

The background of the book cover is a textured, painterly style with shades of teal and blue. A central figure, a woman's face, is partially visible, rendered in a high-contrast red and black color scheme. The title "I'll Follow You" is overlaid on this image.

I'll Follow *a novel* You

Charlene Wang

PRAISE FOR *I'LL FOLLOW YOU*

“Taut, fast-paced, *I'll Follow You* is a cunning novel about virality and friendships that derail. A triumphant addition to the genre of books I love and call ‘women at the edge,’ Charlene Wang’s debut is one to savor.”

—Ingrid Rojas Contreras, author of Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*

“*I'll Follow You* is a dark and twisty story of female friendship, belonging, and betrayal. Charlene Wang deftly explores the complicated power dynamics between women, the way we see ourselves and each other. This haunting and addictive page-turner will keep you guessing until the very end!”

—Jennifer Close, bestselling author of *Girls in White Dresses*

“A deeply satisfying campus novel about the allure of social media, the power of reclaiming your narrative, and what happens when you go poking around in places you don’t belong. In Faith and Kayla, Charlene Wang has written one of the most toxic female friendships in recent memory.”

—Daisy Alpert Florin, author of *My Last Innocent Year*

“Like the friendships we form in the crucible of young womanhood, *I'll Follow You* is unpredictable, layered, all-consuming. Charlene Wang’s debut boasts a fresh, surprising plot, razor-sharp social commentary, and a singular narrative voice laced with equal parts beauty and glittering dark humor. A bracing and completely intoxicating read.”

—Caitlin Mullen, Edgar Award–winning author of *Please See Us*

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MINDY'S BOOK STUDIO

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First edition



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To Lao Ye, who taught me the power of stories

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A NOTE FROM MINDY KALING

If you grew up on *Pretty Little Liars*, binge-watched *Euphoria*, or have a soft spot for messy female friendships and unchecked entitlement (to read about, not live through!), then *I'll Follow You* will be your next obsession.

After best friends Faith and Kayla go viral, they catapult out of their trailer park and into the glitzy world of Instagram fame—Kayla as the face and Faith as the brains behind the camera. For a while, it's all glossy filters and brand deals, until Faith ditches Kayla for the elite halls of Harkness College. Naturally, Kayla follows with a ring light and a vendetta. At Harkness, the girls dive into a world of clout chasing, secret societies, and social media warfare. And as they scramble up the social (and social media) ladder, their ride-or-die friendship starts to sour. Set against dorm rooms, DMs, and sorority parties, *I'll Follow You* is an addictive thriller that kept me guessing who to trust . . . if anyone.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MK' or a stylized version of the author's name.

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Part I

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Chapter 1

Kayla and I always said we'd get out of Gator Park together. It was the promise we made to each other, back when we thought promises meant something. Now, as an adult, when someone tells you—*I promise I'll call you back!* Or *Promise we'll go someday!*—you just roll your eyes. Promises, after all, are just stories—stories of how we see ourselves, stories of how we *think* the future should unfold. And in the story Kayla told over and over again, it was always us together.

LA after graduation. Roommates in a run-down apartment in a good neighborhood, where most of our rent went toward having a good sushi spot within walking distance. Sometimes the details changed—New York instead of LA, bagels instead of sushi—but our roles stayed the same.

Kayla was the architect of our futures, the getaway driver. I just pumped the gas and filled the tires.

For so long, I stuck to my plot beats as the sidekick. Only once, as a joke, did I ever bring up what to Kayla was the ultimate betrayal: Leaving Gator Park without her. Leaving *her* behind.

I can still see her now: The pure gleam of fury in her eyes. The rubber band snap of her Bubblicious gum. *Over my dead body*, she swore. *Over my dead body you beat me out of here first.*

Now, after all these years, after everything that has happened, Kayla's words haunt me. Last night, at a party in a city thousands of miles away from Gator Park—a city Kayla would never live to see—her words taunted me in the mirror when I caught my reflection. My eyebrows shooting up in surprise that it was *me* there with all these checkmarked names instead of her. That in the end, I did what I did.

Over my dead body. In that chillingly astute way of hers, Kayla had been right.



The first time I met Kayla, I was twelve. There I was in the back office of Gator Park's property management office, counting the rent that the lady in

lot 57 had paid in ones and fives, listening to my uncle, Randy, explain on the phone that *no, we weren't the one located in Florida, and no, there weren't any actual alligators*, when in walked the new girl who'd driven from Biloxi last night with her mother. Randy had stayed up late to check in Gator Park's newest long-term residents, who carried with them a whiff of seedy glamour. Biloxi was only six hours away on the Gulf Coast, but it might as well have been the Caribbean to me back then.

"We need two sets of keys made," the girl announced in a queenly tone. This made me both hate her and like her in equal measure.

"Right behind you." I nodded toward the corner of the office, where a key-copying machine was maintained as a courtesy for the residents. It flashed *\$10 for 1 KEY, 2 for \$15!* across the screen. Then I returned to counting while keeping the corner of my eye on the new girl, who'd sauntered over to the machine and begun jabbing at the buttons on the screen.

She wore denim cutoffs and a blue-paisley bandanna that she'd repurposed as a halter top. It showed off her tan lines—something that struck me as impossibly adult.

At the time, it should be said, I was going through a massive upheaval in the friendship department. Eunice Lee, whose father ran the Chinese grocery in town, had been my best friend since kindergarten, but I'd gotten restless. All we did was do our homework together, sometimes sneaking episodes of *Gossip Girl* on her mother's iPad. But I didn't want to watch dangerous games of social deception; I wanted to *live* them. When I tried to explain it to Eunice, she just gave me a funny look; it was the same look she gave me for months after my mother died. Things got more and more strained, precipitating The Incident at Eunice's twelfth birthday party, i.e., her bursting into tears and telling me not to come over anymore. We hadn't talked since.

The girl gave one last yank, a long curtain of red hair falling in front of her face.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I called out: "What's Biloxi like?"

Kayla looked up coolly. "The beach sucks. But the casinos are pretty cool. Brenda was a cocktail waitress at the Beau Rivage, so they always let me in."

Now I was double-impressed, having worked out that Kayla called her mother by her first name. "You have to put money in," I told her, flustered

by the silence that followed. “It doesn’t take cards.”

Kayla’s face flickered. “Do I look like I have a card? Do *you* have a card?”

A nervous giggle escaped my lips. “No.”

Kayla glanced at the cash I was counting. Then, as if we both just *knew* before the other had said anything, we looked back at Randy, who was still on the phone.

“What if you gave me a five?” she asked, her voice low and amused.

I stared at her. “This isn’t mine,” I said.

She laughed, as if that wasn’t the point at all. “C’mon,” she said, and there was that dangerous coaxing tone I’d come to know so well over the years. “You’ve never once thought about it?”



I ended up slipping her a twenty that day. She got her two keys made, and with the leftover cash we bought two Cokes and a packet of Sour Straws and ate them while sitting on the curb outside the Circle K across the highway, our tongues turning cherry red as we drew the judgmental stares of the Baptist ladies on their way to church. It was easy to laugh it off with my new friend, this dazzling girl. But as soon as I got home, I went into my piggy bank, where I’d kept all the money I’d saved up helping Randy out, and counted out twenty dollars. That night I put it back.

I didn’t care that it fell to me to clean up after Kayla. Twenty dollars seemed a low price for what Kayla was offering me: danger, excitement, that electric charge of *possibility* beyond the dusty edges of our trailer park. But over time, the messes I’d be stuck cleaning up would get bigger and bigger. Breaking open my piggy bank wouldn’t be enough. It would take all my nerve and cunning and wits to be Kayla’s accomplice, to help her get away with whatever she set her sights on.

And the summer we turned fourteen, it would nearly take my life.

