

HIDEOUS Beauty

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@empireofbooks

HIDEOUS Beauty

WILLIAM HUSSEY



In memory of Marilyn Hussey.
I think you'd have really liked this one, Mum x

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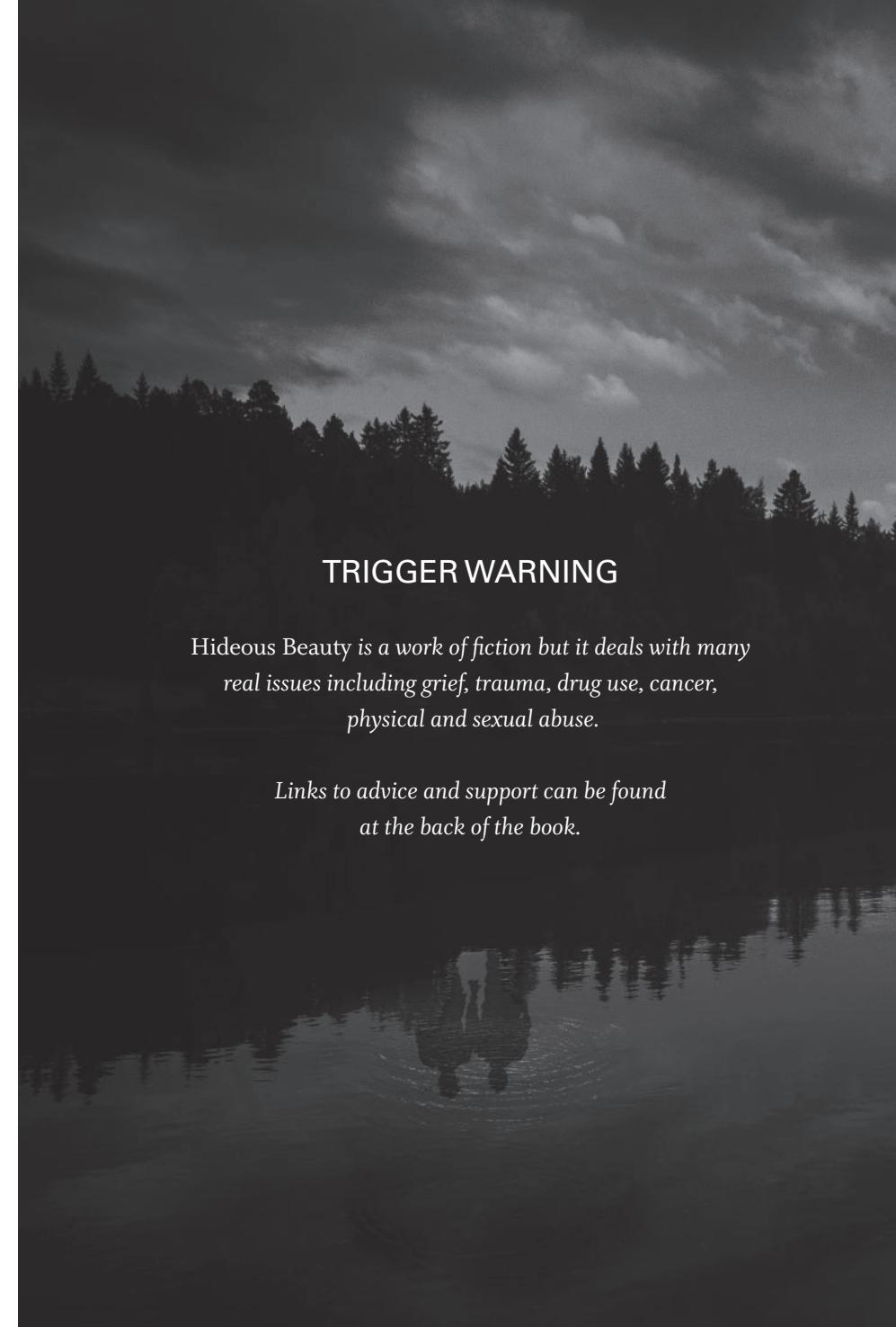
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TRIGGER WARNING

*Hideous Beauty is a work of fiction but it deals with many
real issues including grief, trauma, drug use, cancer,
physical and sexual abuse.*

*Links to advice and support can be found
at the back of the book.*



NOW: Thursday 2nd April

1

El makes the suggestion and I bury my face in my hands.

“Are you seriously trying to kill me? Honestly, I’d like to know, just so I can decide who gets my stuff after I’m dead. To you, Ellis Bell, I leave my complete comics collection, plus this sweet middle finger, which I’m flipping you as we speak. I also hereby return all the drawings you’ve ever given me. You’ll find the *really* filthy one taped under my desk drawer.”

