

TWISTED

**THE GIRL WHO
CREW NASTY
THINGS**

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An imprint of Enslow Publishing

WEST 44 BOOKS™



Maddie Dragonette sat by herself in a quiet corner of the school cafeteria. She sat at this same table every day. It was a small table with just one chair. It was used sometimes by the cafeteria's workers. Someone might sit and wrap sets of silverware into fresh napkins. Or write out the menu that would go on the school bulletin board. But during lunch period, the table was left open for Maddie. This wasn't an official rule or anything. It was just kind of understood.

Maddie sat by herself because she wanted to. She couldn't stand her classmates. For that matter, she really couldn't stand *anyone*. Other

people made her angry. In fact, whenever she thought about them, she didn't even use the word "other." She just used the word "people," like she wasn't a person herself. And that's because, deep down, she *didn't* think of herself as a person. She wasn't sure what she was exactly. But she was absolutely certain that she wasn't one of *them*. She was better.

People made her angry. She didn't like the way they walked. She didn't like the way they talked. She didn't like their clothes, their shoes, or their hair. She didn't like that some girls played on the school's softball team. She hated softball. And because she hated it, she thought everyone else should hate it, too. And anyone who didn't hate it—well, she hated them for *not* hating it.

She hated social studies, too. So she hated everyone who liked it. One of the boys

in her social studies class was named Jordan. He was the smartest kid in the school. Maddie *really* hated that. She hated all the kids who were smart. And that's because, deep down, she knew she really wasn't too bright. She would never be as smart as Jordan. Or Billy Palmer. Or Allie Moskowitz. Or any of the smart kids. So she hated them, and that took care of that.

She had decided long ago that hating people was the answer to all of her problems.



Maddie unpacked her lunch from the brown paper bag. Then she unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite. It was chicken with lettuce, tomato, and mayo. As she chewed, she looked at the sandwich carefully. Her mother had made it that morning. The chicken looked

good. All white meat, shredded into little pieces. There was the right amount of mayo. And the lettuce was nice and crisp.

But the tomato...that was a problem.

There was a spot in the middle where it was orange instead of red. And it was hard, too. Maddie didn't like that one bit. She liked having the best of everything. She felt she deserved it. And this wasn't the best sandwich it could have been. So she made a note in her mind. She was going to talk to her mother about the tomato when she got home. She might even do more than talk. She might have to yell a little. That was okay, though. Yelling at people was one thing Maddie Dragonette did love. It made her feel great.

She took another bite and looked around the cafeteria. It was really crowded at the moment. Some of the other kids were

classmates of hers. They paid no attention to her. They never did. It was like she wasn't even there. They all talked and laughed and had a good time. Something about this really bothered her. Seeing people happy...it just *bothered* her.

She made a point of looking at Olivia Robinson. Olivia was sitting with three other friends. They looked like they were having the greatest day ever. Maddie knew all about Olivia. She was a straight-A student. She played field hockey, basketball, and—so gross—softball. She was a cheerleader. She had beautiful golden hair. She never said a bad word about anyone. And she was always cheerful. Sometimes Olivia sat and talked to people who *weren't* feeling cheerful. She was the type of person who really cared about others. Everyone loved her, and Maddie *really* hated that. She hated people who

everyone else loved.

But none of that was important to Maddie right now. The important thing was what Olivia was holding. It was a beautiful necklace. It had a gold chain and a flower-shaped pendant. Maddie did like flowers. That's because she liked to grow things. Back home, she grew lots of things. Some were pretty. Some were not. A few were downright nasty. But that was okay. Nasty things could be useful sometimes.

Olivia held up the necklace so her friends could see it. Maddie had heard her talking about it in gym class. It was a gift from her aunt. Olivia had helped her clean out her basement last weekend. She also had the necklace's box, which had a little bow on top.