That summer, Kayla had gotten it into her head to go to the old well. It was the day after our freshman year had wrapped up, and the week before, a parkour craze had swept the school—blame boredom, the end of statewide tests, the heat of June like curdled milk. It started in homeroom with Doug McCombs, who got up in the middle of the darkened room while *Citizen Kane* was playing, and with the screech of his chair, yelled “*Parkour!*”

Then he sprinted with a leap onto Mrs. Robert's desk and clipped the RBG bobblehead she kept on the corner. According to some kids, it arced in the air before falling to the ground, the head popping off and peering up with a macabre smile. People later said it was some kind of political statement. Kayla said Doug just wanted attention, and, as it turned out, she was right: His cousin, from a few towns over, had gotten thirteen thousand views on his YouTube video parkouring in the aisles of a Piggly Wiggly.

The greatest thing to come out of Paradise, Mississippi, a Delta town of three stoplights surrounding a courthouse square, had been a backup NFL quarterback. This teensy sliver of internet notoriety was, therefore, deeply aspirational. Copycats abounded: kids running up walls in the hallway, their friends sniggering and recording on their phones; kids leaping over cafeteria tables and rolling off trash cans. Four of our classmates ended up at the nurse's with broken arms and sprained ankles.

Poor Principal Walker's voice crackled with exasperation over the intercom: *I can't believe I need to spell this out for y'all, but when the rules are "no running in the hallway" this also means no running on the walls, no jumping, no leaping, nothing.* Then, when he thought the intercom was turned off, we heard him mutter: "Assholes."

Kayla's idea was subversive. All the parkour videos on YouTube were almost mind-numbingly straightforward: "*Parkour to KFC*," "*Parkour NYC Rooftop POV*," "*INSANE PARKOUR ESCAPE!*" Our video, Kayla decided, would open with her parkouring through the woods, but when she got to the old well, she'd yell "Parkour!" and then make a spectacular leap over the edge—only to disappear. For a few minutes after, the video would keep rolling.

That was it. A dark, edgy joke about the stupidity of parkour. *It probably helps*, I remembered thinking, *that Kayla is really hot.*

"Wait," I said, watching her Google on my laptop, somewhat ominously: *How much weight can two carabiners support?*

The consensus on the internet was that a carabiner can hold the weight of a car, or a very small, calm rhino.

"Ha!" Kayla said, snapping the laptop shut.

"But how're you going to get *out* of the well?" I persisted. "And how deep is it?" At the precipice of our budding YouTube fame, this seemed like a set of important questions.

“I’ll tie myself to some rope, and you’ll pull me up afterward,” Kayla said, unconcerned. “We’ll edit the rope out later.”

“I’ll *pull you up*? Kayla, this is a terrible idea—”

“Chill.” Kayla rolled her eyes. “I’ve got a plan. We’ll just use, like, a pulley.”



The old stone well was deep in the woods, off an unpaved road marked with no trespassing signs. There were wells all over the county, once famous for their red water, which was touted to have had medicinal properties. Before she’d gotten sick, my mother told me about them: the flocks of people who drove from all parts of the US, the battered sign outside Paradise’s limits that read **PARADISE—HOME OF THE FAMOUS RED WELL!** before Hurricane Camille blew it down. Arms laden with supplies, Kayla and I walked across Gator Park to the head of the overgrown trail into the woods. Coils of long sturdy rope circled Kayla’s torso, and in my backpack were three red carabiners we’d taken from Randy’s toolbox.

On a Saturday in June, the trailer park was steamy with grilling fumes and shimmering in the heat of the midday sun. Outside double-wides painted pretty colors like robin’s-egg blue or baby pink or purple, our neighbors grilled hot dogs on stovetops and played cards over a cooler of beers. One of them waved at us, shouting, “What’re you twins up to?” No matter how many times I heard this joke, I still bristled. The punch line that went unsaid: We were inseparable, but, physically, we were as far apart as humanly possible. Kayla was a couple of notches above what passed as pretty in Paradise; when people called her *stunning*, they meant it, and not just because she had that coveted, heroine-in-a-romance-novel combination of red hair and green eyes. She was tall and thin too. Whereas I was chubby with limp dark hair that I could never decide how to part.

We ran across the two-lane highway to the other side of Gator Park, where the poorest, most run-down trailers were set back in the woods, hot wires running between any two double-wides and eviction notices fluttering in the breeze on rusted screen doors. Kayla took the long way, cutting a left at the Winnebago on concrete blocks, away from the trailer at the end of the lane where she lived with Brenda and her stepfather. She never liked going by there, and I didn’t blame her.

Up on the road ahead, stray dogs lifted their heads, tongues hanging out in the heat. No matter how many times Randy chased them off, the strays always came back. They were stuck here, just like us. Pitiful creatures: ribs sticking out, eyes wild and milky and haunted. They howled all night, fought viciously for the most meager of scraps. The only person who fed them was Kayla, and as we walked, she tossed fistfuls of kibble from her pocket that she had shoplifted from the Dollar General. “When I get out of here, I’m going to adopt all of you,” she cooed as they got riled up, jumping and snapping at her outstretched fingers.

Their barks fell away once we were in the woods. As we walked down the overgrown trail that led to a clearing, Kayla’s prognostication kicked into high gear: We’d go viral overnight, become influencers, and move to L.A. I nodded in the right places and stepped between the twisted vines, the tree roots bulging like veins, feeling my anxiety build. We’d watched only one YouTube video about how to make a pulley. It seemed to me that we should’ve watched at least three.

The opening of the well was slick with blackish-green algae and stank of sulfur. “We’re gonna get famous!” Kayla yelled into its black depths. The gaping black hole loomed back at us, and I imagined Kayla’s ponytail, flashing bright like the underbelly of a minnow before disappearing into its depths. Suddenly I was frightened; I was frightened like a child was frightened—of shadows under beds, of old abandoned houses, of cracks in the sidewalk. Kayla, meanwhile, was tying the rope to the beam running across the well under the thatched roof.

My stomach was knotted as I took the carabiners from my backpack and set to work securing them to the rope on the beam, then clipping the last one through the loop in Kayla’s jean shorts. Kayla was as flushed and excited as I was nervous. “Keep the camera still,” she commanded. “Nothing’s worse than a shaky video. Make sure you pan out when I’m running up to the well.”

I pulled on the rope, testing the slack. “Pan out,” I repeated. “Got it.”

“Watch your shadow.”

“Okay.”

Kayla fidgeted with a strand of hair. “Up or down, you think?”

I took a step back and looked at Kayla. There was a new intensity about her: Her eyes had a clear, feverish tint, and I half expected to see the

blood thrumming through the pale-green veins on her temples. “You’re actually serious about this.”

Most people would’ve faltered, or at least acted embarrassed. “I am,” Kayla said simply. “If Doug McComb’s idiot cousin can go viral, we can too.”

Then she twirled around and marched back into the woods, her footsteps crashing into the thick undergrowth of kudzu and milkweed, the rope snaking after her with a soft rustle. Sighing, I took out my phone—Kayla’s phone was dead, and mine had the better camera anyways—and followed her.



As the sun dipped into the whispery line of trees, we took two five-minute videos. Looking at Kayla on the screen, I felt that same old bland envy I always did. The sunlight was dappled on her face. The coppery shimmers in her hair were vivid against the thousands of shades of green. Her long, lithe limbs windmilled the air with feline grace. Then, the pièce de résistance: Kayla, with a shout, hoisting her body over the well wall, then leaping over, disappearing into the blackness.

My heart was pounding so loud in my chest I thought we’d have to edit *that* out too. The other end of the rope slippery in one hand, I counted: *One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three . . .*

Then I clicked the red button and dropped my phone.

Scrambling to the edge, I pulled. I pulled and pulled and pulled, beads of sweat rolling down my forehead. Finally, at last, Kayla’s hands appeared, gripping the edges of the well like something out of a horror movie, then the crown of her head, then her whole body, convulsing in laughter. “Fuck yeah,” she said cheerfully, swinging a leg over the wall.

She made it look so easy. Then again, *I* was the one pulling the rope.