I pull my hands away and give El a sidelong smirk. He smirks back. And I know I’ve already lost the argument, because his smirks are in a different league and complemented by these huge brown eyes that compel you to surrender.

“C’mon.” He rocks my shoulder. “Don’t be a drama queen. It might be fun.”

“Dude, I have had more than enough ‘fun’ for one day.”

And that might be just about the greatest understatement in human history.

El sighs and turns his belching, beat-up old Nissan Micra out of my drive and onto Denvers Row. I watch his long dextrous fingers grip and slide and tube the steering wheel, and my stomach flips. Just a little.

“El,” I say warily, “this is the way to school.”

“So anyway, I thought your parents took it pretty well,” he says, deflecting like a pro. “Your mum laughed and clapped her hands like you’d just farted pixie dust out of your arse and your dad actually gave you a hug. Sort of. Honestly, was that a hug or was he burping you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so awkward. Oh, and by the way, I saw that brother of yours checking me out *again*. I’m not sure what creeps me out more, Chris lustng after me or that immense pubescent thing your mum keeps on the dining room table.”

“First” – I raise a finger – “that is one of my mum’s decorative sculptures. She made it at her art class last week, and she’s very proud.”

“Hey, I’m not judging. As far as immense pubescent things go, it’s a keeper.”

“Second,” I say, forcing my lips into a straight line, “Chris is most definitely *not* into you. You embarrassed him fairly spectacularly at the Berringtons’ barbecue, remember? And he has a girlfriend. Third girlfriend this year, in fact.”

El shrugs and takes another turn towards school. “It’s true,” he says quickly, cutting off my latest protest, “that ‘Chris’ is the least gay name your parents could’ve come up with for their firstborn. But three girlfriends in twelve months? That’s protesting way too much.”

“And your gaydar is never wrong, I suppose?”

“Not where McKees are concerned. By the way, while we’re talking names, with ‘Dylan Lemuel Jasper’ they were just asking for trouble. But I guess they’re so hip and tolerant and everything, they actually wanted their second son to be at least a little flouncy.”

“Flouncy?” I shake my head. “That’s coming from *you*?”

And just like that the mood changes. It’s the kind of jackknife switch around that might give anyone else whiplash, but after all these months of secret dating, I’m used to El’s rhythms. He loses the adorable grin for a second and one of those strong, gentle hands reaches across the space between us, his fingers interlacing with mine. He draws my palm to his mouth and kisses it. I decide a millisecond beforehand that my stomach will *not* flip. Not this time. Not *every* time. Come on, it’s getting ridiculous.

It flips.

“Dylan, I mean it. Your mum and dad? That was pretty awesome. I don’t think you even realize how awesome. You told your parents who you were and you got to leave

the house with all your teeth. It's one up on my coming-out story, anyway."

I blink hard and cup the line of Ellis's jaw. He nestles his face into my palm. El very rarely cries, even when he has every reason.

"You know," I say, "I'm always here if you—"

"I know. But I've told you most of it anyway, and I had the dental work done the same day I moved into this cheesy little town. And, honestly, McKee D, a lot of rancid water has gone under that particular bridge; I don't really fancy wading back into it again."

He smiles. A strained grin so big that it reveals his pearly whites all the way to the back molars, like he's a living advertisement for the Ferrivale dental surgery. His teeth are perfect. Of course they are. He's Ellis Maximillian Bell. By the way, Maximillian? That's one of the few things about my boyfriend I haven't been able to figure out. From what I know of his parents, it seems unlikely they took that much trouble over his middle name. In fact, having to come up with a first name was probably a chore for which they never forgave him. My theory is El took Maximillian for himself, claimed it and owned it, and that it's as recent as last December, when Mr Morris introduced us to the main characters of the French Revolution and El became fascinated by the rebel leader Maximilien Robespierre. For all of a fortnight. El's passions are intense but fleeting.

Except, I'm happy to say, in my case.

My boyfriend. Weird how new that still sounds. I roll it around in my head for a bit. I like how it rolls, smooth and easy and natural. Okay, so he's been my boyfriend for quite a while, but as of tonight, it's official. My brother knows. My parents know. The world, or at least my tiny corner of it in Ferrivale, knows. It's thanks to some sweaty-palmed pervert at school who caught us unawares with his smartphone, then posted us all over Instagram. Honestly, I guess I should thank our friendly neighbourhood pornographer. His shonky camerawork gave me that final push when nothing else could. I had to bite the bullet and come out to my family.

El never understood what my problem was with telling the folks, and I guess to an outsider – especially one with El's family history – it must have looked unnecessarily cowardly. But you see, things aren't always as people make them out to be, and that look my parents exchanged when I told them, the look El didn't catch?

