you, I won't judge you I promise." she says with a warm smile. Maya nods, and says: "F-fine.. I I-liked her.. B-but that's not n-normal r-right?.. Love c-can only b-be between a m-man and a w-woman.." Maya buries her face in her knees again, and sighs. "Have you ever look up what a lesbian is?" Rebecca asks curiously. Maya looks up, and shakes her head, even more embarrassed. Rebecca explains how love isn't only between a man and a woman. "You see, Maya. It's normal to not be 'straight'. Straight means love between a man and a woman, but that's not the only option. There are thousands of options! But the most common ones are for example being lesbian, which is love between two women. And I believe you might be a lesbian, Maya." Maya looks at Rebecca in disbelief. It explained so much, but she was also confused. "B-but.. i-in class w-we only get t-taught about s-straight r-relationships.." Maya mutters. Rebecca quickly answered: "That's all outdated dear. It's normal to not be straight! I would say it's even pretty cool!" she gives Maya a pat on her shoulder. She notices she flinched, but

decides to leave it for another session. “So... how did your first day back go?” Maya thinks for a moment, before starting to replay the events of that day...

Maya woke up at 5 am. She groaned, but couldn't go back to sleep. She slowly gets up, and starts her morning routine. It's quiet in the Schoppenboer house. No annoying sisters, no nagging mom, just Maya. After Maya finishes her routine, she heads back to her room and starts up her computer. She notices a message from Roos sent a few minutes ago, and clicks on it:

**Roos - 5:39 AM**

Good morning!

“Wait wait, who's Roos?” Rebecca interrupts Maya. Maya turns bright red, and stutters “M-my f-friend...” Rebecca smiles, and writes something down while saying: “That's amazing, Maya! I'm so proud of you!” Maya weakly smiles awkwardly. “Sorry for interrupting, go ahead.” Rebecca says, letting Maya continue her story.

Maya looked at the message, and then sends back:

**Maya - 5:44 AM**

G-good morningg

She closes the app, and finds the RPG game she's been grinding the hell out of lately. She starts it up, and opens Spotify so she can lock in. Her mind swarms with tactics and tasks she needs to do while she presses play.

A couple hours later, Maya is just finishing off a boss when she glances at the clock. 8:11 AM, shit. Maya quickly finishes the boss raid, saves and turns off the computer. Her school starts at 8:30, and it takes twenty minutes to bike. She grabs her things, and runs downstairs. Her mom tries to greet her, but Maya quickly grabs her jacket and runs out of the house. She jumps on her bike, and desperately bikes to her school. Maya doesn't have time to find a quiet parking spot, so she just parks her bike, and quickly runs into the school. She glances at her phone: 8:28 AM. She arrives at her class, but the bell rings before she can enter the classroom. “You're late, Maya” Mr. Kepers says, their Biology teacher. Maya mutters an apology, and quickly enters the classroom. The teacher sighs, and closes the door to start his class.

Maya is quietly panting, trying not to draw attention to herself, although it was no use. Every student stared at her while she entered, like they always do when someone enters late, but now they were looking at Mr. Kepers as he starts writing something on the board: "Working of the heart" Maya groans, and puts her head on her arms, and almost immediately falls asleep. She gets startled awake by a soft stab in her side. She jumps up, and manages to change her yelp into a cough. "Thank you for your input, Maya. Now, this part here is the..." Maya turns red, as she sees a couple students looking at her and giggling. She looks down at her table, but someone taps her arm. She looks next to her, and sees Roos. "Well good morning to you too! I'm sorry for scaring you, I didn't think you were sleeping..." Roos says, smiling at Maya. Maya blushes, and quickly says "G-good m-morning.." She lays her head back on her arms, and tries to listen to the teacher, but she can't focus. Roos senses she's not in the mood to talk, so she stays quiet, and doodles in her notebook. After she's done, she shows Maya the drawing. It's them as Minecraft characters, with the house Maya built in the background. Maya looks at it, and says "Wow.. T-that's amazing.." "Here, you can keep it!" Roos says, ripping the page out her notebook and handing it to Maya. She's not sure what to do with it, so she puts it safely in her bag. "T-thank y-you.." she stutters, mad at herself for such a shitty attempt at thanking her. Roos smiles, and pays attention to the class. Maya lays her head back down on her arms, and doses off into sleep.

The bell rings, and everyone puts their stuff away and gets up, except Maya. She's asleep, and Roos is standing with her bag over her shoulder, unsure what to do. Mr. Kepers looks up, sighs and yells "Maya!" Maya immediately wakes up, turning red. "At least try to stay awake okay? School is for learning, not sleeping. Do that in your own time" Maya looks away embarrassed as she grabs her bag and quickly leaves the classroom. Roos tries to run after her, but she's too quick. She sees Maya walking to their next class, but a bunch of second graders block her path. When she manages to squeeze through, Maya's gone. She finds her at their next class, Dutch. She tries sitting next to her, but Coco excitedly greets her, and Roos is forced to talk to her. Mymy is sitting with her friend, so Coco has a free seat, and Roos reluctantly takes it. Maya was watching her talk to Coco, and her fears were proven. Roos wasn't her friend, just Coco's. Coco stole another friend from her. She lays down on her arms again, and stares at the front of the class, as Roos looks over at her. She can't tell what Maya is thinking, but she notices how everyone seems to avoid the empty seat next to Maya like a virus. Their teacher walks in, and quickly starts her class.

They play a small game, the teacher puts a sentence on the board with one of the word(s) highlighted, and whoever successfully guesses if the word ends with a 'd', 't', 'dd' or 'dt' gets a point. The person with the most points at the end would get a chocolate bar. The whole class gets excited, as they all yell out their answers at the same time. Maya puts her hood up, and buries her face in her arms. She never participated in such classes, she was too afraid to. She's about to fall asleep again, when she hears her name. "This one's only for Maya." the teacher calls out, shushing the class. Maya shoots up, feeling her body tremble and her heart start to race as the all too familiar pain comes back in her chest. "U-um.." she stutters, with all eyes on her. Maya looks at the board, but can't think straight from the stress. She hears Coco whisper something, but ignores it. She takes a deep shaky breath, and stutters: "U-um.. 'dt'?.. The class breaks out in laughter, but the teacher shushes them up. "Very close, Maya, but not quite. Would you like another try?" Maya looks at her shoes, and slightly shakes her head in shame. The teacher gives another student the chance, and she says "'d' of course, miss." "Very good! One point for Cato!" the teacher says, putting a line next to her name. She's in the lead for the chocolate bar, along with a couple other students. Maya is the only student who ends up with zero points. There's a tie between Cato, Mymy and Rens. The teacher gives them one more sentence, which will determine the winner. Rens pushes up his glasses, and looks at the board ready to answer the question. Mymy is being herself, making a big deal out of it. "Help me peasants, and our victory shall be shared!!" she yelled, standing on her desk. "Get down, Mymy! Now are you three ready?" Rens nods, and Cato and Mymy confidently say "Yup!". She puts the sentence on the board, and the three remain quiet for a couple seconds. Then suddenly, Rens speaks up, and says "dt". The teacher smiles and nods, and the class erupts into cheers. Maya gets started by the noise and quickly looks up. Thankfully it's not aimed at her, so she lays her head back down. The teacher hands Rens the chocolate bar as the bell rings. Everyone packs their things, while Maya waits for everyone to leave. She notices Roos is still in the classroom, but ignores her and quickly leaves.

Once again, Roos tries to follow Maya, but she's too quick. She walks to the bathroom on the second floor, and locks herself in one of the stalls. She unlocks her phone, and opens a mobile game to try and distract herself. It's the mobile version of the RPG she's been playing, and although she was much less effective on her phone, she still manages to get some things done.

Roos looks around the lunch room, but doesn't see Maya. She's never seen her eat lunch here, and wonders where she goes during the breaks. She finds Coco, and asks her if she knows where Maya is. She shakes her head, and invites Roos to sit with them, but Roos declines. She goes looking for Maya, but can't find her anywhere. Feeling a bit worried now, she tries texting her, but she gets no response. Roos decides to try the school yard and walks over to the main entrance.

Maya is fixed on her game. She's defeating an important boss which will grant her the last crystal she needs to create the Omni Staff, the most powerful weapon in the game. Just when she's about to deal the final blows, a message on her phone distracts her, causing her character to die. Maya groans in frustration, and mutes the chat the message came from. Several days of progress down the drain. it would take her forever to get all those potions back... Maya sighs, and closes the game. That's more sleepless nights trying to get her stuff back. Just then, the bell rings, and Maya, feeling angry, leaves the bathroom and heads to her next class. She sees Roos sitting in her usual spot, but with a free seat next to her. She ignores it, and sits on the other side of the room, far in the back. She puts her hood back over her head, and stares straight ahead at the empty board. Roos is about to get up and invite her to sit next to her, when Coco takes her seat. "Hey Roos! Is everything alright? You've been avoiding us all day." Coco asks, concerned for her friend. "Y-yeah.. I'm fine, sorry." Roos quickly mutters, sitting back in her chair. Before Coco can ask more, her other friends come in and sit near Coco so they can talk. Roos looks back at Maya. Her face is barely visible, all she can see is her iconic red hoodie. She wants to do something, but the teacher walks in so she's forced to pay attention. Maya barely moves throughout the class, but nobody except Roos seems to notice.

Maya finally managed to drown out her classmates talking, and escapes into her mind. In her mind, she's playing her game, getting all her stuff back. It turns into a dream as Maya falls asleep. She's dressed as her character, "NightWing The Sorcerer". Nightwing starts walking as her cloak sways behind her. She arrives in Alkazar, one of the many towns in the game, and heads for the potion shop. Luckily, she saved enough money to buy a couple of the really expensive potions she needs. While she contemplates which potions to buy first, a boss alert appears over her head. She presses on it, and it shows: "THE CREATURE OF CHAOS SPOTTED NEAR MOOSEWOOD". Nightwing quickly exits the shop, and fast travels to Moosewood using her wand. She

needs its scales and eyes for some potions, which are expensive to buy. She's joined by a couple faceless heroes, who are doing their own quests.

The battle begins, and Nightwing sends two fireballs straight into The Creature's chest. The other faceless heroes suddenly disappear, and it's just Nightwing left. She drinks a potion of strength, and uses her wand to fly up to the roof of a building for a better shot. She aims, but doesn't see The Creature's tail swing at her from the side. She's hit off the building, and loses almost all her health. Nightwing tries to drink a potion of healing, but all her items seem to disappear. Maya, no longer dressed as Nightwing, looks up at The Creature, who has transformed into Mymy. With a laugh she says: "Wow, you can't even beat a video game. You're pathetic, Maya." Nightwing tries to get up, but Mymy crushes Nightwing under her boot, and Maya suddenly wakes up. She carefully looks around her, but nobody seems to notice her sudden movement. She lays her head back down on her desk, but can't fall back asleep.

Rebecca finishes writing, and asks "So you were dreaming about your video game?" Maya nods, feeling embarrassed. "And Mymy killed you... is that maybe a metaphor for something?" Maya looks up, but shakes her head. "I-I don't know w-what it means.." she says quietly. Rebecca nods understandingly, and asks Maya to continue. She skips a bit ahead to the end of the day, as nothing interesting happened.

Maya is walking out of her final class, and softly groans. Today was so shit, she just wanted to head home and start the long grind in her game. She sees several students near her bike, and whispers "Fuck.." She tries grabbing her bike, but they're in the way. Not knowing what to do, Maya grabs her phone, and notices the message sent earlier. She checks it, and it's from Roos:

**Roos - 11:03 AM**

Hey Maya, where are you?  
I wanna sit with you

Maya is about to respond, when the students near her bike finally bike away. She quickly grabs her key, and unlocks her bike. She's about to bike off when she hears a yell behind her: "Wait up, Maya!" she turns around, and sees Coco, Mymy and their friends walking towards her. Maya thinks "Fuck.." when she sees Roos walking with the group. Her eyes light up as she sees Maya, and she waves at her. The rest of the group split up as they walk to their

bikes, while Mymy and Coco walk to Maya. “How was your day, Maya?” Coco asks with a smile. Maya mutters something as they grab their bikes. As Maya starts biking back home, Coco appears on her side, and starts talking to her instead of Mymy. Maya feels her anger return, but doesn’t say anything. Coco starts ranting about some stupid tournament she has that weekend, and how nervous she was. “The social one, nervous. Makes sense” Maya thinks grumpily. “...but I still feel like I can improve. I’m not good enough for the team yet-” Coco says, but her voice trails off when she sees Maya’s face. Her hands are tightly gripping the steering wheel, as she fights back tears. “Maya?..” Coco quietly asks, but Maya looks at her, and yells “SHUT UP, ORPHAN!” before biking away quickly. Coco and Mymy try to follow her, but they fall behind pretty quickly. Maya keeps biking, tears falling freely now. She takes a shortcut through a rough street, and makes it to her house before her sisters. She runs upstairs, and slams her door shut, ignoring her parents' greeting. A couple minutes go by, and she hears her sisters return home. Maya buries her face in her pillow, and tries to drown out the noise. She screams in her pillow, shocking everyone downstairs.