Maddie pretended she wasn't watching Olivia. But she was, very carefully. She was

waiting, and she was getting tired of it. Olivia had her own sandwich out. She had put it on the table and unwrapped it. But she hadn't taken a bite yet. All she was doing was yapping about her precious necklace.

Olivia set it back in its box. Then she picked up the sandwich. She was about to take a bite. But she started laughing instead. One of her friends had said something funny. Maddie couldn't hear what it was, and she really didn't care.

Come on...she thought. Come ON...

Finally, Olivia took a bite. It was a big one. She chewed it around for a moment. It made her cheeks bulge, first on one side and then the other. Then she swallowed it. Maddie got a warm feeling in her own stomach. She had to fight back a smile.

Olivia started laughing again. Then

everything changed. Her eyes grew wide, and her face began turning red. She started coughing. First only a little, then a lot. Her hands went to her throat. She tried to say something, but Maddie couldn't hear it. Now she looked really scared. All her friends did, too.

The one sitting next to her started rubbing her back. She asked Olivia what was wrong. Olivia said something about her sandwich being hot. Not *hot* hot, she said, but spicy hot. Other people began to notice what was happening. They came over to see. Then one of the women who worked in the cafeteria appeared. The name on her tag read "Ms. Patterson."

Ms. Patterson looked more scared than even Olivia did. By this time, Olivia was looking a little better. She had taken a few sips

from her water bottle. But her face was still red. It was kind of shiny, too. She was so scared that she started sweating.

Ms. Patterson asked Olivia if she was okay. Olivia said her throat was still burning really bad. Ms. Patterson said she should go to the nurse. Olivia nodded and got up. Ms. Patterson led her away. Her friends all went along.

Just as they got to the door, however, one of Olivia's friends stopped. This was Hannah Kim. Thin, athletic, dark hair, very pretty. She wasn't in any of Maddie's classes this year. Maddie was happy about that. Hannah was the kind of girl who raised her hand at every question. And she always got the answers right. Maddie often wished terrible things would happen to her.

Hannah came back to the table to get

everyone's stuff. Then she noticed the box with the necklace was gone. She looked around for it, but it was nowhere in sight. She asked if anyone saw what happened to it. No one had.

Hannah looked very upset now. Maddie liked that.

A lot.



Maddie lay on her bed a few hours later. Her room was kind of like the rooms of other kids. There were a few stuffed animals on the dresser, and some posters on the walls. A big TV was tucked in one corner. Next to that was a shelf loaded with books. The closet had a pair of sliding doors. One door was open, and dirty clothes were piled on the floor inside.

What made the room different, though, were all the plants and flowers. They were everywhere. There were two in small pots on the dresser. Three others were in much bigger pots on the floor. And there was a cactus on Maddie's nightstand. It looked like a fuzzy

cucumber half buried in the dirt. But most of them were in the windows. Maddie didn't have normal windows. Instead, they were like big glass boxes that stuck out from the house. Each one had three shelves. Some had plants that were long and flowing, almost like hair. Others were tall and spiky. Some were green, others were brown or red or pink. Some had big, floppy leaves. Others had very tiny leaves.

Maddie didn't think of them as plants or flowers or whatever. She thought of them kind of like children. *Her* children. She loved looking at them and taking care of them. She also loved talking to them. She imagined that they talked back to her, too. And they always said what she wanted to hear. They said what she wanted, and they *did* what she wanted. That's what she liked best about them. Whatever she wanted them to do, they did it. She was the

boss here. Always.

She reached over and got her backpack from the floor. It was pretty heavy because of all the schoolbooks. She unzipped it and dug around inside. Then she pulled out a box. It had a small red bow on top. She opened the box and took out Olivia's necklace. She lay back again and held it high. It swung back and forth a little. The flower pendant had a perfect sparkle to it.