Brushing the dirt off her jean shorts, Kayla grinned. “One more time?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. The tension in my stomach was slowly dissipating now that I saw that the pulley worked. Dusk was creeping into the woods, and in the gaps in the foliage, the swamp was a black mirror, hazy with fireflies.

Kayla’s eyes flashed in the dark blue. “You do it this time.”

I stared at her. I laughed. “Very funny.”

“Do it.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. Something like a whine was in my voice; I hated the sound of it. “We got your video. Let’s just go home.”

“Are you scared? Because you literally just saw me do it. It’s fine.”

“I just don’t want to.”

“But why?”

“Why do *you* want me to do it so bad?”

Kayla leaned her head against my shoulder. “Because we’re best friends.” She smelled of dog food, my deodorant—and then, indescribably, *her*. Warm, sweet, like the sweet dregs of milk at the bottom of a bowl of cereal.

“I’m heavier than you,” I said waspishly after a long pause. But we both knew, by then, I was going to do it.

“Not by much,” Kayla allowed. She reminded me of a little kid who, having stolen a toy, handled it with extra care. She made a big show of unclipping the carabiner from her jean shorts and reclipping it through the loop of my Old Navy woven belt; double- and triple-checking all the knots; and then, with an air of regal magnanimity, she said: “Here. If it makes you feel better, wanna tie my end of the rope to a tree?”

I considered this. “Fine.”

A sturdy oak was in the vicinity, its canopy of leaves casting long shadows over the mossy thatched roof of the well. Dread building inside me, I watched as Kayla snaked the rope, once, then twice, around the gnarled trunk, then tied a fisherman’s knot, her brow furrowed and her tongue stuck out in concentration.

Right before I jumped, Kayla gave my hand a squeeze.

“This will be fun,” she said, smiling that dazzling smile. “I *promise*.”

I still see that old well in my dreams. The mouth of darkness, tunneling toward me; the rank smell of sulfur hitting the back of my mouth like a gag; the deep fall and the feeling, somewhere near the bottom, of pure weightlessness . . .

All I really remember, of course, is the pain. When I came to, waves of pain came crashing down on me, unceasing and boundaryless; I retched in the damp black dirt. There was a ringing in my ears, loud and intermittent, like a radio station dipping in and out of range. Gradually, I came to understand that what I was hearing was my name. *Odd*, I thought dully.

Faith . . . Faith . . . Faith . . .

Kayla was screaming my name. I looked up, and, all over again, I was falling, falling: Fifteen feet above, bluish light spilled over the hole, and all I could see were Kayla's green eyes, wide and frightened.

Looking down, I fingered my belt loop—it was torn. The carabiner had snapped clean off, lost in the dark jumble of objects around me.

Kayla was still screaming my name. *Bitch*, I thought. Then I lost consciousness again.



Later on, they'd tell me I had been down in the well for about an hour. Once she figured out I was unconscious (and that my phone was lost in the undergrowth), Kayla ran to the highway and flagged down an elderly couple who had been passing through on their way to Houston. They called 911. The fire department two towns over got the call and made impressive time. Honestly, I'm hazy about the details here: how the rescuers widened the hole and erected a pulley system—better than the one we'd made—and one descended down in a harness, pulling me out. I woke up in the hospital in Greenville. "Shit," I said as soon as I saw Randy sitting across from me, a Styrofoam cup of coffee balanced on his knee. "Shit is right," Randy replied.

I'd suffered a mild concussion and broken my arm. It was a miracle I was alive, the doctor told me. If the well still had water, or if I'd not fallen so cleanly, arms pressed against my sides, Randy might've been paying a \$1,000 morgue bill rather than a \$1,000 hospital bill.

As it turned out, Kayla's video did what it was supposed to do—just not in the way she planned. We made Channel 7 that night: *Local Girl, 14, Falls Down Well*. The news reporter, a portly brunette with frosted highlights, hailed Kayla as a hero, the plucky friend who'd called for help. On TV, Kayla looked like starlight. "All thought just left my head, I guess," she said a little breathlessly, widening her eyes. "I just couldn't *believe* it happened, you know? I was so focused on making sure I got help. Nothing else mattered."

Nothing else mattered, eh? I thought bitterly, clicking the TV off. So Kayla got to be the hero. Never mind that *she* was the one who convinced me to jump in the first place.

"Don't be mad," Kayla said, a day later when I got out of the hospital.

She brought over a teddy bear and a giant sack of Twizzlers—a peace offering, shoplifted, most likely. For the past few minutes, Kayla had been showing me all the comments on the video of the broadcast on Channel 7’s Facebook page: *Such a brave girl, and so beautiful! True Mississippi values. What a nice, heartwarming story!*

“I’m not mad,” I said.

“You did not wake up a better liar, Thibodeaux.”

“Fine. Then tell me this: What happened to your video, huh? Are you going to upload it?”

Kayla was silent.

“That’s what I thought,” I said with grim satisfaction.

After a long pause, Kayla said slyly, a little darkly: “Well, I’m glad you jumped. At least we’re still friends.”

“We wouldn’t be friends if I hadn’t jumped?” I said, astonished.

Kayla fixed me with a strange, chilly look. “You would’ve risked nothing while I risked everything. How’s that friendship?”

From my hospital bed, I wondered, how many times would I follow Kayla over the years? How many times would I have to prove my friendship, my loyalty, over and over? I’ll never forget her face as she looked down at me while I was lying in that well: a flare in the darkness, her eyes two brilliant cracks of light. Kayla was an exotic bird alighting in a colorless place and, if I only held on to her tight enough, *I* might just fly away too. Hope was like that for people like us: addictive, potent, so precious it was worth dying for. After all that’s happened, I think I finally understand what Kayla was getting at that day. She was willing to die to get us out of Gator Park—and she wanted to know if I would too.



One night our sophomore year, I was sprawled on my bed with my English Lit essay on *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine Earnshaw sticking primroses in the plate of porridge. Outside my window was lead gray; there was a storm coming in. A gust of wind threw an empty Sprite bottle into the pane, hitting with a gentle thud and flying away again. Then came the rain: warm and intermittent at first, then increasing steadily.

Next to me, Kayla was on her back, scrolling Instagram, her face lit up in cool white. She was deep in the grid of some influencer’s photos: rosé on

a yacht, Chanel flap bags, idyllic blue waters. In one of the photos, the influencer gazed coyly at the camera with one hand under her chin and another twirling a forkful of red-sauce pasta, as if to say, *Aren't I a woman at ease with myself, and the world?*

I turned back to Brontë. *Primroses are a symbol of transformation*, I wrote. But soon enough, I was distracted by Kayla again, who was studying her face in her phone's front camera like it was a mirror. She widened her eyes, tilted her chin up. Pursed her lips. I often caught Kayla checking herself out in mirrors, windows, a spoon; but tonight there was something hungry and appraising in her gaze. Maybe it had to do with the two finger-shaped welts on her arm I'd spotted earlier when the neck of her baggy Shania Twain T-shirt slipped down her shoulder. They were purple tinged with ugly yellow, a few days old. I didn't say anything; I never did. Just like Kayla never mentioned my mother.

Sometimes in friendships, there is nothing kinder than silence.

But that night, I wanted to say something. Something true, even if feeble. "You're way prettier than that Instagram model," I told Kayla.

"Bella Rose?" Kayla flopped over to face me. I could tell she was secretly pleased. "She used to be a Hooters waitress. Now she's got a gazillion followers."

Later, leaning against the peeling laminate counter in the kitchen with our bowls of cereal for dinner, Kayla looked at me thoughtfully. A bit of milk dribbled down her lips. "We could do it, you know."

"Do what?"

I recognized the glint in her eyes. It was the look she got right before she convinced me to do something dangerous. "Become influencers."