“T-that was my day..” Maya finishes speaking, and Rebecca notes the last things down, and looks at Maya with a hint of concern. “Are all your days similar to this?...” she asks, and Maya nods. “It’s just all one constant panic attack..” she adds. Rebecca nods while writing, and says: “Well... sadly we’re out of time, but we’ll talk more next time, okay?” Maya nods, and gets up to leave the room. She meets her mom in the waiting room, as she gets up to drive Maya back home. She wants to ask about her appointment, but something in her is telling her to leave Maya alone. They drive back home in silence, as Maya’s mind starts replaying the events of the last few days. It was Friday now, and Maya was glad she didn’t have to go back to school tomorrow. School has been rough on her mental health, and she was glad she had the chance to share it with someone. Suddenly, Soei asks: “You’ve been wearing the same hoodie for years, maybe it’s time for some new clothes?” Maya looks at her startled, and before thinking responds: “N-no..” Soei just nods, as she keeps driving in silence. Maya stares out the window as she calms down from the shock. Regret from her quick answer started flooding her mind. Of course she wanted new clothes, but she couldn’t. The red hoodie had become part of her image, and changing her look would only stress her out more. Maya, feeling sad, wondered if she would be stuck wearing that stupid hoodie for the rest of her life.

## **Chapter 11: “Revelations”**

It's Saturday now, and the Schoppenboer family is sitting at the table for breakfast. They're discussing a plan for the day, and Coco seems especially eager to get the day started. Coco takes out her phone, and sends Roos a quick message:

**Coco - 8:43 AM**

We're heading to the shopping mall to get Maya some nice clothes  
She's been locked up in her room again though..  
Can you please check up on her?..

**Roos - 8:46 AM**

She's been ignoring my texts..  
Idk what to do..

Maya is locked up in her room as always, hiding under the blankets. The last few days have been a lot for her, and she's trying to just recover from it all. She finally feels a little calmer, and quietly sighs in content. She hears a notification noise, which scares Maya. She groans, and grabs her phone. She opens the chat and sees a message from her mom:

**Soei - 8:40**

We're heading out for a few hours, will you be okay home alone?

Maya feels relieved. She'll have the house to herself! She reacts to the message with a thumbs up, and exits their chat. She notices Roos' chat, and a wave of guilt washes over her. She completely forgot to unmute her days later... She definitely hates her now.. Maya quickly opens the chat, and reads her messages:

**- May 27 -**

**Roos - 17:32**

Heyyy Maya  
Do you wanna play Minecraft again?

**Roos - 18:09**

Maya?...

**- May 28 -**

**Roos - 9:14 AM**

I noticed you don't look okay.. Have you been sleeping Maya?..

**Roos - 12:16 PM**

Please respond

I'm really worried..

**- May 29 -**

**Roos - 8:47 AM**

I heard from Coco you're locked up in your room again..

It's okay if you don't wanna talk, but please let me know if you're okay..

Maya stares at the messages, as wave after wave of guilt wash over her. She definitely fucked up her one chance of making an actual friend..

Ravi enters the parking lot, and tries finding a good spot with help from Soei. They park the car, and everyone gets out. Coco sends one final message, before putting her phone away. She brought her own money to get Maya something nice. Mymy pulls out her wallet, and pulls out her debit card from ING. It has the VOC flag in the background. "Check! I'm ready!" She tells her dad. "Remember Mymy, we're not here for our own shopping. We're here to get Maya something nice.", Ravi tells her. Mymy rolls her eyes, and starts walking towards the exit of the parking lot. Her family quickly follows her, and Ravi pays for 2 hours of parking. Coco is tugging on his sleeve, trying to get him to hurry up. "Alright alright, almost done." Ravi says with a slight chuckle. He finishes paying, and puts his credit card back in his wallet, before following his wife outside and towards the mall. "Remember, we're here for Maya, not yourself. Our main goal is clothes, but if you see something nice you can get it as a present. Mymy and Coco nod, and run up ahead, looking into several stores through the display glass. Coco thinks what would look good on Maya, but her mind is blank. She realises how little she actually knows about her sister. She walks towards Mymy, who's looking at some Dutch soccer shirt, and asks her if she knows any interests Maya has. Mymy thinks for a couple seconds, and then shakes her head. "Nothing.." she admits, "She's been so distant, I know nothing about her.." They walk back to their parents, and ask them if they know anything about Maya that could help them pick a present. Ravi thinks for a long time, but Soei almost immediately answers. "She was obsessed with the Second World War as a kid... I don't know if she's still interested in that, but maybe that's something?" Ravi nods and adds: "And she likes that one RPG game, "Heroes of Zamar" I believe it's called... She

asked for it all year, and she practically screamed when we got it for her for Sinterklaas.” “So... World War Two and an RPG game.. that doesn't narrow the options much” Coco says disappointed. She wishes she knew what Maya liked, and then remembers something else. “She likes anime.” Coco tells her parents, and Mymy nods. “I've seen her watch her shows all the time, but I don't know what the titles are, just that they-” Mymy quickly covers her mouth, and whispers “Shut up” before telling her parents “Yeahh, no idea what she watches.” Her parents look at her suspiciously, but quickly brush it aside. They discuss their plan, and Coco and Soei, and Mymy and Ravi split up in teams to explore the large mall, and find something to buy. They agree to meet back at the bit fountain in the middle in 3 hours.

Coco and Soei enter their first store: Jack and Jones. It's where Soei got Maya the red hoodie she always wears. They look around for a bit, but don't find anything so they leave. They head to another store, and Coco immediately spots something. She runs off, and comes back with a red hoodie with open shoulders. “It's like her normal hoodie, but slightly more revealing. Maybe it can help her come out of her shell” Coco explains, and Soei is immediately on board. They look around a bit longer, but find nothing else, so they head towards the checkout to pay for the hoodie. As they leave the store, Coco spots a video game store, and tells Soei that a new video could be nice for her. Soei agrees, and they walk over to the store.

Mymy and Ravi look around, but can't find anything to buy. They walk past a Media Mart, and Mymy suggests a new monitor or mouse. Ravi thinks, and says: “How about new headphones? Her current ones are practically falling apart.” Mymy nods, and they enter the store. The store is huge, and packed with customers. Ravi and Mymy head towards the electronics section, and look for some headphones. “Jesus, these prices...” Ravi mumbles, as Mymy is trying on different brands. “These are comfortable, and not too flashy!” Mymy says excitedly, showing her dad the headphones. The headphones were red with black padding, and had extra padding for comfort. Ravi smiles, and grabs the box, and Ravi and Mymy start heading towards the checkout.

Maya is laying on her back, staring at the ceiling. Her mind has taken over, and is playing worst case scenarios in her mind. Roos blocking her, Roos ignoring her, Roos laughing at her with Coco and Mymy.. Everyone hates her, and she gets kicked out... Maya quickly sits up, closing her eyes. T-that wouldn't happen.. r-right?.. “GET OUT OF MY HEAD!” Maya screams, slamming her fists against her head. She falls backwards onto her bed, and

covers her head with her arms, and curls up as she cries. "I'm sorry Roos.." she repeats, over and over and over, as the guilt slowly consumes her. A notification from her phone suddenly breaks her free, as Maya grabs her phone with shaking hands. It's Roos... Maya feels her chest start to hurt, as her heart goes wild. Another panic attack. What did she say?.. Does she hate her?.. Maya is too afraid to check the message, but her curiosity forces her to.

**Roos - 9:12 AM**

I'm sorry for spamming you.. You don't have to answer me, it's okay. Please let me know if you need someone to talk to, okay?..

Maya feels her panic attack slightly subside, but her anxiety is still high. With shaking hands she writes a message back, but deletes it halfway through. Instead she writes back a short message:

**Maya - 9:30 AM**

I'm fine..

Sorry..

Maya puts her phone down, but immediately hears a notification. She grabs her phone again, and looks at the message.

**Roos - 9:30 AM**

Thank god..

I know you're not okay.. but I won't push you <3

**Maya - 9:32 AM**

I don't know what to do..

**Roos - 9:32 AM**

Maya..

Would you like to call? You don't have to talk, I just don't want you to be alone

**Maya - 9:35 AM**

Ig..

Roos starts a video call, which surprises Maya, but she hesitantly picks up, and immediately turns off her camera. Roos appears on the screen, with her room in the background. "Hey Maya. You don't have to, but I would like to see your face. There's a short silence, and Roos quickly adds: "You don't have to! I won't force you I promise" Suddenly Maya turns her camera on, and looks at the camera. She looks worse than at school yesterday, and Roos visibly

gasps. Maya looks away, and hides under her blankets. Roos immediately realises she made a mistake, and tries to fix it. "N-no Maya! I'm sorry for gasping, you look good!" Roos blurts out without thinking. She realises what she said, and turns red. Maya lifts up her blankets a bit, so she can see Roos' face. She notices how red she is, and she turns red too. "A-anyways.. I t-think you look g-great! I wanna t-talk with you, please c-come out" Roos stutters, trying to hide her embarrassment. This makes Maya softly giggle, as she pokes her head out from under her blankets. "H-here I am.. W-what did y-you wanna t-talk a-about?.." Maya mutters, sitting upright, but hiding her body with her blankets. "You, silly!" Roos answers, regaining her composure. "What's going on, Maya?.." Maya looks away, with sadness on her face. "Y-you don't have to tell me, it's okay!" Roos quickly says, but Maya takes a deep breath, thinks for a couple seconds, and starts talking.

"Everything.. Just.. Everything.. I-"

Tears start falling as Maya breaks, and finally tells someone what's wrong. Roos looks a bit surprised, but she listens to every word, and lets Maya speak.

"E-everything f-fucking hurts.. I've a-always b-been the o-outcast.. I've n-never been good enough for a-anyone!.. C-coco is fucking perfect at e-everything she d-does, and Mymy is a p-psychopath, b-but d-does it stop her f-from making friends?! F-fuck no! M-meanwhile I sit in my f-fucking room all f-fucking day! I h-have n-nobody.. I-I'm b-broken.. I-I'll n-never be g-good enough..

Maya loses her voice as she breaks down in tears, unable to continue. Roos is silent for a couple seconds, processing everything Maya said. She knew Maya was broken, but she could have never guessed she was this broken.. Maya is back hiding under her blankets, her automatic instincts kicked in to hide her feelings. "Hey Maya?.." Roos carefully asks. Maya slightly peaks out, only her face visible. "I-is it okay if I come over?.. I wanna be here for you." Maya is surprised by the request, and quietly nods. Roos smiles, and says "I'll be there really soon okay? Just hold tight!" She hangs up, and quickly puts some clothes on and runs downstairs. She yells at her mom "I'm heading to a friend's house be back later!" before grabbing her coat and running out the door. 15 minutes later, she arrives at Maya's house, and nervously knocks. Coco and Soei leave the store with a plastic bag in Coco's hand with a gift card for "Heroes of Zamar" for Maya. Coco puts the new sweater in the bag

with the gift card, and asks her mom which store they should go to next. “How about... a new plushie friend?” Soei suggests, and Coco’s face lights up. “Yess! She loves that blobfish, maybe having another could help her!” They head to a toy store, and walk towards the plushie section. They walk up and down the aisle, looking for the perfect plushie for Maya. They find a long cat one, that looks like her old cat. Coco screams in excitement when they spot it, and a couple other shoppers stare at her. They bring it to the register and Coco buys it with her money. She wanted it to feel extra special for Maya. Leaving the store, they high five for a mission accomplished. They decide to go back to the fountain and wait for Mymy and Ravi.

Mymy and Ravi are in a supermarket, looking at the snack aisle. Maya has never bought snacks for herself, so they’re not sure what she would like. “How about... these?” Ravi asks, holding up a pack of Autodrop. Mymy thinks, but shakes her head. Ravi puts the Autodrop back, and says: “Well, I have one last idea.. but you won’t like it” Mymy slowly turns to him, and says: “No... Not that. Anything but that!” “Mymy” Ravi says sternly, “This is to help Maya. If you really loved her, you would do it.” “You filthy Belg...” Mymy whispers, before yelling out “Fine.. for Maya!” She runs off, and comes back with a packet of stroopwafels. “You owe me for this!” she says to her dad, handing him the packet. Ravi smiles, and puts it in the shopping cart. Ravi gets a text from Coco, telling them to meet Coco and Soei at the fountain for lunch. Ravi replies “Alright, be there soon.” and he and Mymy walk towards the front to pay.

A couple seconds later Maya appears at the door, wearing her signature hoodie with the hood over her head. “Hey Maya! Thank you for letting me come over!” Roos says, hugging her. This startles Maya, but it feels nice. They head up to Maya’s room, and Maya opens the door. It’s a mess, and Maya quietly apologizes, but Roos says it looks fine. “You should see my room, girl” she says with a giggle. Maya lays down on her bed, and hides under her blankets again. Roos sits in her desk chair, and looks around her room. She notices Greg on the floor, and asks “Who’s this little guy?” Maya turns red, and immediately grabs him and hides him. “N-nobody.. J-just a plushie.. haha..” Roos smiles at her, and asks Maya if she wants to share more with her. Maya thinks, but shrugs. “I-it’s not I-like you care.. n-nobody does..” Maya quietly says, but Roos hears it. “Of course I care!” Roos quickly says, scooting her chair closer to Maya’s bed. “I’m sorry if I’ve been pushy.. but I wanna be your friend. I wanna help you, Maya.” Maya turns red, and looks away, but Roos launches forwards, and hugs Maya tightly saying “I’m here for you Maya, I

promise.” Maya feels her tears return, but manages to stop herself from crying. Thankfully Roos didn’t notice, she thinks, as Roos pulls away from the hug, and lets Maya sit back down on her bed. After a couple seconds of silence, Maya quietly says: “I hate my family..” unable to look at Roos directly. Roos nods seriously, and Maya sees she really cares. “C-coco always tries to make me socialize.. A-and Mymy a-always embarrasses m-me..” Maya carefully says, afraid Roos was gonna judge her, but that never comes.