All mine, she thought with a smile. Then she remembered how upset Hannah had been when she came back to the table and couldn't find the box. Maddie's smile grew even bigger. And Hannah hadn't been half as upset as Olivia when she found out what happened. Olivia had been crying, and all her friends tried to comfort her. Maddie saw them walking through the hall. Tears were running down

Olivia's face, and everyone was around her. They were treating her like she was a celebrity or something. Maddie didn't say anything. But she couldn't help standing there and watching. Something about seeing Olivia cry made her feel great.

Tough luck, Olivia, Maddie told herself. *I wanted it.* She had stolen things from other kids before. And this is what she always thought afterward. If she wanted something, that was a good enough reason to take it. Was it unfair? Was it mean? Maybe. *But that's their problem,* Maddie always believed. *They'll get over it.*

The door to her room opened slowly. Then Maddie's mom stuck her head in. She looked kind of like Maddie. Same reddish hair, same freckles. But she was much older. And she *seemed* even older than she was. There were dark half-moons under her eyes. Her skin kind

of sagged a bit. And her hair was starting to go gray in some places. She certainly wasn't old enough for gray hair—yet there it was.

“Hey, sweetie,” her mom said. Her voice was very soft and quiet. “How was school today?”

Maddie never stopped looking at the necklace. “Fine,” she replied.

“How did your math test go?”

“Good,” Maddie told her. She knew what her mom really wanted to know. She wanted to know if Maddie got a good grade on the test. She had gotten a C. She knew this because Mr. Oldham had graded the tests right away. But she didn't feel like talking about it. Besides, her mom could always go online and find out. The school had a site now where parents could follow their kids' grades. But her mom had a strange fear of computers. She had a strange

fear of a lot of things. And Maddie used it against her.

“Do you know if you got a—”

“The sandwich was wrong,” Maddie said.

“What, honey?”

“The chicken sandwich. It wasn’t right.”

“What...what was wrong about it?”

“The tomato wasn’t ripe. It was hard in the middle. It was orange, too. That means it wasn’t ripe. It was disgusting. I had to take it off and throw it away. Then I had to eat the sandwich without it. I *hate* chicken sandwiches without tomatoes.”

“Oh, Maddie, I’m so sorry. If you want, I could make you another one right n—”

“I don’t want one now,” Maddie replied.

“I wanted one at lunch.”

“I was sure I used a good tomato when I made—”

“You didn’t. You used a bad tomato. You used one from your garden, not from mine.” Maddie looked to her at last. “Is that right? You used one from *your* garden?”

Her mom froze, her eyes wide. “Yes,” she said, nodding very slowly.

“I told you never to do that. You don’t know anything about gardening.”

“That’s not true.”

“You couldn’t grow something right if your life depended on it.”

“Now, Maddie, that’s no way to talk to your mother.”

Maddie’s smile from before had disappeared. Now it was back.

“You want to argue with me about growing things?”

Now her mom looked positively terrified.

“No, no...I’m sorry I brought it up.”

Maddie laughed just a little. Then she went back to admiring the necklace.

“What...what’s that you have there?” her mom asked.

“I found it on the playground,” Maddie replied. She had some idea of what her mom wanted to say next. Something like, *Well, why don’t you bring it to the office? Or the lost and found?* Her mom was a big believer in Doing The Right Thing.

Maddie found this incredibly annoying. Doing the right thing was for suckers, she thought. It didn’t get you anything. Maybe people liked you more. But Maddie didn’t care if anyone liked her. She just wanted people to be afraid of her. Maddie knew her mom was afraid of her. She loved this. Like right now, for example. There was just something great about seeing her standing there, scared half to death.

“You...you found it on the playground?”
her mom asked.

“Yeah,” Maddie replied. She knew more questions would follow. So she faked a big yawn. Then she said, “I’m feeling a little tired, so I want to take a nap. Could you close the door, please?”

Her mom hung there for a moment, saying nothing. She looked more frightened than ever. Then she did as Maddie asked.

Maddie enjoyed listening to her footsteps as she walked away.