I laughed, a high, tinny laugh quickly drowned out by gunshots. In the recliner Randy was playing *Call of Duty*, a can of AriZona iced tea perched between his upright legs. On the TV, his blood-splattered avatar crawled through a storage room. My eyes swept the brown shag carpet, the rip in the arm of the couch, spilling out tufts of polyester. Water from the Texas-size stain in the ceiling dripped into a bucket in the corner. I thought of Bella Rose's feed, anesthetizing, immaculate. *Influencers*, us? Our lives were so ugly.

As if reading my mind, Kayla smiled. She nodded toward the TV, a cutscene now. "She'd be more of an avatar, right?" She rolled her eyes. "It's not like Bella Rose is her real name."

I nodded knowingly as if this was obvious. It was not.

Kayla put her bowl down in the sink. “Think about it. My face.” She shrugged, modest. “And you’re so good with words, you could write the captions. She’d be *perfect*.”

She. Years later, I still marvel at the deft sleight of hand. The pivot from *me* to *she*—and therefore *us*—Kayla’s supreme ability to coax anyone into doing anything just by presenting a set of circumstances in a certain light. Or did I fail to recognize that Kayla’s brilliance ran deeper—always I made this mistake—because *I* was supposed to be the smart one; *I* was the one who loved books, and yet Kayla, in proposing that we create this other girl, was the one with the true authorial spark?

We needed a name. A storybook name, a good Mayflower name, like Taylor or Victoria or Caroline. Back in my room, we drank sweet coffee out of chipped mugs and tossed names around like dresses shrugged on for size only to be quickly discarded. “Victoria sounds like somebody’s ninety-five-year-old grandmother who sends coupons instead of cash in birthday cards,” Kayla pointed out. “And, hello, Taylor Swift? That’s like somebody trying to make it in Hollywood and calling herself Marilyn.”

“Lily? Caroline?”

“Flower names are for the yoga girls. And we can’t do Caroline, that’s already—”

“What about Hannah Primrose?”

I’d blurted out the name, but even as I did, I felt it: the twitch of something real and alive, electrifying. Like this other girl, Hannah, already existed—and all we had to do was summon her.

“Hannah,” Kayla repeated. A slow smile spread across her face. “Hannah Primrose.” She leaped out of bed so fast she knocked over her coffee. It seeped into the carpet, already stained in most places. “Hannah can be anyone. Anyone we want! Maybe even that’s what the brand is about. It doesn’t matter if you’re from some shitty little town in Mississippi or Nebraska or Ohio. You’re a blank canvas. Just like Hannah.”

My head was spinning. Just a few minutes ago, Hannah was a name we plucked out of thin air; suddenly Hannah was a *brand*. Still, there was a certain ring to it. Four soft syllables rolling off the tongue. In those paperbacks I loved—Gothic columns, ivy-wrapped archways—Hannah was the girl in a collegiate sweatshirt, studying the classics in a snowy New

England town. I didn't know it then, but already I, too, was thinking about the endless possibilities—the potential for reinvention.

That night we created the Instagram account: @HannahPrimrose. The profile picture was a selfie of Kayla, her green eyes slightly hooded and the ghost of a smile on her glossy parted lips. The password was our birthdays combined.



We posted every day.

Hannah, we decided, was the sweet Southern girl, her life a phantasmagoria of the girlhood we never had: reading campus novels on a screened porch, shopping in fancy boutiques, journaling late at night in a frilly pink bedroom with string lights. It was a character. Or “avatar” as Kayla had called it. Lies, most people would say. But it didn't feel much different from the girls at our high school posting photos of their corsages while their prom dates, Future Farmers of America, puked up cranberry vodka in the parking lot, or the Kardashians photoshopping whole body parts out. No matter who they were, everybody was working toward the same slippery goal: attention. We were two girls from Mississippi, the trailer park. We had to be more creative with our lies than most.

It must've been a few months after we created Hannah—the posts now have long been deleted—when Kayla pulled a brightly patterned dress out of the five-dollar rack at Goodwill. It was sleeveless with straps that tied into preppy bows on the shoulder, swirled with blue and green and pink like a painter's palette. Right away, Kayla—who had an eye for this sort of thing—saw it for what it was: a very good dupe of a Lilly Pulitzer. She shrieked loudly, snatched the dress off the hanger, and flitted to the dressing room. The dress fit Kayla perfectly, but I scoffed and said, “*That's* not a Lilly Pulitzer.” Not like I really knew the difference; I had to pull the retail images up on my phone. The colors were deeper, more prismatic. There was a certain crispness in the fabric. That gold stitching.

When I pointed this out, Kayla taught me a valuable lesson. Slinging her arm over my shoulder, she brought me closer until we were both facing the fitting-room mirror. In the lower-right corner, a shoplifting warning—**SMILE, YOU'RE ON CAMERA!**

Kayla grinned. “You know what your problem is? You think too much.” She giggled. “You think everybody’s like you, looking like this.” She mimed looking at the hem of her dress with a magnifying glass, a gesture so exaggerated I had to laugh. “When, really . . . they’re looking like this.” She took a few steps back, forming a frame with her fingers.

A few days later, a green Lilly Pulitzer shopping bag arrived in the mail. The logo was embossed in gold. Pristine condition. Like just yesterday it had been sitting in a pile in the store. Kayla found the seller on Depop: five dollars for Lilly Pulitzer, twenty-five dollars for Chanel and Gucci. It made me a little sad, this strange little corner of the internet serving an apparently robust demand for designer shopping bags, but Kayla’s clever ruse also thrilled me. Like there was nothing we couldn’t get away with, nobody we couldn’t be. All we needed were the right props, Kayla’s dazzling face—and my words.

In downtown Greenville—a pretty cobblestone street where the shops were—Kayla peed in the alley behind a dumpster, the dress hitched up her thighs. On the bus we’d killed a whole gallon of Lipton, passing the jug between us in the seats. My fingers twitched from the caffeine. “Ready?” Kayla said brightly, straightening up. The tops of her cheekbones were highlighted in a gold shimmer and loose waves framed her face. Standing in the middle of the street, with the Lilly Pulitzer shopping bag dangling off her arm, she looked like any other Southern belle, fresh from the salon, shopping on a summer afternoon.

We took dozens of photos, quickly falling into a rhythm: Kayla posing with one arm bent and her hip thrust out while I crouched to get the shot. Kayla looking over her shoulder while I lunged closer and closer, as if the iPhone had taken on a driving force of its own. We’d been doing Instagram for only a few months, and yet we’d taken to our roles so easily. Kayla in front of the camera while I clicked away, careful to keep my shadow out of the frame.

We geotagged Canal Place, a glitzy shopping mall with a Lilly Pulitzer store that was nearly three hundred miles away, in New Orleans. When I typed the caption, I wanted to bottle up that summertime feeling—of the sugar dissolving on our tongues, of the promise of many more empty days stretching ahead—but I also wanted to hint at something darker, more grasping. Finally I wrote: **the feminine urge to drink 9 sweet teas and buy more summer dresses. what’s your perfect day?**

I didn't know that word then: *ghostwriter*. All I knew was I had a knack for taking Kayla's charisma and turning it into bite-size, compelling captions. All I knew were those nights staying up late with Kayla, our faces illuminated by the glow of the screen, the internet at our fingertips, pure and limitless. And when, five months later, a post of ours made the Explore page and got thousands of likes, thousands of new followers, the comments piling up at a dizzying rate:

Bellissimo



Love this vibe—

I began to think that stepping into Hannah's persona was so easy, so seductive—like the story I was meant to tell was *our* story instead of mine.

But the partnership wasn't equal, as I'd come to realize. Only a few months later, Kayla and I had our first big fight. It all started with Kayla's grand idea that she should meet her followers. "I have a responsibility to connect with them," she declared. Up until that point, the boundaries between online and offline, fantasy and reality, had been clear, well maintained.

"Is that safe?" I asked.