As Maya talks and Roos listens, Maya starts feeling a little more confident, and says more and more. Years of being alone and having nobody to share her pain with, she finally felt truly safe with someone. Roos was an amazing listener. She chose her words very carefully, and made sure Maya knew that she cared. She let Maya do most of the talking, but never forced her to tell her anything. Not that that was needed, as Maya kept talking all by herself. Maya’s posterior slowly changes. She goes from hiding under her blankets, to sitting on the edge of her bed facing Roos. She was still hiding behind Greg, but Roos didn’t mind. Maya keeps talking, telling Roos about her insecurities, past experiences, the anxiety and fear she felt every day..

Coco sees Mymy and Ravi appear, and waves at them excitedly. They regroup, and decide to get some lunch before heading home. They go to a small restaurant, and Coco and Mymy show each other what they bought Maya while Ravi and Soei talked. They were discussing how they should give Maya her presents, and Coco and Mymy quickly join the discussion. They decided Coco would give her the presents, but tell Maya it was from Coco and Mymy. As they finish eating, Ravi gets up to pay the bill, and they leave the restaurant and head back to the car. The car ride back home is a lot more lively than the ride to the mall. They’re all singing along to the songs playing on the radio, and Mymy does silly voices that makes everyone laugh. Soei parks the car in their driveway, and everyone steps out. They notice a bike outside of their house, and everyone freezes. That wasn’t Maya’s bike... who was visiting them? They quickly enter the house, but the living room looks the same as when they left. Coco heads upstairs with the gifts for Maya, while Mymy and her parents follow behind.

Maya has calmed down, and they’re talking about random things. When they run out of things to talk about, Roos asks Maya the question she wanted to ask for a long time. “So, um.. d-do you wanna b-be my f-friend?” she asks nervously. Maya looks up in surprise. As thousands of bad thoughts swarm her mind, but she just quietly nods. Roos screams out in happiness, hops on

Maya's lap without thinking, and hugs Maya. In that moment, the door opens, and Coco stands frozen in the doorway. Roos and Maya freeze too, turning towards the door red as a tomato. Coco quickly yells out "SORRY" and slams the door closed. Roos, realising she was sitting with her knees on Maya's lap, quickly gets off and sits back in her office chair. Maya is still frozen, red from embarrassment. She feels her body tense up, as her heart is going wild. No.. No.. Please.. Not now.. Maya can feel her anxiety rise as her breathing becomes quick and shallow. She becomes light headed, and her body shakes. Roos notices something is wrong, and quickly walks over to her. "Maya?.. What's wrong?.." she quietly asks, although she can probably guess what was wrong. Maya starts hyperventilating more, trying to calm herself down, but it doesn't work. Roos hugs her again, and says "It's okay, Maya. You're safe. I'm here." Maya closes her eyes, and she slowly but surely calms back down. All she's left with is the guilt and embarrassment. "I-I'm s-sorry.." she stutters, while covering her face. Roos sits down next to her, and comforts Maya assuring her it's okay.

Coco is standing frozen in front of Maya's door with her hand on the handle, her face red as her mind tries to process what she just saw. Her family looks at her in confusion, asking what happened. Mymy tries to enter Maya's room, but Coco stops her. "D-don't go in! Maya's.. um.. sleeping!" Mymy looks sceptical, but gives up and goes to her room. Coco brings her parents to her room, and quickly shuts the door. In a whispered voice she explains what happened. Ravi and Soei look at each other, and tell Coco not to let Maya know that they're aware. "We need to wait for Maya to be comfortable to come out to us, okay?" Coco nods, and her parents leave the room. They go back to Maya's room, and Coco softly knocks on the door. After a couple seconds they hear Maya quietly say: "C-come in.." They enter, and see Maya sitting on her bed with her back against the wall, and Roos sitting in her office chair at the other end of the room. Maya is a little red, but apart from that there's no sign of what just happened. "Hey, Maya! I'm sorry for barging in, but we got you some gifts!" Coco says cheerfully, and she hands Maya two big bags. Maya takes the bags with shaking hands, and her parents go downstairs to start making dinner, and to give Maya some space. She opens the first bag, and pulls out a red hoodie. It looks a lot like the ones she's wearing, but when she unfolds it she sees the shoulders are open. "We thought it could help you get out of your shell a little! You know, when you're ready of course!" Coco explains, and Maya just nods. She pulls the second thing out of the bag, and sees a new pair of headphones. They match her hoodie, and are extra comfortable. "T-thank y-you.." Maya stutters, putting the box down, and

grabbing the second bag. She pulls out the gift card, and holds it in her hands. That's her favorite game.. How- Maya looks up at Coco, who's smiling at her. Mom told us how much you like the game! We thought it could help you in your epic quests!" She says, and immediately cringes at what she said. Maya quietly giggles, and puts it on her bed. She then grabs the last thing: a packet of stroopwafels. Maya glances at Coco who's smiling, and grins. They both know about the inside joke. Roos looks at them and asks what's so funny. "Oh, nothing!" Coco says innocently. "Oh! I have one more gift for you! This ones from me" she leaves the room, and comes back a few seconds later with the cat plushie. Maya freezes with the packet of stroopwafels in her hands. All the memories of her cat come flooding back, and Maya can't hold it in anymore. "Tada!- Maya?.." Coco's smile fades, as she notices something's wrong, and then it clicks. She puts the plushie on Maya's bed, and hugs her tightly. "I'm so sorry about your cat, Maya.. I didn't mean to hurt you so much.. I'm so sorry.." Maya starts crying hard. The pain of the loss of her cat hitting her hard. She cried for several minutes in Coco's arms, as Coco comforted her. Roos, not wanting to interfere with their bonding, quietly watches from her chair.

Maya starts to calm down, and Coco breaks off the hug. "I love you, Maya." she says softly. Maya can tell from her voice she means it. Coco leaves the room, leaving Roos and Maya alone together. Maya grabs the cat plushie with her eyes closed, gently rocking back and forth. Roos slowly stands up, and sits down next to Maya. "Are you okay, Maya?.."

## **Chapter 12: "A Day Of Firsts"**

Roos looks at the time on her phone: 18:43 PM. "Shit! I'm sorry Maya one moment" Roos says while standing up, and unlocking her phone. While typing something, she asks Maya: "Hey, is it okay if I stay the night? I wanna be here for you" without looking up from her phone. Maya is surprised by the request. She hasn't had anyone outside of her family in her room for years, and now.. Roos wants to stay the night? Roos doesn't hear a response, and quickly looks up from her phone at Maya. She hasn't moved, and is just staring straight ahead, deep in thoughts. "Maya?.. We don't have to, I-I can go home-" Maya snaps out of it, and without thinking says "N-no! Y-you can s-stay t-the night if you w-want.." Maya hugs Roos, and she realises Maya really wanted her to stay. She smiles, and says "Alright, I'll ask my mom. But how do you wanna ask yours?" Maya shrugs, still clinging on to Roos. Roos thinks for a moment, and pulls out of Maya's hug and helps her sit back down on her bed.

“How about, I eat dinner downstairs, and I can ask them? You won’t have to ask, and you won’t have to eat dinner with them!” Maya thinks for a moment, and then nods. “Alright! I’ll head downstairs now, okay? I’ll be back soon, don’t worry!” Roos leaves the room, quietly closing the door behind her, and starts heading towards the stairs.

Soei was downstairs cooking dinner with help from Coco, while Ravi was watching tv. Mymy is always playing games in her room. Soei and Coco were quietly discussing what Coco saw in Maya’s room. “Maya had one friend in elementary school, her name was Emily I think.” Soei tells Coco. “They seemed pretty close, but I never really met her. And then one day, they stopped talking completely.” Coco nods with a sad expression on her face. She didn’t know Maya well enough to make her own judgments. Maya was already quiet and kept to herself when Mymy and Coco moved in, and it only got worse from there. She knew Roos was a lesbian from a drunken game of Truth or Dare, and that she had feelings for Maya. “Um.. mom?” Coco hesitantly asks. “Yes, sweetie?” Soei answers, looking at her daughter with a slight hint of concern. “Um.. Roos is a lesbian-” Soei freezes, but quickly recovers. She thinks for a couple seconds, and says: “That confirms it, right? Our Maya likes girls...” Coco quickly adds: “Roos has feelings for Maya, but Maya doesn’t know. I think they’re just friends, but I don’t know how Maya feels” Soei thinks, and says: “Maybe we should ask Roos?” At that moment, Roos comes down the stairs, and walks up to Coco and Soei. “Hey Coco, Hey Ms Schoppenboer. Maya is okay now, but I wanted to ask if I could stay the night. I wanna be here for Maya..” Roos turns a little red while saying the last sentence, and they notice. “Of course! Do your parents know though?” Soei asks. Roos tells her her mom approved, and was bringing over her stuff now. Soei smiles, and thanks her for looking after Maya. Roos turns red and quickly answers: “N-no w-worries, ma’am.”

Soei and Coco finish making dinner, and Roos helps them set the table. Ravi turns off the TV, and sits at the dinner table with the others. Completely missing the conversation between Soei, Coco and Roos earlier, he asks: “Oh, hey Roos! Are you staying the night?” Roos nods, and blushes again. Ravi puts his fork down, and looks at Roos. “So... I heard you have an interest in Maya” Soei freezes, Coco spits out her drink in shock, and Mymy drops her fork, and looks from Ravi to Roos. Ravi ignores them, and looks at Roos, who froze mid bite and was looking at Ravi. She slowly lowered her fork, and said: “I-I’m not sure what you m-mean, Mr. Schoppenboer. I like Maya, b-but as a friend.” Ravi smiles at Roos, and picks up his fork. “It’s okay, Roos. We won’t tell Maya, and you are always welcome here.” he adds, before putting a potato

in his mouth. Roos chokes on a piece of potato, and coughs it back up. "I-I'm sorry sir, but I just like Maya as a friend" she quickly says, while still coughing. Coco and Soei look at each other, which Roos doesn't notice. The rest of the meal Maya and Roos' relationship wasn't brought up again, and as they were clearing the table, they hear a knock at the door. It's Roos' mom, bringing her her stuff. Roos quickly answers the door, and lets her mom inside.

Maya is now alone in her room. She takes a deep breath, and lets the events of the past few hours wash over her. She felt this strange feeling she couldn't quite explain. She felt kind of homesick, but she was at home. Maya ignores it, and lays down on her bed with her new cat plushie. Hugging it, she realises her usual anxiety was almost entirely gone. Sure, there were a couple bad thoughts, but she didn't feel like she was on the verge of crying or having a panic attack like she usually did. She sighs happily, and falls asleep with the cat plushie in her arms.

Roos and Soei head upstairs, Roos holding her backpack with her stuff, and Soei dragging a mattress behind her. Roos quietly knocks on Maya's door, but there's no answer. She cautiously enters, and sees Maya sleeping in her bed. She looks... peaceful. Roos quickly turns around, and says: "Maya is sleeping, let's not wake her up" Soei nods, and they quietly move the mattress inside. She puts it in the middle of Maya's room, but Roos moves it closer to Maya's bed. Soei pretends she didn't notice, and leaves to get Roos a blanket and a pillow. She returns and puts the pillow and blanket on Roos' mattress as Roos is unpacking her backpack. She grabs her toothbrush, and heads to the bathroom. Soei watches Maya peacefully sleep for a moment, before leaving her room herself. Roos returns, and lays down on her bed. She sees Maya's arm hanging off the edge of her bed, her scars visible on her pale skin. She grabs Maya's hand, and holds it while rubbing her shoulders. Maya flinches in her sleep, but doesn't wake up. Roos whispers: "I love you, Maya" before laying down in her bed, and falls asleep.

Maya slowly wakes up, her vision blurry from just waking up. She sits up, and rubs her eyes. She notices movement near her bed, and her heart goes crazy for a moment. It takes Maya a couple seconds to notice it was Roos. She was sleeping peacefully in her bed, the sun perfectly shining on her as she slept. Maya gets this strange feeling again which makes her blush, as she quickly turns away from Roos. She lays back down, and stares at the ceiling, deep in thoughts. "Is this what love feels like?.. Does she.. like Roos?.. Sure, she enjoys her company, and her heart skips a beat when she sees her, and she wants to spend as much time as she can with her- omg she likes Roos" Maya

freezes as that thought crosses her mind. "Maya likes Roos." It keeps replaying in her head as things start to fall into place and make sense for Maya. She thinks back at what Rebecca told her about people liking the same gender. Was she.. one of them? As her mind replayed past memories, things really started to click for Maya, every memory making it more and more obvious for Maya. She likes girls, and more specifically she likes Roos. Maya turns her head and looks at Roos again. Her silky brown hair glistening in the sunlight, her perfect smooth skin, her amazing warm hugs... Maya turns bright red, and quickly looks away again. But.. how did Roos feel about her?.. Negative thoughts took over as her overthinking took control. Worst case scenarios start playing as Maya sank deeper and deeper. "Roos probably doesn't like you.. I mean, who would?.. She might hate you if you tell her.." Maya feels the all too familiar sadness and hopelessness fill her mind.

