

How the Deer Moon Hungers

Susan Wingate

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A girl comes into her own following a tragedy in Susan Wingate's poignant novel.

In Susan Wingate's novel *How the Deer Moon Hungers*, the hidden horrors of juvenile detention facilities are exposed.

Mackenzie knows that her parents aren't getting back together. Despite her attempts to shelter her seven-year-old sister, Tessa, from the truth, she cannot protect her from brutal realities. Then, on a trip into town, a drunk driver crashes into Tessa, killing her.

Because Mackenzie had marijuana in her possession when Tessa died, she is sentenced to eighteen months in a juvenile detention center for intent to distribute. In detention, Mackenzie experiences violence and sexual abuse, both from other girls and from staff members. Over the course of eighteen months, she considers her relationships with her parents, her friend Gemma, and others affected by Tessa's death.

The book first focuses on the days before Tessa's accident, setting up a full picture of Mackenzie's life, the tension in her relationship with her mother, and the family secret that caused the rift between her parents. Suspense builds until the explosive moments of Tessa's death, before Mackenzie is thrown into the unknown in the book's middle section. Mackenzie's feelings of hopelessness and confusion are apparent as she observes all such events; characters' silences reveal just as much as what they choose to say.

Mackenzie's small island town is established as a cozy place; its children are sheltered, though everyone in the community knows each other's secrets. In contrast, the grim detention facility is a stark but apt setting for Mackenzie's transformation. Mackenzie grows from an innocent yet resentful girl into an impassioned, self-aware young woman. She remains hotheaded and discerning, but her cynicism—despite the horrors she deals with—fades, replaced by bravery and self-assuredness. She is not defined by what happens to her, but rather by how she reacts to each challenge.

Forgiveness is not required for this growth: not of Mackenzie's mother, who gives away Mackenzie's cat and all of her possessions during her first week in detention; or of Gemma, who put the drugs in Mackenzie's hands, but who refuses to tell her side of the story to the police; or of Mackenzie's roommate at the facility, who assaults Mackenzie after she has established trust. Layers of sentimentality are peeled away to expose harsh truths: life isn't fair; it's hard to be strong; and love doesn't always overcome all. Still, the book is hopeful: in accepting that Tessa's death wasn't her fault, Mackenzie finds strength, and in working toward connecting with people in her life she trusts, she develops courage.

How the Deer Moon Hungers is a heart-wrenching coming-of-age novel about overcoming grief.

AIMEE JODOIN (April 24, 2020)

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