"Oh, please," she said. "What's the harm in meeting the people who love us?" As it turned out, Hannah Primrose's followers were a group of sad, overweight preteens—no more than seven had shown up—who patiently waited in front of the Panda Express at the mall for Kayla. But what these followers lacked in numbers they made up for in sheer adulation. A girl started to hyperventilate when Kayla gave her a hug. Another insisted that she link arms with Kayla as we made our way to Claire's, Kayla spouting positivity and fashion tips. There was something pathetic about all of it. Here were followers not too different from us: poor, forgotten girls from some rotting Delta town that had long lost its battle with larger forces. I was vaguely disappointed, like somehow *we'd* been duped.

At Claire's, Kayla fingered a pair of earrings, cheap and shiny. "Get it," a girl said boldly, waving a wad of crumpled bills; Kayla demurred. But the girl insisted, saying that it would make her week. Kayla relented, buying the earrings, trying them on, and taking a selfie with her acne-scarred

benefactor. Soon enough, the other girls started clamoring to give Kayla their money.

I pulled Kayla aside. “You can’t take their money,” I hissed. “It’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong with it? Giving me money makes them happy.”

“They’re *poor*,” I said. “And just kids. We can’t take advantage of them like that.”

Kayla laughed. “We’re poor too. And I’m showing up and hanging out with them for nothing. Shouldn’t we get paid? Justin Bieber doesn’t give concerts for free, so why should I?”

“Are you seriously comparing yourself to Justin Bieber?”

“If you aren’t comfortable with this, then leave. No one needs you to be here.”

Kayla’s retort stung. I was disposable, just like those earrings Kayla promptly lost within a week. But I didn’t leave either. By the fall of our senior year, we hit twenty-five thousand followers. Not bad for two girls from Gator Park, but we still weren’t making any money. Brands were starting to pay us in product—vitamins, bras, skimpy swimsuits, lip glosses in every shade of the line, bandage dresses that were trendy for about as long as a Justin Bieber song. The more useless crap they sent, the more twitchily determined Kayla became. We watched YouTube videos of Bella Rose—a mega-influencer now who lived in Los Angeles (where all the mega-influencers seemed to live)—open the PR packages she’d received that month. “Girl got a karaoke machine,” Kayla said. “That’s how big we’ll be someday. Big enough to live in LA and travel the world and come back to a karaoke machine on the doorstep. Big enough to throw away that karaoke machine, then get *another* karaoke machine.”

“LA, huh?” I grinned. I thought of swaying palm trees and doomed starlets, taco trucks and orange groves. It wasn’t my aesthetic, per se, but who cared? Kayla and I would be together.



“Have you given any thought to colleges?”

Mrs. Pierce, my English teacher, was known for her precision in language. For all four years I had her, she’d mark up our essays in red with comments like: *The chair ran??* So when she took me aside after class that

afternoon in early September, I knew she wasn't just asking if I was applying. Sure I was: to EMCC, the community college, where I figured I'd do a couple of semesters, then transfer to LSU. It was a plan by centrifugal force—which is to say, it was no plan at all. As I told Mrs. Pierce, I averted my gaze.

Mrs. Pierce frowned. Stealing a glance at the kids filing out of her classroom, she leaned over her cluttered desk. "For most of the students here?" she said in a lowered voice. "Sure. But you've got a 4.0 GPA. Good SAT scores. Don't you think you should be setting your sights a little higher?"

I felt my cheeks grow hot. Some kids hated her—including Kayla, who'd flunked her class twice—but I liked Mrs. Pierce. She was tough, but she cared. Every now and then, she invited me over for dinner with her and her husband, a poet from Belgium who taught at Alcorn State. We'd talk about the books I was reading over pot roast. I didn't like feeling like I'd disappointed her. "Even if I got in, I'd never be able to afford it," I mumbled.

"Your uncle's still part-time at Gator Park?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's also working nights at McDonald's."

Mrs. Pierce shuffled some folders around on her desk, then pulled from one of them a small, glossy pamphlet, which she handed to me. On the front of the brochure, two magnolias were impaled by a blue *H* like an arrow above three rosy-cheeked students—one was white and one was Black, while the third was ethnically ambiguous—sitting on a manicured lawn, smiling beatifically at each other, as if their perfect lives were one long inside joke.

"Have you heard of Harkness College?"

Everybody knew Harkness, even in bum-fuck Mississippi, just as everybody had heard of Harvard or Yale or Duke. Harkness was a private liberal arts college outside New Orleans that had graduated CEOs, senators, Olympic medalists. I traced the *H* with my finger.

"They've got the Stegner Fund, which awards scholarships to students from underprivileged areas of Louisiana and Mississippi. You'd have to write a few essays, and really knock them out of the park. But I think you have a real shot. You're a great kid. You've worked hard. And . . ." She trailed off. Startled, I looked up to see tears glittering in her eyes. "You've been through a lot," she finished softly.

That night at Waffle House, Randy—to my surprise—agreed with Mrs. Pierce. “Why not apply?” he said in a gruff, offhanded manner, polishing off the last bites of his hash browns. “What was your SAT score again? Like, what, 1400?”

“2260.”

Randy snorted. “Round up any twenty kids in the county, and they wouldn’t have that high of a score combined.” I stared at him across the table, where the brochure Mrs. Pierce gave me was splayed open to an ivy-wrapped gateway. *Is he proud?* I wondered. But he was just sawing away at his waffle.

“Maybe,” I said, spearing my bacon.

Sometimes, with his round, acne-pitted cheeks and slouched posture, Randy didn’t look much older than me—like he’d gone straight from teenage boy to middle-aged man with the same pot habit still kicking around. He was only twenty-seven when I came to live with him. Randy wiped the grease off his calloused fingers with a napkin, then picked up the brochure. “You know,” he said thoughtfully, “it was Amy’s dream to go to Harkness.”

Amy was my mother. “What?” I said sharply.

“That was her plan. Go to Alcorn State for a year, bring up her GPA, then transfer to Harkness.”

“What do you mean, that was the plan?”

“She had you,” Randy said simply. “She dropped out of Alcorn, always said she’d re-enroll one day. But then . . .”

He didn’t need to say the rest. In most of my memories, my mother was laid up in bed for days, reading Ruth Rendell paperbacks while her dark, limp hair—I’d inherited that from her—got so matted, I once had to hack the knots off with scissors.

Incredulous, I stared at my uncle, who was still examining the brochure with wary interest. Leave it to Randy to just casually drop this information in the middle of a goddamn Waffle House. I turned over his words. *Amy’s dream was to go to Harkness.* It was strange, thinking of my mother, that pale and gaunt woman, as ever having had ambition.

She’d had her good days. Like the time we painted our trailer pink and she’d insisted on buying the shade called *Fairytale Pink* at the hardware store, even though another brand had the exact same shade for much less but named it something like F150. “Sometimes you gotta go with what

tickles your fantasy,” she said to the cashier, winking at me. “Fancy, Mom,” I corrected her, giggling. “Tickles your *fancy*.”

But toward the end, the good days were fewer and farther between. Flies circled the piles of garbage under the sink in our trailer. Bills stacked up high on the counter. One gray Sunday afternoon in January, she got out of bed, got dressed, and put on some lipstick. Dropping me off with Randy, who was living on the other side of Gator Park, she’d promised to make me cinnamon rolls later. Then she came home and hanged herself in the bathroom.

I was ten. After my mother killed herself, I came to live with Randy. The State of Mississippi couldn’t find my father, who’d been so absent from my life that I learned the word *toaster* before *daddy*. The last anyone had seen him, he was working on a commercial fishing boat that had set sail from Point Cadet Marina. From what I remember of those days, a bunch of red tape ensued: paperwork, court days, pointed questions from a candy-happy caseworker. All that just to end up in the same dead-end trailer park: Randy’s double-wide was bigger, more spacious, and the electricity never got turned off. But it wasn’t pink.

When it came time to write my college essay about overcoming adversity, I left all that out. The bitterness, the disappointment. The white-hot molten core of my longing to have been born anyone but me. Instead I was *inspired*. Grateful. Sharpened by the axe of tragedy falling down in my life into something useful, worth saving.