Coco yawns, and sits up in her bed. She grabs her phone, and clicks on Roos' message.

**Roos - 21:44 PM**

Maya looks so pretty!!

I wanna help her so badly, but I'm worried I'll just ruin everything and she'll push me away too..

How do I know if she likes me?..

Coco thinks for a moment, before sending a reply:

**Coco - 8:12 AM**

Girl.

You are sleeping in her room, you have hugged her, talked with her, and she even opened up a little!

Do you realise how big that is? None of us were able to do that!

I'm pretty sure your feelings are mutual 😊

Coco turns off her phone, and gets up to join her parents for breakfast. As she walks downstairs, Mymy joins her still in her pajamas.

Roos opens her eyes, but quickly shuts them again. The bright sun is beaming in her face, as she covers her eyes with her arm. She hears a soft gasp, and

Maya quietly says “G-good morning, R-roos” turning red. Roos sits up, and smiles at her, wishing her good morning. “I think I’m gonna head down for breakfast, okay?” She tells Maya, before getting up. To her surprise, Maya quickly gets up too, and walks towards her. While looking down and shaking from head to toe, she quietly asks: “C-can I j-join you f-for breakfast?..” Roos smiles widely and says “Of course!” She grabs Maya’s hand, as they head downstairs for breakfast. On the last steps, Maya suddenly lets go of Roos’ hand, just in time for her family not to notice. Mymy is devouring a warm stroopwafel, and Coco, Ravi and Soei are enjoying freshly made pancakes. Soei looks up, and says: “Oh, good morning Roos!-” she spots Maya standing a bit behind Roos, shaking lightly. “H-hoi” she quietly stutters, turning a bit red. Coco’s face lights up when she sees Maya join them for breakfast, and she quickly pulls the seat back next to her for Maya. Roos smiles, and grabs an extra seat and puts it between Maya and Mymy.

Everyone is extra cheerful, and even Maya is slightly smiling. For the first time she willingly joined her family, and although she felt scared, she didn’t hate it. Her fear slowly faded away, as everyone was laughing and talking, making sure to include Maya without overwhelming her. Although she wasn’t participating in the conversation, she felt happy and included. During their conversations, Mymy asks Roos to pass her the stroopwafels. “Like you need any more stroopwafels, Dutch-wannabe..” Maya audibly mumbles. Everyone goes quiet, and looks at Maya. She realises what she just said. Coco was the first to speak: “Y-you insulted Mymy-” Maya looks at her feet and quietly says “S-sorry..” Mymy hops off her seat and hugs her from behind while yelling “MAYA INSULTED ME! SHE SAID HER OPINION OUT LOUD!” Maya turns red from embarrassment, Ravi and Roos start laughing, and Coco, and Soei are cheering. Ravi finally recovers from laughing, and asks: “So Maya, what other opinions do you have?” Maya looks up surprised, and stutters: “U-um..” but Roos says “Let’s not overwhelm her. This is a huge step for her, we don’t want her to go backwards.”

After breakfast, Maya heads back upstairs to her room, and Roos quickly follows her. Maya collapses on her bed as Roos walks in. “Are you okay, Maya?..” she asks concerned, but Maya quickly gets up, and nods. “Just.. tired. I’m sorry” Roos sits down next to her and hugs her while saying “It’s okay, Maya. You don’t have to apologize” Maya and Roos stay in Maya’s room, just talking. As they talk, Maya feels more and more safe around Roos, and starts opening up to her, although it’s still hard for her to talk about her past. As lunch time comes around, Coco softly knocks on Maya’s door, and waits for an answer. Roos says “Come in. Oh, hey Coco!” Coco walks in, and

smiles at them. Maya instinctively hides under her blankets, with only her face visible. “H-hi..” she says softly. “Would you like some lunch? Mom made grilled cheese sandwiches.” Maya shakes her head, and Roos says she’ll bring some up for Maya. Coco agrees, and she and Roos leave Maya’s room.

Soei and Ravi are sitting at the table, discussing Maya’s progress. Although they’re really proud of her, they’re worried it could all be ruined in just a moment. Coco and Roos help set the table, and they all sit down to eat lunch. “Oh, is Maya not joining us for lunch?” Roos shakes her head, and explains that she’s resting. Soei nods, feeling disappointed but understanding Maya doesn’t always want to socialize. While eating, Mymy, Soei and Ravi are discussing why Mymy can’t invade Belgium and enslave the population. “But moom, they are basically like Dutch people, but less important! We can expand The Netherlands, and have our own personal slaves!” Mymy stands up, and waves her grilled cheese sandwich in the air. “Mymy... For the last time this is not the 1800s. You cannot invade Belgium and you definitely can’t enslave them.” Soei says, rubbing her eyes. “But!-” “Enough! Jesus Mymy...” Soei says cutting her off. Mymy sits back down with an angry expression, and mumbles something inaudible. She sees Roos and Coco barely being able to contain their laughter, and says “Shut it!” Coco and Roos start laughing out loud, and Ravi joins in.

After lunch, Roos puts a grilled cheese on a plate for Maya, and heads back upstairs. She softly knocks on her door, and waits for a response. When she hears nothing, she knocks again, and asks: “Maya?.. It’s Roos. Can I come in?” After several seconds of waiting without a response, she slowly opens the door. Maya was sitting on her bed, curled up into a ball and staring into space. Roos becomes worried, places the plate on Maya’s desk and walks over to her. “Maya?.. What’s wrong?..” she asks, trying to shake Maya from her trance. “Ah! O-oh.. h-hey Roos..” Maya says, returning from her thoughts. Roos sits down next to her, and asks: “Are you okay?..” Maya nods, going back to staring at her wall. “J-just thinking..” She quietly adds. Roos retrieves the plate from Maya’s desk, and puts it next to Maya on her bed. “Would you like to share?” she asks cautiously. Maya looks at the floor, shrugs and mumbles “S-sorry..” “No no, it’s okay! I don’t want you to force yourself to open up to me!” Roos quickly says, trying to comfort her friend. Maya still looks down, so Roos puts her arm around her, and pulls her closer to her, laying Maya’s head on her shoulder. Maya closes her eyes, and enjoys the moment. A couple weeks ago she would have freaked out just thinking of something like this happening, but now, she felt... good. Someone actually cared about

her, not just on the surface, but deep within too. Maya smiles, getting as close to Roos as she could.

Coco helps Ravi clean up the table, while Soei washes the dishes. They're talking about random things, and laughing. When they're finished, Coco says: "I'm gonna head up, okay? Some friends wanted to try this new game." "Of course sweetie! Have fun!" Soei says. Coco smiles, and heads back upstairs. She walks past Mymy's room, and she can hear her giving a loud speech about Dutch superiority or something. Coco stops to listen for a couple seconds, before giggling and continuing to her room. She notices Maya's door is open, and without thinking carefully peeks inside. She sees Maya sleeping on Roos' shoulder, and Roos with her arm around her shoulders smiling. She sees Coco looking at her, and turns bright red while quickly taking her arm off Maya's shoulders. Coco smiles at her, and whispers "Don't worry, I saw nothing" She makes a gesture pretending to zip her mouth shut, and closes Maya's door. She was happy for them, and them both to know she supported them. She walks into her room, and messages her friends in their shared group chat. One of them immediately starts a call, and Coco joins.

Roos is still red as her mind processed what just happened. Coco knew she liked Maya, but it was still embarrassing to be seen like that... Maya suddenly moves, and half-asleep asks "W-what happened?.." Roos quickly answers: "N-nothing Maya! I'm sorry for waking you" Maya just softly groans, and lays her head on Roos' lap, and curls into a ball. Roos turns red and her mind starts going crazy. "OMG! OMG! MAYA IS LAYING ON HER LAP! DOES SHE-WHAT?? Okay... Calm down Roos..." she thinks, trying not to scream out. She extends her arm, and puts Maya's blanket over her shoulders. She hesitates for a moment, and then starts carefully playing with Maya's hair. She doesn't care how rough and untreated it feels, she keeps playing with Maya's hair with the biggest smile on her face. She no longer can keep it to herself, and she apps Coco to quickly come to Maya's room. Coco, fearing something is wrong, immediately excuses herself and heads to Maya's room. She opens the door, and softly gasps. She sees Roos sitting on Maya's bed, beaming with happiness and looking like she's about to explode. Maya is laying on her lap, softly snoring under her blankets. She looked so peaceful, like all her problems just disappeared. Coco smiles, and puts her fingers up to her lips to signal Roos not to wake her up, and quietly leaves the room.

Coco goes over to Mymy's room, and opens her door just as she's in the middle of a passionate speech about how she would enslave Belgium. Coco gets her attention, and says: "Maya is napping, can you keep it down,

please?” Mymy reluctantly agrees, and continues her speech but quieter per Coco’s request. Coco smiles, thanks her and leaves her room.

## **Chapter 13: “The Presentation”**

A young girl is walking through a flower field, which matches her long flowy dress. She sits against a tree, staring out over the sea. She closes her eyes, and inhales the fresh air. It was so peaceful here. There were no worries, no stress, no school, nothing. Just her and her island, and...

“Good morning, honey!” a voice says from behind her. Instead of flinching and immediately closing herself up like she always seemed to do, she turns around and smiles. A pretty girl around her age was standing behind her, her long brown hair flowing in the light breeze. Maya stands up, and hugs her. “Good morning!” She has no trouble speaking up, no stuttering, no second guessing on what to say, just clear words. They sit back down and the girl asks: “So, what are you looking at?” Maya giggles, and answers: “Just the sea. It’s beautiful here, isn’t it?” The girl silently nods, closing her eyes like Maya did, enjoying the sunlight on her face. Maya smiles, and does the same. After a couple seconds of silence, Maya feels the girl shift and stand up, pulling her up to her feet too. Maya opens her eyes, and looks directly in her eyes. She finally notices who it is. Roos smiles warmly, and says: “I love you...” Roos’ sentence seems to slowly fade away, as Maya suddenly wakes up.

Roos had been sitting on Maya’s bed for the past hour, just playing with her hair and smiling wildly. She can’t believe Maya, the girl she had a crush on, was laying on her lap. Once again she has to resist the urge to scream out in excitement, afraid she will wake up Maya, who’s still peacefully sleeping on her nap. Roos sighs softly, and slightly adjusts her position to make sure Maya was comfortable. Suddenly she notices Maya slowly wakes up, and thinks “Oh no.. I woke her up.. Will she be mad at me?..” Maya softly groans, and slowly opens her eyes. The sun is still shining through her window, as Maya tries to adjust to the bright light. Maya buries her head in what she thinks is her pillow, but it’s too hard to be a pillow... Confused, Maya slowly gets up, and sees she was laying on Roos’ lap. “SHIT” she thinks, and turns bright red as her anxiety hits her like a truck. She tries to quickly get up, but falls over and falls onto the floor next to her bed. “Maya! Are you okay?..” Roos asks, quickly getting up and crouching to Maya’s side. Maya softly groans, but quickly gets up and mumbles: “Y-yeah.. S-sorry..” Maya quickly stands back up, and sits down on

her bed. Roos sits down next to her, and Maya quickly buries her face in her legs in embarrassment. Suddenly she hears Roos quietly say: "I'm sorry I woke you up.." Maya just nods, as Roos' guilt continues to build up inside her. "I-I'm s-sorry I was s-sleeping on your l-lap.." Maya stutters, worried Roos was gonna hate her. Roos looks surprised for a second, before quickly saying: "B-but I didn't mind! I-it w-was c-cute.." Maya looks at her in surprise. "C-cute? Roos thinks Maya was cute?" This time Roos is the one who turns red, and quietly mumbles: "Y-you can l-lay on my lap i-if you w-want.. I-I d-don't mind.." Maya quietly nods, and lays her head back down on Roos' lap. It felt a little weird to Maya, but also good.