Well.

"Suh-oooooo," he prods, "can-we-can-we-can-we-can-we?"

I claw my fingers down my face and moan. If I really put my foot down he'll turn us around, I know he will, but here's the thing: scared as I am – freaking *petrified* as I am – I'm also kind of curious. So I admit defeat and give him the nod.

“Huzzah!” We’ve stopped at a junction and El paddles the steering wheel with his palms. Then, digging into the pocket of his perfectly contoured charity shop jacket, he takes out a lipstick and puckers. “Ellis will go to the ball!”

Less than a minute later we’re screeching into the school car park. El’s almost five months older than me and handles his Nissan with the air of a racing driver. He’s even taken the “Unteachable Twonk” (yours truly) out for a few jittery lessons. In my defence, he’s not exactly the most conscientious teacher. I still have no clue how to parallel park or even change gear smoothly, but he’s done his utmost to pass on the über-important skills of handbrake turns and burning rubber. Among other things. I think back to our first driving lesson in the empty car park of the old MegaDeal supermarket at the edge of town, and a delicious heat prickles my cheeks. I learned a few things that night, none of them in the Highway Code.

El hurtles us through the gate and aces a ninety-degree handbrake turn before parking in front of Miss Harper, Grand High Dementor of the geography department. She gives him the kind of look that could suck the soul from a muggle at fifty paces. Then she sees who it is, and smiles like someone’s just offered her a hamper full of kittens. I’m not sure whether she’d choose to pet them or eat them, but still.

“Looking fox-haaaay, Miss H!” El kind of dances around

her as we pass, and she giggles. Actually giggles. Jeeze. “You’ve done something with your hair. Fsssst! Hot as.”

The fevered rat’s nest atop Miss Harper’s head has been a fixture ever since my arrival at Ferrivale High seven years ago. It probably predates even those long-ago days and has its roots way back in the dim and distant mists of her supervillain origin story.

We don’t have tickets but such formalities are for mere mortals. Approaching the doors to the gymnasium, El beams a gigawatt grin that sets Katie Linton, Suzie Ford and the rest of the Easter Dance organizing committee swooning. Even Gemma Argyle gives him an indulgent smile. I roll my eyes as they usher us through. Jesus, are they just not getting the subtle signals El sends out? The ones that murmur, oh so softly, GAAAAAAAAYYYYY!

The bass hits us as we push through the swing doors. The usual stale funk of the gym is complemented tonight by some painfully perky pop. Ellis probably knows the name of the band, the members’ ages and star signs, their favourite junk food and any scandalous rumours doing the rounds. I, meanwhile, have the musical tastes of a great-grandfather and anything post-80s Madonna might as well be ancient Sumerian as far as I’m concerned. Despite knowing this, and that I have all the co-ordination of a freshly ejected baby giraffe, El grabs the collar of my black T-shirt – always black, saves the headache of fashion

– and drags me through the crowd.

“Ellis, what the hell?” I seethe into the back of his neck.

“Stop it,” he laughs, swatting my breath away, “tickles.”

“I’ll do more than tickle in a minute!”

He plunges us onto the sparsely populated dance floor, planting his hands on my hips, turning me to face him, drawing me close.

“Promise?”

And screw Ellis freaking Bell and his freaking gorgeous grin.

My stomach flips again.

Okay, Dylan, this is it. No going back. The closet door is firmly barred behind you, chained and bolted. No re-entry, no refunds. It's gay all the way from here on out. I'm guessing that at least fifty per cent of my classmates have now seen me doing the naked fandango with a guy anyway, so I can't pretend Catwoman does it for me any more, no matter how much she kicks ass. My heart feels light and fluttery, hardly there at all, but El's hands are strong and sure on my hips. I don't look around; I keep my eyes fixed on his.

Deep breath.

Here goes.

It's time to see what Ferrivale High makes of the new (improved?) Dylan McKee.

2

“You are, aren't you?” I whisper into his neck. “You are trying to kill me.”

“Relax,” he whispers back. “And know that, if you try to run, I will trip you.”

The whole thing's happening so fast that I sort of forget to be petrified. Here we are at school, and I'm out, and El hasn't given me a moment to be scared. I suddenly realize this has been his plan all along. It's the last day before the Easter holidays. If he hadn't insisted on coming to the dance, storming us inside before I could catch my breath, I'd have had the whole break to worry myself stupid. This way, at least we'll get it over with. And so, yeah, I've got to hand it to my boyfriend: he is sort of a genius.

We dance on. Strobe lights from the disco heliograph across El's trademark pearls, picking them out in greens and blues and yellows. I don't think I've ever seen him without