Like Kayla said, it was all about the framing.



A month later I applied.

I didn’t tell anyone, least of all Kayla. “They just want you to apply to check some poor, rural box,” Kayla had said contemptuously when I told her about the conversation with Mrs. Pierce. “College is a scam anyways.”

At night, I lingered on the idyllic images in the brochure—sweeping, sun-dappled vistas, magnolia trees rich with shade, students around a table. The pages were so glossy, the colors so saturated. With my finger, I traced the twin magnolias in the *H*. Their starlike burst of yellow and gentle, kaleidoscopic opening of petals made them almost look like primroses.



We fidgeted in our black robes while Principal Walker stood at the podium under a raggedy basketball hoop and gave the same speech he gave every year—*New Chapters! Fulfilling Your Potential!* His forehead was shiny with sweat and, every now and then, he stopped to dab it with a handkerchief and sip from a glass of water. Behind him Mrs. Pierce was gazing at him with studied attentiveness. She caught my eye in the front row and smiled.

I smiled back, then glanced over my shoulder at the empty seat three rows behind me. I imagined Kayla sitting there, making funny faces out of boredom, texting me under her robes. But Kayla had skipped graduation as easily as if it were homeroom. “What’s the point?” she’d scoffed. “You don’t even need to go to get your diploma. They just send it in the mail.”

After we shook hands with Professor Walker and only Doug McCombs tossed his cap in the air, we streamed out of the gym into the parking lot, shimmering in the afternoon heat. All around me, kids posed for photos with their parents, tossed their rolled-up diplomas like footballs, and with puffed-up pride, told anybody who asked that they were going to Delta State or Mississippi Valley State University or—the lucky ones—Ole Miss. Under the shade of an oak, a squad of girlfriends posed in their white dresses and lily bouquets. These were the girls who came from the houses in Paradise, whose addresses had the names of streets like Ellison and Sycamore instead of a jumble of letters and numbers like 598754 MS-1142.

“Mooooom,” one said exasperatedly to an older woman in sunglasses who’d assumed a squat position with the phone. “You’re not getting low enough!”

In the middle of the parking lot, my phone buzzed. **Congratulations! Randy texted. FYI had to get out of there to beat traffic. Got to check in some new residents at 1.**

I brushed my disappointment away like a piece of lint. **No problem,** I texted back.

Mrs. Pierce came over, her hand shielding her eyes against the sun. At the stricken look on my face, she frowned. “Honey, you okay?” she asked. “Where’s your uncle?”

“He had to go to work,” I said, forcing a smile.

Mrs. Pierce squeezed my arm, her voice dropping to a low murmur. “That doesn’t mean you can’t celebrate. You’re going to my party tonight, aren’t you?”

Mrs. Pierce threw a graduation party for the seniors in her English class every year; she even sent out invites, a card featuring an anthropomorphized, googly-eyed pencil that said: *Nobody gets LIT like an English teacher!* Rumor had it the Belgian poet always opened a couple of bottles of wine for the new graduates—good wine, not the Sutter Homes crap that the adults we knew drank. Even if that wasn’t true, I would’ve gone out of gratitude to Mrs. Pierce. She’d done so much for me.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I said.

“Good.” Mrs. Pierce beamed. “We’re all so proud of you.”

We hugged goodbye, then I dug into my backpack for my headphones and played Fiona Apple while I stood on the curb, waiting for the bus. Mrs. Pierce offered me a ride back to Paradise, but I’d demurred—there was something about sympathy, even hers, that made me want to jump out of my skin. Slipping my phone into the front pocket of my backpack, my fingers brushed against cool, buttery-smooth paper.

The letter came a few days ago. *Dear Faith*, it began. *As the admission officer responsible for the historically underrepresented areas of Northwestern Mississippi, I would like to personally congratulate you on your admission to the Harkness College Class of 2022.* I was offered a full ride for all four years.

Well. “Full ride with an asterisk,” as Randy called it when I went over the financial aid package with him that night.

By the time it arrived in the mail, I’d already known I’d gotten in; the real notification appeared online. But the *heft* of the letter was what made it seem real. The raised ridges of the seal under my fingertips, the elegant cursive. The promise of another life.

In the parking lot, I felt a sharp tug at my elbow.

“Omigod! Can’t wait to go to Louisiana Technical Day Community Jesuits College!”

At the sound of Kayla’s voice, I turned and laughed out loud. Because there she was, leaning against Brenda’s beat-up Nissan pulled up against the curb, grinning at me in black robes and from under her black cap. It was such a Kayla thing to do—skip graduation only to show up in the parking

lot outside. “Have you been here this whole time?” I asked, with a mixture of admiration and incredulity.

She unzipped her robes to reveal a pink see-through corset dress with a black choker and knockoff Jimmy Choos with straps running like slippery eels up her ankle. “Skip the Oscars, go to the after-party.” My best friend grinned at me and, for a long, shivering second, I grinned back stupidly and thought, *Just tell her. Just tell her about Harkness.* But I was afraid. Afraid of change, afraid of telling her the truth of what I’d done. With a chill I recognized that it was *these* moments—joking with Kayla, pitting us against everyone else—that I’d miss the most. The time we had together running down the hourglass.

“Pics.” Kayla slung her arm over my shoulders.

Kayla might not have gone to graduation, but Hannah apparently did. She smiled into the camera; even in the black cap, she looked good. As I took the photos, I thought of the letter in the front pocket of my backpack.

Kayla’s green eyes flicked away, landing on me. “Let’s go to New Orleans tonight. There’s this social media manager I’ve been DMing with. He wants to meet us.”

“Tonight?” New Orleans was a four-hour drive. “I can’t. I’ve got Mrs. Pierce’s party.”

“So skip it.”

“I can’t. I said I’d go.”

“Do you really want to get fondled by some creepy French poet?”

I stared at her. “Where’d you hear *that*?”

Kayla smirked. “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.”

“You shouldn’t make stuff like that up,” I snapped. “And her husband’s Belgian.”

“Dude.” Kayla rolled her eyes. “Why do you care so much about this party? It’s not like you’re going to see Mrs. Pierce ever again, once we get out of this shitty town. And this guy is, like, the real deal. He used to be a manager for Hype House.” She looked at me closely. “Don’t you want this to happen for us?”

There it was: the accusation veiled as a question, the frustration simmering just beneath the surface. All kinds of DMs had flooded Hannah’s inbox in the three years since we’d invented her: DM-to-collab accounts, links for “model ambassadors” that led to shoddy, nearly identical websites, guys with weird fetishes masquerading as talent scouts. I didn’t think we

should respond, especially to the men, but Kayla accused me again and again of being narrow minded. Privately, I thought this “social media manager from New Orleans” was going to be just another creepy guy faking his industry credentials to hit on an eighteen-year-old.

“Fine,” I said, sighing. “Let’s go.” Later on, I’d hear that Mrs. Pierce had gotten a cake for me with blue-and-yellow frosting. But I couldn’t help thinking that Kayla deserved one more night of our partnership. I owed that to her at least if I was going to leave her here, in Paradise, alone.



Driving to New Orleans, Kayla showed me the manager’s Instagram. @Daveeeeeed, 5,435 followers. His bio read “creative polyglot @HypeHouse.” In person, @Daveeeeeed looked older than his profile picture—in his thirties, at least, in black jeans and a white button-down stretched tightly across a concave chest and rotund belly; he reminded me of the alien in *American Dad*. In a windowless warehouse playing the Top 40s’ soulless death rattle—the kind of place with tattered Ladies’ Night posters of a diamond-encrusted stiletto—David sat at a table upstairs in the VIP area behind a faded velvet rope. Leaning back, his knees wide apart and his arms resting on the platform behind the banquette, he openly looked up and down Kayla’s body as we walked toward him. A hungry look that gave way to affected professionalism when we sat down. “Call me David!” he said, pronouncing his name *Da-veed*. I wondered what it said about *Da-veed* that he was the kind of man who bought the best table at a shitty club.