After several seconds, Roos was the first one to break the silence. "So... h-how did you sleep?" Maya is surprised by the question, but quietly answers: "I-it was o-okay.. B-better than n-not s-sleeping.. ha ha.." The last sentence came out before Maya realised it. "W-what do you m-mean?.." Roos asks, a hint of concern in her voice. Maya quietly answers, and explains her bizarre sleeping patterns. Roos listens, and nods to let Maya know she's listening. "I d-don't sleep a-a lot.. S-sometimes I don't s-sleep at a-all.. o-or only a c-couple hours.." Roos quickly asks: "U-um.. C-can I ask w-why?.." Maya is once again surprised, and turns red. She starts explaining how she always gets nightmares, which switches over to Maya explaining her methods of dealing with her social anxiety. After she's done, Roos asks: "So.. you sleeping in class, having your hood up, hiding in the breaks, etc is because of anxiety?.." Maya shrugs, and mutters: "N-not q-quite.. P-people overwhelm m-me.. I-I need to do t-those things or.. or e-else.." "Or else what?.." Roos quietly asks. Maya feels tears starting to form, but she quickly wipes them away. "N-nothing.." she answers, clearly uncomfortable by the conversation. Roos doesn't push her to open up more, and instead asks about her game, 'Heroes Of Zamar.' At first, Maya gives short answers, but slowly but sure she starts relaxing and talking more. She was about to explain the different weapons and their abilities, when her mom walks in. "Hey girls, dinner is about-" Maya quickly sits back up, and in one swift motion hides herself under her blanket. Roos turns red, as she stares at Soei. Soei quickly recovers, and says "Dinner is about ready. If you want you can come downstairs, Maya." "I-I'll bring s-something up for h-her, don't worry." Roos answers, trying to help Maya. Soei nods, and leaves the room. Roos is still in shock, but snaps out of it when she hears quiet sobbing. She carefully pulls the blankets away, and sees Maya clutching Greg while sobbing. Roos quickly lays down next to her, and hugs her while asking: "What's wrong?.."

Maya pushes her away, which surprises Roos, and sits up against the wall. "Maya?.." Roos asks, with audible fear and worry in her voice. Maya looks at her, and says: "Y-you d-don't get it.. N-nobody g-gets it.. I a-always j-just embarrass m-myself.." Maya suddenly hits her head, and screams out: "A-AND WHY AM I H-HAPPY?! I'M MAYA! I'M S-SUPPOSED TO FUCKING S-SUFFER!" Roos is shocked, but quickly grabs Maya's arms to stop her from hurting herself. "N-no Maya! You being Maya isn't a bad thing, you're amazing!" She pulls Maya in for a hug, and decides to try and hint towards her true feelings towards Maya. "B-besides.. There's someone s-special I h-have f-feelings for.." she says while blushing. Maya suddenly pulls away, and with tears in her eyes she looks straight at Roos. Maya feels Roos' words cut deep like a knife, as her fears were confirmed. Roos likes someone else, not Maya. "M-Maya?.." Roos quietly asks, but Maya gives her an angry look and says: "G-get out.." Roos' eyes start to tear up as well as she processes what Maya just said. "W-what?.." She asks, but Maya cuts her off. "OUT! YOU'RE JUST AS BAD AS MY SISTERS! YOU PRETEND YOU WANNA HELP, YET YOU'RE JUST USING ME FOR FUCK KNOWS WHAT! I WON'T GET HURT AGAIN! GET OUT!" Maya pushes Roos off her bed, and she falls on the floor. Roos slowly stands up, and tries to explain but Maya cuts her off again. "OUT!" Maya screams, her anger overlapping her fear. She knows the whole house can probably hear her, but she doesn't care. Roos slowly lowers her arm, and mutters: "O-okay.." before leaving the room. Maya collapses on her bed, her crying has stopped but she was still shaking. She felt terrible for yelling at Roos, but it was necessary. She will never open up to anyone, they just wanna hurt her.

Roos sits against the wall opposite to Maya's room for a couple seconds, before she hears Soei say: "Dinner is ready!" She quickly stands up, wipes her face with her sleeve and pretends everything is okay. Mymy's door opens, and she walks towards the stairs. Roos knows she heard everything, but Mymy is pretending she didn't hear anything. When Mymy and Roos arrive, Soei smiles and asks them to help set the table. When the table is all set, they all sit down for dinner. The usual conversations and laughter fill the air, but nobody seems to notice Roos quietly eating, not bothering engaging in their conversation. Nearing the end of dinner, Soei asks if she should keep some leftovers for Maya, which startles Roos. She quickly shakes her head, and mumbles "S-she's not hungry.." Soei nods, and continues her conversation with Coco. After dinner Coco and Mymy head back to their room, but Roos hesitates for a moment. She doesn't know where to go, since Maya kicked her out. She decides to head to Coco's room, and softly knocks. Coco opens the

door, and says: "Hey Roos! What's up?" "N-nothing.. j-just wanted to h-hang out." Coco is a bit sceptical since Roos only seemed interested in Maya just a couple hours ago, but still lets her inside her room. Roos enters, and sits on Coco's bed, while Coco sits back down behind her computer, and continues playing her game. It's Minecraft, and Roos feels a sharp pain in her chest as she remembers her and Maya playing Minecraft. "I'm sorry, would you like to play?" Coco suddenly asks, turning around. "N-no thank you.." Roos mutters, and Coco smiles at her and turns back around. After a couple hours, Coco starts feeling tired, and asks Roos if she shouldn't be with Maya. "W-we h-had an a-argument.." Roos quietly answers. Coco frowns, and quickly comforts her friend. "Do you wanna sleep here tonight?.." she asks, but Roos shakes her head and says she'll just go home. Coco nods, and stays with Roos until they hear the doorbell ring. Roos gets up, and without a word walks downstairs to her mom. That night, Coco has trouble falling asleep. She grabs her phone, and sends a quick message to Maya:

**Coco - 22:24 PM**  
Goodnight Maya ❤️

She stares at their chat for a bit, before putting her phone down. No response, she didn't even read the message. After what feels like whatever she finally falls asleep.

Maya stares at the clock on her phone. 3:51 AM. she sighs and turns off her phone. This is it. She pushed away her only friend, and now everyone is gonna hate her. Unable to sleep, she gets up, and turns on her computer. After typing in her password, Maya clicks on 'Heroes of Zamar' and starts grinding. She spends the rest of the night playing the game, and as the sun comes up, she finally finishes the last preparations for the boss fight. Although she stayed up all night, she doesn't feel tired, so she decides to keep playing. Maya finally snaps out of her trance, and glances at the clock: 14:12 PM. Shit... she's been playing for 11 hours straight... Maya quickly saves the game, and shuts it off before collapsing back in bed.

Maya is standing in the same field as last time, but something is different. The sky is darker, and Maya is wearing her usual clothing. She walks the same path, and sits behind the same tree, but Roos' voice never comes. She sees an island in the distance, and sees Roos standing there with her parents, sisters, teachers and classmates. They're all talking and laughing until they notice Maya. They all turn around, facing away from Maya, and continue

talking. The island seems to disappear in the distance, and Maya doesn't need a philosopher to figure out what's happening. Everyone hates her, and she's truly alone now. Maya slowly stands up, but the island is replaced with a much smaller patch of land. Maya can barely stand on it, and falls over into the water. She wakes up, her bed drenched in sweat. Maya slowly gets up, and notices it's dark outside. Not daring to go back to sleep, she starts up her computer again, and opens one of her favorite animes.

Maya is sitting upright on her bed, her cat plushie in her arms. She had decided to name him Noga, after the cat she lost so many years ago. It was Monday morning, and Maya was reflecting on her weekend. Maya lost her only friend, and was truly alone now.. She rubs her eyes, the bags under her eyes clearly visible from the lack of sleeping. She hears Soei knock on her door, and say "Come on, Maya. You're gonna be late for school." Maya slowly gets up, and gets dressed. After finishing she heads downstairs, not bothering with her usual routine. "Good morning, Maya!" Ravi says, looking up from his newspaper. Maya doesn't react, and grabs her coat and heads out the door. Coco and Mymy already left for school, so Maya rode all alone. Not that she minded, it was peaceful. Arriving at the school gate, she hops off her bike, and parks it. Noticing the amount of students entering the school, she quickly grabs her headphones out of her backpack and puts it on. Thankfully, Coco, Mymy and Roos seem to already be in class, as she doesn't meet them in the hallway. Maya quietly slips into the classroom, and immediately sits in her usual seat in the back. She saw Roos happily talking to someone on her way to her seat, which only made her feel worse. What Maya didn't see was Roos' expression when she saw Maya enter the classroom. Maya lays her head on her arms, doing her best to keep her feelings bottled up inside her. The teacher enters the class, and tells everyone to take their seats. Maya sighs a small sigh of relief, and closes her eyes. The teacher notices Maya laying on her desk, not an unusual sight, but she's wearing headphones. "Maya, headphones off please." the teacher says, and a couple other students look at Maya. Maya doesn't notice however. She's in a trance, and all she can hear is her music. The teacher sighs, and walks over to Maya, taking off her headphones and saying: "You can have these back at the end of the day." Maya flinches hard, and turns red. A couple students laugh, but quickly shut up when the teacher returns back to the front and starts his class. Maya lays her head back down, but her anxiety starts slowly rising. She tries to think of a solution, but can't think of any that wouldn't require any socializing. Defeated, she tries covering her ears, but the sounds around her are only making her anxiety worse. The sound of the teacher's voice, along with every small

cough, tap of a pencil, whisper and rustle of paper are making Maya's heart beat faster, and her anxiety rise. She feels the all too familiar pain in her chest, as she starts feeling light headed. Maya tries to breathe like Rebecca taught her, but only manages quick and shallow breaths. Every small sound makes her flinch now, as her mind screams, begging for silence. Maya closes her eyes tightly, and tries covering her ears with her hands. This helps a little bit, but Maya is still feeling overwhelmed...

"...understood, class?" the teacher says, finishing his rant. "Yes, sir" the students say almost in unison. "Good. Now make groups of three and start working on the project. You'll be presenting your presentations Friday." Maya's eyes shoot open, and she looks up still laying on her arms. "P-presentations?.. N-next week?.. G-groups of t-three?!" Maya feels her eyes start to water as her anxiety floods over, unable to hold it in anymore. She quickly buries her face in her arms, but the tears don't stop. "I w-wanna go h-home.. I w-wanna go home.." Maya repeats softly, her mind unable to register anything besides her desire to go home. Unsurprisingly, nobody even bothers asking Maya to pair up. Coco pairs up with Cleo and Yfke, and Mymy pairs up with Kiki and Roos. Roos looks at Maya laying on her desk, and quietly asks Mymy if they should help Maya. Kiki looks disappointed, but quickly recovers and says they should help her. Roos nods, and quickly walks over to Maya with Mymy reluctantly following her. She gently places her hand on Maya's shoulder, who flinches and shoots up. The sleeve of her hoodie had picked up most of her tears, but her eyes still gave away that she was crying. "U-um.. Hey Maya.. Do you wanna p-partner up with me and Mymy?.." Maya looks at her, not knowing what to do. On the one hand, she hated Roos for hurting her and she really wanted to be alone, but on the other hand, she didn't know what to do for the presentation, and could really use the help. Maya hesitantly nods, and lays back down, and Roos goes to sit down, but offers the chair to Mymy. She grabs the chair from the table in front of Maya's and sits down on the other end, opposite to Mymy. "So.. our presentation has to be about World War Two." Maya looks up slightly. She knows a lot about World War Two... She could have done this alone no problem. "Fuck!" Maya thinks while laying back down on her desk.

Mymy and Roos start discussing what they could talk about, and dividing the work. Maya stays quiet, while silently cursing herself out for not paying attention. "U-um.. Maya?.." Roos carefully asks. Maya moves her head so she can look at Roos while still laying on her arms. Roos notices her angry expression, but still pushes on. "W-we have some topics we wanna discuss..

Which one w-would you like to do?.." Roos asks, pushing the piece of paper to Maya. She quickly reads it, and notices it's all topics she knows a lot about. She shrugs, and buries her face back into her arms. Roos looks at Mymy, who shrugs. "Okay.. How about I do the beginning of the war, Mymy can do the expansion and eventual fall of the Third Reich, and Maya... can do the end of the war. Is that okay?.." Mymy nods, and adds "And their occupations of Europe!" enthusiastically. "Yeah yeah, if we have time" Roos quickly says. Maya just silently nods, barely moving up from her position. "Okay... We can do this!" Roos says, grabbing her laptop. Mymy grabs her laptop as well, but Maya doesn't move. Mymy sighs, and shakes Maya startling her. "Come on, Maya. You gotta contribute your part." Maya glances at her angrily, before grabbing her laptop. They spend the rest of the class working on their presentation. Roos creates a Google Document, and shares it with Mymy and Maya. While Mymy and Roos discuss what to write, and making notes for what to research, Maya opens Spele.nl, and clicks on Raft Wars. She had beaten this game countless times already, but she still enjoyed it. The sound of Mymy and Roos' conversation slowly fades, as Maya focuses on her game. She carefully drags her mouse, lining up her shot perfectly, and... "Maya? Maya!" Maya gets startled by her name being called, and flicks her mouse, missing her shot completely. Maya angrily looks over, and sees Mymy and Roos looking at her. "W-what?.." she asks aggressively, and Mymy answers she should help them instead of playing games. Maya grumbles something, and clicks on the document. She scrolls past their notes, and sees a section labeled: "Maya: End of the war" She groans quietly, and starts writing:

*Hitler had long decided to backstab the Soviet Union, and on June 22nd, 1941 they attacked the Soviet Union. At first, they succeeded at pushing them back, and almost took the capital Moskou, but then winter set in, and the Soviet Union managed to push Hitler out of Russia. This is one of the turning points in the war. Roughly three years later, on June 6th, 1944, the allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy, in France. This later became known as "D-Day", but back then it was called "Operation Neptune". The allied forces mostly consisted of British, American, and Canadian troops, however there were also troops from The Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Denmark, France, and more. The Nazi's fiercely defended the beaches, and there were many casualties. However, the allied forces managed to push their way up the beach, and into France. At the same time, the Soviet Union was pushing Hitler back from the East, and the allies were also pushing the Nazi's out of Africa at the same time. Italy fell in 1943 when Sicily was captured, and they continued to push into Europe. The troops from D-day in the West liberated France,*

*Belgium, and on May 5th 1945 The Netherlands. When they reached Germany, Hitler hid in a bunker, and took his own life. With this, Nazi Germany surrendered, but World War Two wasn't over. America continued their liberation of Japan, but they had fiercely defended their islands. They had no choice, but to drop two atomic bombs on Japan, one on Hiroshima, and the other on Nagasaki. After this Japan finally surrendered, and the war ended.*

Maya feels a slight shudder run down her spine as she writes those last words. She forgot how much she knew about World War Two. It used to be such a big hobby for her, but now... "Nice work, Maya!" Roos says after reading what Maya had written down. "How about you start on the presentation slides, while we finish our sections, and work on the script?" Maya nods silently, and opens Google Presentations.

The bell rings, and students get up to head to the cafeteria. "Wow, we got really far!" Roos says enthusiastically, as she high fives Mymy. She turns around to high five Maya, but she's already done packing her backpack, and already stood up and started walking to the door. The rest of the day consists of Roos trying to be with Maya, and Maya ignoring and pushing her away more. The final bell finally rings, and Maya wakes up from her dream. She was flying a P-51 fighter plane in World War Two, and was about to shoot down a plane... Groaning that it was just a dream, she quickly gets her things, and heads out of the classroom. Maya quickly goes back to her first classroom to retrieve her headphones, but there is nobody there. She sees her headphones on the desk, and decides to just take them and quickly walks out. As she walks to the exit, she puts her headphones on and plays one of her playlists. "That's better..." She thinks, as she finally starts to relax a little after a long and stressful day. "Hey, Maya!" someone says behind her, and Maya realises it's Roos. Maya doesn't answer as Roos catches up with her, with Mymy next to her. "So... Me and Mymy are gonna work on the presentation after school at your house. Would you like to join us?" Maya mutters something quietly, before shaking her head. Roos looks a bit disappointed, but doesn't push Maya. Sadly this means Roos has to bike home with her, Mymy and Coco. Maya looks ahead of her as she sees Mymy and Coco chatting, while Mymy is behind them. She silently curses them out during the bike ride home, and when they finally return home, Maya practically throws her bike in the shed, and runs upstairs to her room. She slams the door shut, and collapses on the ground. "Finally.. Alone.." Maya gets up, and lays down on her bed, pulling out her phone and scrolling Reddit, Tiktok and Youtube shorts for a bit, trying to distract herself from today.

Roos and Mymy are sitting at the dinner table, pieces of paper scattered all over the table containing plannings, facts, notes, and so forth. Roos rereads what Maya wrote, and puts some feedback under it in blue ink. "Hey Maya. Great information, but could you expand on it a little? Thank you!" She turns to Mymy, who is just finishing up her part of the script. "Aannnddd... done!" She exclaims, leaning back in her chair. "Great work, Mymy! Now we just need Maya's part of the script, and we're practically done!" Roos says, just as excited. "Can you maybe message Maya? Just let her know what to do." Mymy nods, and pulls out her phone.

### **Mymy - 18:19 PM**

Hey Maya, can you finish your part of the script? Just expand on what you've written, and it'll be good! Thank you

She puts her phone down, as Roos closes her laptop. "Well I should head back home. I'll see you tomorrow!" she says, while waving at Mymy. Roos walks out the door, and bikes back to her house.

Maya is laying in her bed, just staring at the ceiling thinking about life, when she hears a notification. She groans, and grabs her phone, expecting her mom to ask her to come to dinner, or Coco with her stupid "cheer up" messages. However, she feels her heart sink as she sees it's from Roos. The guilt of what happened on Saturday returns to Maya, much stronger than before. With trembling hands, she opens the message, and reads it. It's 5 simple words:

### **Roos - 18:55 PM**

Maya, we need to talk...

## **Chapter 14: "Time Heals All Wounds"**

It's 4 am, and the Schoppenboer family is fast asleep. All except one, ofcourse. Maya is laying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Although she felt exhausted, she couldn't sleep, knowing Roos wanted to talk about something. "She hated her now, didn't she.. Why did she ever think anyone would like her?! She ruined everything and lost her only friend.." Bad thoughts continue to swerve through her mind as Maya tries to sleep. She turns on to her side, and pulls Greg in for a hug trying to bury her face in him, but it doesn't help. Defeated and angry, Maya stumbles to the bathroom, her lack of sleep really catching up to her now. She slaps herself awake, and opens the door and

heads inside. She grabs the cup that's on the sink, and fills it with water. She opens the mirror cabinet, and pulls out a bottle of melatonin. She takes two pills out, and sticks them in her mouth, drinking the water afterwards to swallow the little pills. Feeling a little better, Maya returns to her room and collapses on her bed, instantly falling asleep.

"Maya! Wake up! You're late!" A distant voice is yelling at her, but Maya can barely register them. She groans, and turns onto her other side, but the voice doesn't go away. "Maya! Oh my god..." the voice seemed to disappear as Maya faintly heard footsteps walking away from her. "Finally" she thinks, before getting comfortable and going back to sleep. Suddenly her blankets got yanked off, the force hitting Greg and Noga onto the floor. "Maya get up right now! You're gonna be late!" Maya has barely time to process the words, as one word sticks out to her: "Late" Suddenly she shoots up, and looks at the clock. "Oh shit.." The clock on her phone displays: 8:12 AM. Her first class starts in 18 minutes... Maya jumps up, barely registering that her mom is standing in her room. "Hurry up, Maya" She says, before leaving the room. "Y-yeah.." Maya answers, as she scrambles all of her clothes together, and quickly puts them on. She grabs her bag which she thankfully prepared the night before, and sprints out of the door. Looking at her phone, she can see that it's 9:16 AM now. Maya hops on her bike, and practically races towards the school, heart pounding from the rush of exercise.

"Alright class. Can everyone take their seats, please?" The teacher says, as she's closing the door. She was waiting on Maya, but there was no sign of her so she decided to start the class without her. The sound of mixed conversations slowly dies down, and the class sits behind their desks ready to start the day. "Now, today we're gonna start with our math test" a quiet groan can be heard from the class as everyone separates their desks. "We have a double period, so I'll try to grade some tests before the period is over." The teacher starts handing out tests as she keeps explaining. "As always, no peeking, no cheating, keep your eyes on your own test and table. If you're finished with the test, put it upside down on the floor next to you, and lay your head down. When everyone is done, you'll be allowed to do some work for your other classes. Any questions, class?" "No, miss." the class says somewhat in unison. "Alright, you may begin... now." The students all flip their tests over, and start working on the questions. Roos is particularly focused on her test. She needs to get a good grade or she'll fail math class. "Okay.. question 1a: solve for x. Easy." she thinks with a smile, getting to work on the

question. After a minute or two she finds the answer, and confidently writes it down. "Alright.. question 1b-"

The door suddenly opens, and a very red Maya is standing in the doorway. The teacher looks up from her desk, then gestures for her to come to her. "Why are you so late, Maya?" She whispers. "U-um.. A-alarm d-didn't go o-off?.." Maya answers with a shaky voice. The class softly laughs, and the teacher focuses her attention on them, saying "Focus on your test, you have 44 minutes left" before returning her attention to Maya. "This is the second time, Maya. One more and you're getting a blokrooster for a week, got it?" Maya looks at her shocked and embarrassed. She quietly nods, before heading to her desk and sitting down. The teacher walks over with another test, and puts it in front of Maya. She whispers the same instructions to her, and then asks if she understands. Maya just nods and starts her test.

The first bell rings, and the teacher stands up, announcing: "Alright time's up. Finish up your last question and bring your test to the front." Maya is startled awake, and slowly brings her test up to the front. She didn't know any answers so she was just handing in a blank sheet. "Great.. Another 1,1.." she thinks, feeling more and more like a failure. She collapses back in her seat, and grumpily watches her class discuss the test. "Alright class. You can work on your other subjects now. I heard you have a presentation coming up, so I would suggest working on that if you need to." The teacher sits back down, and starts grading their tests. Everyone starts forming groups to work on the presentation, or sitting alone to do homework or study. Maya puts her head down, and tries to sleep through the class. As always her class is loud, and she can't stand all the noise. She manages to calm herself down, and is about to fall asleep when...

"Um.. hey Maya" Maya shoots up, and sees Mymy and Roos standing next to her desk. Roos continues and asks: "Do you wanna work on the presentation? We're almost done!" Maya just nods, and puts her head back down. As Mymy and Roos are discussing the presentation, Maya is lost in her thoughts. The anxiety of this morning made her completely forget that Roos wanted to talk to her, but now it came back stronger than ever. She softly grumbles, which Roos notices. "I'm sorry, what did you say, Maya?" Maya slowly raises her head, and mutters: "N-nothing.. S-sorry.." Roos nods, and continues her conversation with Mymy. "Alright so. Maya, can you finish your part of the presentation? We'll need you to change it a bit so you can present it as your script. I'm almost done with the slides, so that's all we need." Maya just nods.

She barely heard what Mymy said, but grabs her laptop and opens the presentation. She sees everything they had written, and starts second guessing her section. It was small, lazy and barely historically accurate. Maya groans as she opens Google. 40 minutes later Maya is finally done with her section. It's nowhere near as good as Roos' or Mymy's, but it was decent enough. Mymy already finished the slides 25 minutes ago, so she and Roos were just talking. Mymy was trying to convince her she was the rightful ruler of the world, and how she would take over once she was queen of The Netherlands. Although Roos didn't believe a single word she said, she still listened out of politeness. Maya puts her head down, and waits for Roos and Mymy to give her further instructions. They don't seem to notice her as they're too invested in their conversation, and as the bell rings Maya immediately gets up, and leaves the classroom. "Oh Maya, wait up! I wanted to talk to you, remember?" Roos quickly says, packing her bag. Maya quietly groans, and waits at the doorway for Roos. Roos finishes packing, and walks towards Maya, smiling at her. They start walking, and Maya asks "W-what did you w-wanna-" "Shhhh, not here." Roos says cutting her off. "I don't want anyone else to hear us". Maya sticks her hands into her hoodie pocket, and follows Roos outside, to a secluded section of the playground. Roos sits down on the grass, with her back against a tree. The same tree Maya sometimes sat under when the toilets were being cleaned. Maya hesitates for a moment, but then sits down next to her.

Roos takes several deep breaths. Although her exterior didn't show it, she was freaking out on the inside. She wanted to fix things with Maya, and be her friend (or maybe more if she wanted). Roos closes her eyes, and takes one final breath. "U-um.. M-maya.." she stutters, her hands starting to tremble slightly. "H-how are you?" Maya is surprised by the question, but quickly gives her usual answer. "F-fine.." Roos closes her eyes, and quietly says "Fuck it" before opening her eyes again, and finally spilling her feelings to Maya. "M-maya.. I- I have a c-crush on you!" The words escape Roos' mouth before she realises. She didn't mean to yell, but she had to force the words out. She takes some breaths, and looks at Maya, afraid of her reaction. Maya is sitting on the grass completely frozen. She feels her quiet and isolated world fall apart as every word rings in her mind. Roos likes Maya. *Roos likes Maya!* Her mind is still processing Roos' words as she sits on the grass. After a solid 20 seconds of no response, Roos worryingly asks: "M-maya?.." Maya snaps out of her thoughts, but now her self-doubt comes back stronger than ever. "W-why m-me.. H-how.. Y-you.." she feels tears forming as her mind immediately concludes that this is just a sick prank on her. After a couple

seconds of stuttering, she blurts out: “T-this is a p-prank.. Y-you c-can’t.. ” she curls up in a ball, unsure what is real between them anymore. And then it clicks for Roos. Maya’s self doubt made her yell at Roos. She didn’t mean to. Roos slowly stands up, and tightly hugs Maya while whispering: “I’m sorry I said that.. But you are an amazing person, and I wanna help you.. be here for you.. comfort you.. hold you.. I-love you..” Maya starts crying a bit harder, pressing her face on Roos’ shoulder. “I promise this is not a prank, Maya” Roos continues, “I love you, and I’m here for you” After a couple seconds, Maya starts calming down a little. She felt relieved to finally let her emotions out after keeping them so tightly locked up for several days. Maya closes her eyes and leans against Roos, just enjoying the moment. Suddenly, Roos breaks the silence. “Hey... I would like to do something with you. Just... go out somewhere. It’s okay if you don’t want to!” Maya looks up at Roos, and quietly asks: “J-just y-you and m-me?..” Roos smiles, and says “Of course!”. Without hesitation Maya agrees. Roos smiles brightly. “Maya wants to go out with me!” she thinks, still holding Maya tightly. They hear the school bell in the distance, but neither of them wanted to go back to the school. Maya slowly gets up, wipes her face, and Roos stands up next to her. They walk to their next class together, as Roos is practically beaming in excitement.