Kayla was smiling so wide her teeth looked like Chiclets under the purple club lighting. “I’m Kayla!” she said, matching David’s amphetamine cheer. If David was surprised that Hannah Primrose was a pseudonym, he didn’t show it; he was too busy staring at Kayla’s breasts. When Kayla introduced me as her “creative director,” he barely glanced my way. Wedged between me and David in the banquette seat, Kayla wrapped her arms around me as if to emphasize: *We’re a package deal!*

Not after tonight, I queasily thought.

“So, tell me,” David said, pouring vodka into three glasses, topping it off with a splash of orange juice. “Influencers are a dime a dozen these days. Twenty thousand followers, fifty thousand followers. A dog can get

that. Granted, a very cute dog.” He smiled, revealing a yellow left incisor. “What makes you special?”

Kayla talked about our audience. Thousands of girls who were just like us, from some shitty small town and hungry for a pastel-pink fantasy. To our followers, Hannah wasn’t just another pretty redhead with good skin and enviable style. She was a visual *diary*. The future of long form. Real-time creative nonfiction—

“What about men?” David asked, cutting Kayla off.

Kayla looked confused, then let out a throaty laugh. “What about them?”

“Men are half of the demographic,” David pointed out as if this was some Profound Thought. “Seems to me that it would be a bad strategy to overlook them.” He nudged Kayla playfully. “Throw them a bone every once in a while.”

Finally, I spoke. “That kind of content would alienate our female followers.”

For the first time all night, David looked at me. “Does Kim Kardashian alienate her female followers?” he scoffed.

“Kim was growing her audience twenty years ago. It was pushing the envelope then for a curvy woman to post photos of herself online.”

David smirked. “She still started her career with a sex tape.”

I chose to ignore this. “Now it just feels like playing to the lowest common denominator.” *Like you*, I wanted to add. But Kayla’s fingers were digging into my knee, a warning. “Then again,” I finished, pushing her hand away, “I’m not the social media manager.”

“No, you’re not,” David said flatly. The bottle girl walked by with her tray, and he eyed her before turning back to us, a smile plastered on his face. “This is all just preliminary discussion, anyways,” he said smoothly. “The most important thing is I’d love to sign you guys. I think we can do big things together. What do you say?”



“Let’s go,” I implored Kayla in the bathroom as I watched her shimmy her hot-pink thong down her thighs and squat over the toilet. As she peed, she swayed unsteadily on her heels.

“Why?”

“Um, because he’s creepy?”

Kayla giggled. She stood up, and I noticed that she’d shaved before I looked away. The mirror above the sink was covered in a Sharpie and lipstick scrawl: *W + V BFF, Janice is my homegirl!!* I wondered how many of them were still friends.

Kayla flushed the toilet; then her face appeared behind me in the mirror. She met my eyes for a moment, then looked away. But not before I caught that look on her face, like the darting tail of a deer in headlights: desperation.

“He can help us get brands,” Kayla said. “So what if he’s a little creepy? I can totally handle Da-veed.”

“*Da-veed* can’t get you places,” I pointed out. “*Da-veed* is just some vaguely European guy who wants to sleep with you. Do we even know if he’s legit?”

“He was Bella Rose’s first manager,” Kayla insisted. “Don’t believe me?” She pulled out her phone from her chunky gold-chain clutch. But the screen was black, inert. Her phone was dead.

“You didn’t charge your phone in the car?” I asked, feeling that familiar mixture of affection and exasperation.

“There’s pictures of him tagged with her. Anyways, it doesn’t matter.” Kayla shoved her phone back in her clutch. “You’re just in a bad mood because you didn’t go to your lame party.”

This shut me up. I stood there, watching Kayla grab a wad of paper towels and dab her forehead. There it was again, as if fluttering on wings, just within my fingertips: I could’ve told her about Harkness then, but the words stuck in the back of my throat. “David doesn’t need me,” I told Kayla instead—a cop-out. “Didn’t you hear him? He couldn’t care less about the captions.”

“But *I* need you.” She balled up the paper towels and smiled at me in the mirror. And it was the directness of Kayla’s appeal, that shining thread of vulnerability in her voice, that disarmed me. For weeks I’d been trying to figure out how to break the news, waiting to catch her at the right time, in the right mood. But was *I* ready to let go of Hannah? Of Kayla? I felt a glimmer of doubt. Maybe I didn’t need to choose between Kayla and Harkness. We could work something out. Long distance, or during my breaks from school. Maybe I was too quick to assume that the amniotic fluid of Kayla and me, floating in this world we made, had to be broken.

Kayla seized on my silence. “So, we’re in?” She jumped up and down and hugged me tightly. Lightning quick, she yanked on the doorknob and the bass of “All of the Lights” came thudding in.



Bottles had appeared on the table while we were gone. “Girls, how was the talk in the bathroom?” David asked, his tone mocking. I hated him.

Kayla told him we were in. “Excellent,” David said, rubbing his hands together.

The rest of the night sped forward. There was a round of tequila shots with discolored wedges of lime, and at one point David, with a furtive look, took out a little baggie of white powder, spilling its contents across the glass tabletop.

David, sniffing loudly, kept veering the conversation toward the personal: *Where did Kayla grow up? Had she ever been to London? Did she like Italian? Had she ever had the tomahawk at Charlie’s? No? Well, would she like to go sometime?*

In the years to come, of course, I’d see it for what it so obviously was: a power imbalance. We weren’t hardened party girls; I could’ve counted with one hand the number of times we’d drunk alcohol with less than fifty grams of sugar. And yet neither of us batted an eye at the coke. We wanted to seem adult, even as the night was tipping out of our control.

Kayla was very drunk. At David’s advances, his little touches here and there—a brush of the fingers, a hand lingering on the top of her arm—she reminded me of a statue, glassy eyed and remote. Coke, it turned out, made David edgy, restless. Persistent and artless, like a buzzard. “We should drive back—” I shouted at Kayla over the thudding bass, but David abruptly shot up to his feet, pulling Kayla with him to dance. I watched them: Kayla, laughing with her head tossed back, her graceful throat and long limbs dipped in the purple club lights; David leaning in to whisper something in her ear.

Kayla caught my eye and mouthed something. Even David turned around and gestured wildly for me to come over. Smiling, I got up and joined them. Kayla began to dance with me, and I mirrored her sexy baby doll movements, both of us aware of David’s eyes, of the fact even then that we were dancing for a coked-out middle-aged man who was sweating

profusely through his shirt. He brought the Patrón over, and we all took swigs straight from the bottle. Jumped up and down. Screamed at each other over the bass, *Woooooo*.

Time blurred. David was talking to me: something about cross-pollination, Mykonos. As if to make up for his total lack of interest in me earlier, he was overly familiar, clapping me on the back, smiling aggressively.

“Cheers,” he said, handing me a beer. We clinked bottles. “We’re going to be colleagues!” he yelled in my ear. Up close, David’s eyes were bloodshot. He put his hand on the small of Kayla’s back. “And *she’s* going to be a superstar!”

Kayla winked at me. She reached over, unsticking a strand of hair from my forehead. “I love you.”

David grinned, baring that yellow incisor again. “You girls are going to love the house!”

Kayla laughed easily. “What?” I asked uncomprehendingly.

“Pool, backyard. State-of-the-art kitchen. And the rest of the girls are sweethearts, you’ll love—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I said.

“Oh. Shit.” David looked at Kayla. “You didn’t tell her?”

“I wanted it to be a *surprise!* Surprise!” Biting her lip, Kayla grinned at me in a helpless kind of way. “David’s starting a collab house. Here, in New Orleans. And he’s invited us. Isn’t this amazing?”

“You told him *we’d move in?*”

“What’s the big deal? We’ve always talked about getting out of Paradise.”

“I can’t just pick up and move into a house with a bunch of influencers.”