The rest of the week goes by without much excitement. However, there are changes for both girls. Instead of locking herself up in the bathroom every break, Maya and Roos go outside, and hang out by the tree where Roos confessed her feelings to Maya. They discussed whatever came to mind, including where they would go for their ‘date’. Although neither of them called it that, they both knew it was secretly a date. “Hey Maya, are there any places you would like to go?” Roos asks. Maya thinks, but shrugs and shakes her head. “Maybe... an interest?” Roos asks, thinking out loud. Maya has an answer, but she’s afraid of what Roos would think. Roos can see from her face she does, and encourages her to share. “U-um.. I h-have an i-interest in.. W-world War Two..” Maya carefully says, waiting for Roos to shoot her idea down. Instead, Roos’ eyes light up, and excitedly says: “Ooo cool! There’s a history museum not far from here, right? I would love to go!” Maya smiles weakly, feeling relieved that Roos was interested in her idea. They decide to go to the museum on Saturday, just the two of them. Although Maya is nervous, she’s also excited for the weekend. “Wait, does your interest mean that you know a lot about the war?” Roos asks. Maya nods, and Roos gets more excited. “Cool! You can teach me about it!” Maya smiles back at her, and tries to forget that fateful school field trip in elementary school. Sadly the bell rings, and Maya and Roos walk back into the school and to their next class.

Friday finally rolls around. Maya's excitement was high, but her anxiety was higher. This was her one chance to impress Roos, and she was afraid of messing it up. Oh, and there was the presentation they had to give. Walking into the classroom, Maya is hit with a wave of anxiety. Everyone was in their respective groups, quietly discussing the last details and preparing to present. Maya walks to the back of the class, and sits down in her chair. She's soon joined by Mymy and Roos. "How are you feeling, Maya?" Roos asks, a hint of concern in her voice. "I-I'm o-okay.." Maya stutters, clearly far out of her element. The teacher enters, and everyone takes their seats near their groups. "Alright class, It's presentation day. I made a list, and we're gonna go down that list." He looks at the list, and calls out "Adam, Bert and Rens, you're up. Good luck." The teacher sits down, as the three boys walk up the front of the class. Rens takes a deep breath, and says: "Hello class. Our presentation is about D-Day, and how it was the turning point for the war. On June 6th 1944, the allied forces..." Maya starts to zone out while Rens keeps talking. She puts her head down, and starts drifting off as Adam continues the presentation. Suddenly the sound of clapping wakes her up. She shoots up, but realises the presentation is over. She rubs her eyes, and lays back down on her desk. The teacher thanks them as Adam, Bert and Rens sit down, and calls out the next group: "Mymy, Roos and Maya". Maya shoots up again, feeling herself become red and her anxiety rises. Mymy and Roos stand up, and walk to the front of the class, while Maya quickly follows them. They stand in a line in front of the board, as Roos sets up her laptop with the presentation. "You can do this!" She softly whispers to Maya, who's shaking uncontrollably. Maya stands in front of the laptop, and puts her hands in her hoodie pocket. Mymy grabs her nerf gun, puts a World War 2 helmet on her head, and dramatically begins their presentation. "It's September 1st, 1939. Nazi Germany invades Poland and throws Europe into chaos and despair for years to come... Poland fought bravely, but it was no use... Poland falls, and the Second World War begins!" Mymy shoots off her gun into the crowd out of excitement. Mymy continues talking, but Maya doesn't hear any of it. She closes her eyes, and tries to calm herself down, but the shaking won't stop. Suddenly Roos nudges her, and she quickly opens her eyes. "Next slide, please." She whispers, and Maya quickly presses the spacebar. "Thank you, Maya. Anyways, France and the United Kingdom..." Mymy says, continuing her presentation.

Maya stares at the ground, occasionally pressing the spacebar as Mymy and Roos continue the presentation. Her trance is broken when Mymy asks: "Are

there any questions?” One student raises their hand, and Mymy calls on them. “Why didn’t Maya help give the presentation? Did she not help out?” Maya turns bright red, and quietly mumbles something. Roos wants to say something, but Mymy is faster. “Maya has been a great help with finding information for our presentation. Not only did she make the end of the war section of our script, but she also corrected our sections. She was really helpful with making the presentation, but she has trouble talking in front of people, so we decided if she did a little extra work on the presentation, she wouldn’t have to present. Does that answer your question?” The student sits back down, and the teacher nods, writing something down. “Well done, girls. You can sit back down.” When they sit back down, Maya quietly whispers “T-thank y-you..” to Mymy. She smiles, and tells her it was nothing. The presentation was over, and Maya was back in her seat. She started calming down as group after group presented their presentation. Towards the end of the school day, Maya could only think about one thing: Roos and Maya’s date tomorrow. Although she still feels a little anxious, it was overshadowed by her excitement. As they walk to their bikes, Roos yells out “Bye, Maya! Looking forward to tomorrow!” Maya weakly waves at her, and with Coco and Mymy head to their bikes. Maya doesn’t notice Coco and Mymy looking at each other, and grinning. They were right, Maya and Roos were a thing. They were really excited for their introverted sister, and happy she was opening up a little.

Saturday rolls around, and Maya is laying in her bed wide awake. She has been awake since 5 am, since she couldn’t fall asleep. She hears her family starting their morning, and she gets up to get ready for the day. Instinctively she goes for her usual hoodie, but stops. She thinks for a moment, and grabs the hoodie Coco bought for her. She grabbed her usual black stockings (although fresh ones), and saw something in the back of her closet. She grabs it, and sees it's a red skirt she hasn’t worn in forever. She tries it on, and it still fits! Ignoring the voices screaming at her that it’s a bad idea, she grabs her clothing and heads to the bathroom to freshen up. She takes a shower, making sure to wash her hair thoroughly, and combs it. Her hair’s natural color slightly comes back, and Maya smiles. She grabs the clothes she brought with her, and puts them on. She looks in the mirror, and smiles at herself. She hasn’t felt this pretty in years. She looks at the makeup in the mirror cabinet, but decides to just put on nail polish. She grabs a red one that matches her clothes, and carefully applies it to her nails. She’s not as good as she used to be, but with patience (and a little help of nail polish remover) she makes it look pretty good. Being done with her routine, she heads back to her room and texts Roos:

**Maya - 8:22 AM**

I'm ready to go!

I decided to actually give a shit how I look for our day out

**Roos - 8:24 AM**

Nicee! Excited to see your outfit!

I'll be there soon!

Maya smiles, and heads back to her room, where she sits on her bed and watches some videos on her phone. She hears a car pull up, and someone knocking on the door. Maya takes a deep breath, and heads downstairs. She sees Soei and Roos' mom chatting while Roos is standing next to them, smiling brightly. Her jaw drops when she sees Maya, and Maya turns red. "Wow Maya... You look so pretty!" Soei says, beaming with pride. "Are you ready to go, Maya?" Roos' mom asks, and Maya nods. They leave the house, and Maya and Roos sit in the backseat while Roos' mom drives them to the museum. "Alright, I'll be shopping in the mall nearby. If you need anything you can call me. We'll meet back here in three hours, okay?" Maya nods quietly, and Roos says: "Okay mom." They exit the car, and head inside the museum. At first Maya is quiet, but Roos makes sure she feels comfortable and Maya quickly starts opening up more. They head into the planes section, as Maya starts explaining how the planes worked. "This is the P-51 Mustang! It was a long range, single seater fighter plane! And here...", Maya walks over to another plane, "...is a Bell P-39 Airacobra! And this-" Maya suddenly stops, and turns red. "S-sorry.. I'm talking too much.." she says quietly. Roos smiles and quickly reassures Maya she's not, and that she enjoys listening to her. Maya blushes, and continues teaching Roos about the different planes, and then tanks, and then weapons...

"Phew, I'm beat!" Roos exclaims, collapsing on one of the benches. Maya sits down next to her, with a smile on her face. "T-today has been amazing.." she quietly says, and Roos smiles too. Maya starts playing with her hands, as something is bothering her within. "Hey, is something wrong, Maya..?" Roos asks, looking concerned. "N-no no.. J-just.. N-nevermind.." Maya says quietly, pulling up her knees and curling up into a ball. Roos moves closer to Maya, and puts her arm around her shoulders. "You can talk to me.. please, what's wrong?.." Roos asks, resting Maya's head on her shoulder. Maya quietly mutters something, but Roos doesn't hear it. "I'm sorry, what was that?" she asks. Maya closes her eyes and suddenly yells: "I-I like you!.." Roos is shocked, and turns bright red, and so does Maya. "Y-you.. I-like me?.." Roos

asks quietly, not believing what she was hearing. Maya nods, and quietly says "I-I have f-for a while.. I w-was too a-afraid to say s-something.. I'm s-sor-" before she can finish, Roos hugs her. Pulling away, she practically screams "YOU LIKE ME! OH MY GOD! I'VE LIKED YOU FOR A WHILE, BUT I WAS AFRAID TO TELL YOU! THIS IS AMAZING!" Maya slightly smiles at Roos' happiness, as she hugs Maya again. "D-does this m-mean.." Maya asks carefully. "You wanna?-" Roos asks, not believing her luck. "I-I d-do.. I-if you want.." Maya says, a glimpse of hope in her voice. "Of course!!" Roos screams, and she jumps up and yells: "I have a girlfriend! Ha ha!" Maya blushes as Roos starts dancing out of excitement. Maya stands up, grabs Roos' hand, and does something neither of them were expecting. Maya kisses Roos. They stand there for a couple seconds, before Maya breaks off the kiss. They're both super red, but Roos quickly hugs Maya again, unable to put her happiness into words.

Roos grabs Maya's hand as they exit the museum. A couple people look at them while walking out, but they don't care. They reach Roos' mom, who looks up from her phone and sees them. She looks at her daughter, and then smiles. She hugs Roos, and says "I'm happy for you! Congratulations!" She lets go of her daughter, and hugs Maya too. "Roos made a really good decision!" She lets go, and they all hop into the car to head back to Maya's house. They arrive, and Maya and Roos hop out of the car. Maya looks nervous, but Roos kisses her on the cheek, smiles, and grabs her hand. "You're not alone anymore, Maya. We'll do this together." Maya smiles too, as they both enter the house. "Hey, how was it-" Soei says, but she freezes when she sees Roos and Maya walk in the house. "Oh my god!" she yells out, dropping the plate she was putting away and walks over to hug Maya. "So you two are?" she asks with a smile, and Roos nods. She screams out again, and hugs Roos this time. Coco, Mymy and Ravi hear the screaming, and quickly come down to see what's happening. Maya is the first one to speak. "M-mom.. D-dad.. Coco.. M-mymy.. T-this is Roos, my g-girlfriend.." she stutters, the excitement clearly audible in her voice. They all scream in excitement, and Mymy is the first one to hug Maya. Coco runs to Roos, hugging and congratulating her. After Mymy lets go of Maya, Coco hugs her, and then Ravi. For once, being the center of attention wasn't so bad. Maya felt happy as they all sat at the table to celebrate. Soei brought out some cookies she was making, and puts them on the table. Roos sits down next to Maya, and kisses her on the cheek.

"I love you, Maya."

## Chapter 15: “Epilogue”

A girl is biking through the streets of Utrecht, waving through traffic and taking in the sights and sounds. Two heavy grocery bags shake in her bike bags. She has to hurry, or the ice cream will melt before she gets home. Just as she approaches a traffic light, it jumps from orange to red, forcing her to break and stop. She doesn't mind, and hops off her bike, and looks around. On her left is just traffic, but to her right she can see shops and restaurants being visited by eager customers, ready to spend their hard earned money. She smiles, and notices the light has gone to green. She uses her leg to push off of the ground, giving her enough momentum to sit on her bike and start pedaling. Taking a left turn, she leaves the main road and takes some smaller roads to a quieter part of town. Although she enjoyed the busy parts of Utrecht, her partner preferred a quieter life, which she respected. The roads lead her to one small road, which leads to a small house just outside of Utrecht.

Arriving at the house, she hops off her bike and grabs one of the grocery bags. Her partner is in the kitchen, and sees her arrive, and quickly heads outside to help. “Hi sweetie! Can you take the other bag, please?” Maya nods, and grabs the other bag. She heads inside, and puts the bag on the counter next to the other bag. “Phew! thanks, Maya!” Roos says, kissing her on the cheek. Maya smiles, and helps her unpack her bag. Although others found it rude, Roos didn't mind Maya's silence. They've gotten so close over the years that it didn't even matter to her anymore. She knew how rough she had it in her childhood, and just wanted her to be happy. She glances at Maya, who's looking into one of the bags. “Oh, I just got some essentials, but also... this!” Roos pulls out the ice cream she bought, and she sees Maya's face light up with excitement. Roos smiles, and quickly puts it in the freezer so it doesn't melt. The mailslot rattles as the mailman puts some letters through it. “Could you get those honey?” Roos asks Maya, and she nods. She heads to the side room which leads outside, and grabs the letters before returning. Bills... Advertisements... Junkmail- Oh! Letters from Mymy and Coco!

After graduating from high school, Maya, Mymy and Coco all went their separate ways. Mymy went to study in Japan and reconnect with her parents and sister Eiko, and Coco ran a small schooling business in Africa, helping children learn in a safe environment. As for Maya? Well... she decided to stay in The Netherlands. Although her parents wanted her to become something successful like a doctor or a lawyer, they respected their daughters' decisions

to instead become a developer for her favorite game: “Heroes of Zamar”. She was afraid of telling them that’s what she wanted to do, but her parents supported her decisions and assured her they would be proud of her no matter what. Maya loved her job, and became one of the head developers for the game, earning enough money to move out and buy a quiet house for her and Roos. Maya was happy here. She didn’t need to leave the house, and could work on and play her favorite game all day! Roos was studying to become an artist. Although her parents were a lot harder to convince. After several long discussions (some with Maya there) they finally agreed. Roos also worked part time at an animal store, making sure she could contribute financially (although Maya was earning so much that she could pay it herself).

Maya opens the letter from Coco first:

*“Hoi Maya!*

*I really miss you, the family, and The Netherlands.. but it’s been really fun here! The children are very eager to learn, which makes it so much fun to teach them! We’ve been working on math, and they’re getting really good! Although some of them still struggle to wrap their heads around multiplication.. I would love to see you, Mymy and mom and dad again! It’s been so long... I’ve already planned a reunion with them, and I would love for you to come too! But no pressure! It’s up to you! How is Roos doing? I heard you are going strong! I’m really happy for you!*

*I’ll see you soon, okay? If you don’t wanna attend the reunion, I would love to visit you and Roos! Reply soon okay?*

*Lots of love, Coco*

Maya smiles, and Roos turns around and asks her what she’s reading. Maya hands her the letter, and opens Mymy’s letter.

*“Yo Maya!*

*It’s been too long, girl! Lotta stuff happening, I have so much to tell you!*

*Japan is so cool! I would regret ever leaving, but then I wouldn't have met such amazing people like you, Coco, and mom and dad! Me and Eiko finally got to catch up, and she would love to meet you guys sometime! Can you believe she actually came to The Netherlands just to hunt me down?? Apparently she got close, but never found me! I'm just that good hehe. Anyways, although my Japanese is a little rusty, I never knew I spoke it! Well, I still have trouble with it, but I'm learning! Right now I'm studying economics, and it's really interesting! I've learnt so much about the economy! I was also offered a management position once I finish studying! I'm really excited for it, and school is going well!*

*Alright enough about me! Coco offered for us to have a little reunion, and I'm stoked! I can't wait to see what you and Coco have been up to! I know I've been a jerk to you in our teenage years.. but I truly hope you're doing well, Maya. I still feel bad for everything I put you through, and I hope someday I can make it up to you! I'm really sorry Maya, but I wanna be better for you now, I promise!*

*I really hope to see you at the reunion, love you sis!  
Love, Mymy*

Maya wipes away her tears. She knew Mymy deeply regretted her actions all those years ago, but hearing her say it and wanna be better, really meant a lot to her. Roos had already finished Coco's letter, and asked her what was wrong. "N-nothing.." Maya answered, smiling at her, and giving her Mymy's letter. Roos reads the letter as Maya keeps unpacking the groceries.

Maya and Roos are sitting at the dinner table, eating the pasta Roos made. She had taken cooking lessons every week, and Maya could see massive improvements. The pasta was delicious, and she enjoyed every bite. "Um.. H-hey Maya?.." Roos asks carefully. Maya looks up, giving Roos her attention. "Have you thought about the reunion yet?" Maya slowly chews the pasta, giving her some time to think before she answers. She shakes her head. Roos continues, more hesitant now. "W-would you like to go? I can go with you, and help you in case you need it!" Maya thinks for longer now. She's gotten past a lot of her traumas, but social environments were still hard for her. With Roos she could pretty easily talk (although she still preferred not to sometimes), but with others it was still hard. With light shaking hands, she looks at Roos, and quietly asks: "Y-you p-promise you'll b-be there?.." Roos smiles, and says "Of course! I'll protect my shy princess, don't worry!" she puts her hand on Maya's

hand, and Maya says: “O-okay.. W-we’ll go..” Roos grabs her utensils, and they keep eating.

Maya and Roos are biking through the outskirts of Utrecht. They rarely went inside Utrecht together unless it was necessary, as Roos knew it would overwhelm Maya. It’s the weekend now, and Roos and Maya are heading to Maya’s old house. Maya was wearing her trusty hoodie (although a larger one as her childhood one didn’t fit her anymore), and a pair of pants. Her nails were also painted red, just like that fateful day. Roos was wearing a flowery dress, and a jacket against the cold morning air. Maya had a small backpack with her, which she and Roos called her ‘Emergency’ bag. The bag contained Maya’s headphones, phone charger, a fidget cube, a small whiteboard and marker, her favorite candy, a 7 of hearts poker card (which when given to Roos meant she felt overwhelmed and wanted to leave) and a piece of paper with info on it in case Maya ever got lost and had to ask for help. The bag served as a way for Maya to deal with her social anxiety without taking massive steps. Maya never left home without her bag, and although it might sound dumb to others, Roos knew how severe Maya’s anxiety was, and just wanted to help her anyway she could. They enter Maya’s old neighborhood, and old memories start coming back to her. She remembers playing outside with the neighbour kids, exploring, making huts, and playing soccer. She smiles, but her thoughts are cut off as they arrive at Maya’s house. She sees three cars parked outside, and realises the other two must be Coco’s and Mymy’s cars. Walking up to the front door, Maya becomes nervous, but Roos grabs her hand, and smiles at her reassuringly. Maya takes a deep breath, and rings the doorbell.

A couple seconds go by, and then her mom opens the door. “Maya! It’s so good to see you!” she says, hugging her daughter. “And you brought Roos! Great to see you as always!” Soei gives Roos a hug before inviting them inside. Roos hangs her jacket on the coat hanger, and she and Maya walk to the living room. “MAYA!” a sudden scream startled them both, as someone runs over to her, and hugs her tightly practically knocking her over. Roos tries her best not to laugh, and says “Hi Coco! It’s so good to see you!” Coco lets go of Maya, and hugs her friend. “It’s good to see you too, Roos! You both look great! God, I missed you so much...” Coco hugs Maya again, before letting go so Mymy can greet her. Maya is still recovering from the shock, and thankfully Mymy doesn’t scream like Coco. She calmly walks over, and gives Maya a quick hug with a smile. “It’s good to see you sis, I really missed you!” She lets go, and greets Roos. “I-it’s good to s-see you g-guys..” Maya says

quietly, giving a slight smile. "Lunch will be ready soon!" Soei yells from the kitchen, and Maya, Mymy, Roos and Coco sit in the living room to catch up. "Alright, I've been dying to know what you guys have been up to!" Coco says excitedly. Mymy smiles, and begins explaining her new life in Japan. Maya grabs the fidget cube out of her bag, and starts playing with it while listening to Mymy. It was something Rebecca recommended all those years ago during therapy. "It can really help some people with ADD to concentrate and feel calmer," she explained. She gave Maya a blue and white cube, which Maya was playing with right now. It had really helped her both during high school, in her job, but also for conversations. She can easily follow the conversation, and quietly nods when Mymy takes a breath. Mymy finishes, and Coco excitedly starts explaining her life. Maya suddenly notices she doesn't hate listening to Coco like before. Actually, she wanted to hear more from both Coco and Mymy. For the first time, she didn't feel hate, jealousy, resentment, or anything. Just love.

Coco finishes explaining, and turns to Roos and Maya. "So, what have you two been up to?" Maya feels that all too familiar shudder whenever someone asks her something, but Roos takes the lead and starts explaining their life. When she reaches Maya's daily life, she turns to her and asks "Do you wanna tell them, hon?" Maya shakes her head, and Roos nods, and continues her story. Maya notices how mature Coco and especially Mymy have become. Before Coco would keep pressuring Maya until she finally said something, and Mymy would make fun of her anxiety, but neither of them said anything. "They finally understand me.." Maya thinks, as she starts smiling uncontrollably. Roos finishes her story, and Coco says: "You're a lead developer? Wow, that's so cool! I still have trouble with computers.." Mymy and Roos laugh, and Maya smiles. "I-I've actually t-thought a-about making m-my own g-game.." she says quietly, turning a bit red. Mymy and Coco sit upright, eager to hear more. Roos giggles, and says: "Ah yes, this mystery game you've been making on the side. You'll tell your sister, but not your girlfriend, huh?" "N-no.. I-" Maya says, turning more red now. Roos laughs, and says "Don't worry honey, it's okay! I was only joking" Maya smiles, and Coco asks: "Do you wanna tell us more? It sounds really interesting!" Maya thinks for a moment, but shakes her head. Coco smiles, and Mymy says: "No worries!"

"Lunch is ready!" Soei yells from the kitchen, setting the last things on the table. Everyone stands up, and takes a seat at the table. The room is filled with conversations and laughter as Mymy, Coco and Roos talk about their lives. Maya sits quietly, enjoying the food and the company. Nobody bats an eye to her silence, which Maya appreciates. She finishes her sandwich, and

wants to grab the butter to make another, but sees it's out of her reach. Maya reaches in the backpack that's next to her chair, pulls out the whiteboard and marker, and writes something on it. Maya hands the whiteboard to Roos, who reads it ("Can you ask for the butter, please?") and smiles. She gives it back to Maya, and asks Coco for the butter. Coco happily hands it to her, and Roos puts it down next to Maya. Mymy watches this happen, and asks Roos about the whiteboard. Roos asks Maya if she's okay with her sharing it", and Maya quietly nods, before putting butter on her bread roll. "Maya has been making amazing progress to recovering, but she still struggles with social anxiety. So, we thought of a solution!" Roos grabs the bag, and shows it to the family. "We call this her 'Emergency Bag'. It contains some stuff Maya could use so she doesn't get overwhelmed or anxious in public! One of them is the whiteboard, which she can use to write messages to me without having to talk!" Maya finishes making her sandwich, and starts eating it. "Wow, that's really smart! I'm glad you guys found a solution for her anxiety!" Soei says, smiling brightly. "Me too!" Roos answers, smiling back at her.

As they finish their lunches, Roos and Soei clean off the table, while Maya, Coco and Mymy head back to the living room. Maya had reassured Roos that she would be okay, but Roos was still a bit nervous. She regularly glanced at Maya to make sure she was okay. She knew Maya so well that she could notice signs of anxiety or a panic attack before anyone else. Thankfully, Maya was just happily sitting with her sisters, listening to their conversations and occasionally asking questions by nodding or shaking her head. The questions become a bit more personal, as Mymy suddenly asks Coco: "So, Coco. Seeing anyone special?" Coco turns red, but answers: "As a matter of fact, yes I am! It's this really cute guy I'm working with!" Mymy smiles, and says: "That's great! I'm so happy for you!" Coco beams with happiness as she nods. "We obviously know Maya is in a relationship", Coco says, playfully poking Maya with her elbow, "but what about you, Mymy?" Mymy turns red, and mumbles something about not wanting anything. Coco nods, and quickly changes the topic. Soei and Roos come back from the kitchen, and sit down with the sisters. Roos sits down next to Maya, and Maya curls up on the couch, and lays her head on Roos' shoulder. Soft snoring appears as Maya falls asleep. Roos puts her arm around Maya, and they continue talking but a little quieter. Maya called it her 'Social Naps', which she uses to recharge her social battery (and catch up on sleep, as her sleep schedule was still fucked).

As it's nearing dinner time, Roos says they should head back, as she has to study and Maya should do some work. The family nods, and Roos carefully

wakes Maya up from her nap. "Babe wake up, it's time to head home." Maya yawns, and rubs her eyes while nodding. They walk to the door, and they say their goodbyes. "It was really good to see you, Maya! I hope you can visit me in Africa someday!" Coco says, hugging her. "It was great seeing you! We'll see you again soon, okay?" Mymy says, hugging her too. Lastly, Soei walks over to Maya, and hugs her tightly. "It was amazing seeing you again, sweetheart... I'm sorry I wasn't the best mother, but I'm super proud of you. I love you, Maya." Maya feels tears appear as she's filled with happiness. She hugs her mom, and quietly says "I love you too, mom" Maya and Roos walk outside, waving before heading to their bikes, and biking back home. Back at home, Maya grabs an energy drink, and kisses Roos on the cheek before heading back upstairs to her work room. Roos smiles, and heads to her study room to begin studying for her upcoming exams.

Maya sits down behind her desk, and opens up Discord. She sends a message in the development channel, and opens "Heroes of Zamar". Her character appears in the game, and Maya fast travels to a secret island in the game, which isn't out to the public yet. She has two accounts: One was her developer account, which she used to work on the game, and her old account from her childhood which she used to casually play the game in her free time. She opens the game's code on her other monitor, and scrolls to the section she's been working on. It's full of random notes and reminders, both from her and the other developers. She finishes her energy drink, puts on a 9 hour FNAF lore video, and starts working on the code. Her video offers nice background noise while she works, allowing her to focus more easily. She sees a ping, and opens up Discord again. It's a Junior Developer asking her what they can do to help. She thinks for a moment, and tells them to work on the new boss room while she finishes up the island. They react with a thumbs up emoji, and shortly after join her on the island. Maya heads downstairs, grabs another energy drink, some water, and a snack from the fridge, and sits back down behind her desk. She stretches, puts her feet up and gets to work on the game.

The End