“Why not?” Kayla laughed. “You’re just going to EMCC.”

I reared back as if I’d been slapped. So *that* was the way Kayla saw me. I wasn’t supposed to have my own dreams and ambitions and, if I did, they’d take me only a quarter tank’s worth of gas up the highway. I was just a doll to her, to be dragged out of Gator Park to wherever she liked.

Something flickered in my vision. It was the first time in our six years of friendship that I wanted to hurt her, to make *her* feel small for once:

“I got into Harkness,” I said.

Kayla’s face faltered. “What?”

“I got in,” I repeated, more softly. “And I’m going.”

Kayla opened, then closed, her mouth.

“Whoa,” David said. I’d forgotten he was there. “That’s an Ivy League, right?”

When Kayla spoke again, it was in this tremulous, eerie register I’d never heard before. “How long have you known?”

“Kayla—” I began.

“*How long?*” Kayla screamed, her mouth wide and her eyes bulging, a primal shriek that carried over the music.

“Oh shit,” David said.

Tears were running down my face. “Please,” I whispered, putting a hand on Kayla’s arm. “I didn’t mean to not tell you, I didn’t think I’d get in —”

Kayla shook my hand off. “Don’t follow me,” she hissed. Then she ran toward the exit, David close behind her, disappearing into the dark club.

Kayla, Kayla, Kayla, Kayla—I must’ve screamed after her a million times that night. The flash of anger I’d felt was gone, replaced by a panicky neediness that overwhelmed me. For a while—maybe it was thirty minutes or maybe it was hours—I lost them in the throngs of drunk people standing outside the club; I suspected they had gone into David’s car. I paced up and down the row of darkened vehicles in the parking lot, shouting Kayla’s name. I couldn’t call her; her phone was dead.

Finally, I heard David’s voice a few feet away. The door to a black SUV opened. David jumped out and, as I approached him, he gave me a look that was maddeningly superior, calm. Coke has a short half-life, which was convenient for men like him.

“Look, it’s been a hell of a night,” David said. He sniffed loudly. “Why don’t you girls take some space?”

Creep. “I’m not leaving without Kayla,” I said.

At that moment, Kayla climbed out of the back seat. Her hair was messed up, and the pale nude cup of her bra was peeking out the top of her dress. “Go home, Faith,” she said evenly.

“Will you be okay?”

Kayla met my eyes and nodded.

“Will we be okay?” My voice cracked.

But Kayla was already climbing back into the car, tossing me one final look over her shoulder. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” But she didn’t call me

tomorrow, or the next day, or the next.



The cabbie took the crumpled dollars I fished from the bottom of my purse and dropped me at the Greyhound station, where I slept on a bench. I took the bus back to Greenville in the morning. Eyes gritty from lack of sleep, I called Kayla over and over during the whole fourteen-hour ordeal. Her phone went straight to voicemail. *Hey there. If you're calling me and under the age of fifty, maybe you should just text. Or not . . .*

Sometimes I wonder if our friendship was meant to end on the cold linoleum floor of that bus station. Certainly anyone I've told this story to—anyone with a healthy amount of self-respect—would've considered the possibility, their eyes widening at the bare facts as I recited them: eighteen years old, ditched by my best friend in the middle of New Orleans at two in the morning. Kayla comes across terrible. Callous and vengeful, a little slutty. But *I* was the one calling her over and over again, like a woman with a bad boyfriend. I was the one who felt like I still needed to explain, to apologize. To mend what might've not needed mending.

What did that say about me?

By the time I got back to Gator Park, it was nearly dusk. I ran down the road to the Winnebago on concrete blocks, then veered a sharp right until I saw the edge of the woods, twilight seeping in through the treetops. The trailers in that part of the park were dark, not a sign of life except for a scrawny black cat darting from under one. At the end of the lane, surrounded by piles of garbage and debris—old tires, a rusted lawn mower, steel canisters, and mysterious white buckets of slop—the Gulf Stream clung to its patch of dirt like a long, aging toenail.

Kayla's mother, Brenda, opened the door. I can still see her in her fuzzy red bathrobe, smoking a Newport down to the filter. The way her tattooed eyebrows shot up at the sight of me. Suddenly I realized how I must've looked, dark bags under my eyes and clothes slept in from last night. "Um, hi, Ms. Brenda," I said, trying my best to sound casual, upbeat. "Is Kayla there?"

"Kayla didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"She's gone. Left this morning on a Greyhound."

I felt dizzy. “Gone? Gone where?”

“Didn’t say,” Brenda said vaguely. “Just came home, packed two garbage bags up, and lit out.” Her eyes flickered anxiously to the empty spot where Kayla’s stepfather parked out front.

“I told her she should go before he gets back.” Then she smiled wistfully. “I always knew she’d get out of here.”

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Chapter 2

My first night at Harkness, all the freshmen on my floor played the Deserted Island game: *If you could only bring an item that began with the same letter as your first initial, what would it be?*

“Deck of cards. In case we get bored, you know?”

Danielle, who lived across the hallway from me, was a spray-tanned brunette from one of the handful of cities that kids at Harkness liked to specify in lieu of the state: Los Angeles, Portland, or, in Danielle’s case, Dallas. Danielle from Dallas had pin-straight hair and a conventionally attractive face that was perpetually two shades lighter than her body. Sitting cross-legged on the couch next to her was her blond, willowy roommate, Blake, who, I’d overheard earlier in the bathroom, was Grace Kelly’s granddaughter. “Books,” Blake said crisply in an English accent. “Lots and lots of books, preferably on how to be rescued from a deserted island.” Everybody laughed.

Looking at those two, I envied them. Already, they seemed inseparable. In fact, each girl on my floor was sitting with her roommate, their faces flush with the glow of new friendship; right before our RA, Kelly, started the meeting, I’d listened to snippets of the conversations buzzing around me—hometowns and high school boyfriends, who was going to the party that night at Chi Gam.

My own roommate was MIA. Evelyn Baker was from Rye, New York. We’d friended each other on Facebook over the summer, but, curiously, Evelyn had never responded to any of my messages: **hey roomie! are you excited for next year? hi again, will you be bringing a microwave?**

Earlier that day, I’d opened the door to Smith 403D. The room was two halves that were perfect mirror images: two twin-size beds lined against opposite walls, two desks, two closets. A tall leaded-glass window overlooked the leafy quad, and the afternoon light streamed through the thin cotton curtains, warming oak floors nicked by the wear and tear of generations before me. It looked exactly how I’d imagined my freshman-year dorm room, reading all those worn paperbacks set on New England campuses: *The Secret History*, *A Separate Peace*. Austere, but more

importantly, I thought, it evened the playing field. Nobody would know that, up until then, I'd only slept on mattresses on the floor.

Randy walked to the window, tapped on the glass, and let out a low whistle. Opening it was a different matter. The hundred-year-old sash made a loud *squelch* as Randy's forearms strained with effort. It would be one of only three times I'd open the window for the rest of the year.

"This is what sixty grand gets you, huh?" Randy had joked as a breeze wafted in. He didn't get it. To him, a window was only as good as its ability to open, and a college was only as good as the job it got you after. All morning—as we drove into campus, picked up my orientation packet, found parking, and walked up to Smith—I could tell that Randy was thinking: *Is all this really better than Ole Miss?* Outside Smith—classic and redbrick with sky tunnels connecting it to the other four dorms that shared the quad—Randy shoved his hands in the pockets of his faded Levi's and walked in a slouching, almost-adolescent way past the fathers in Patagonia vests, not even making eye contact. It was the classic *if you aren't impressed with me, then I'm not impressed with you*.

It was for this reason that I had been glad we'd arrived earlier than Evelyn, whose parents wore Fair Isle sweaters in their Facebook photos. In the hallway with Randy, basic questions were land mines. *What is it that you do?* another father had asked Randy. My uncle—out of pride or embarrassment, I couldn't tell—rattled off a slew of jobs: *cook, property manager, warehouse specialist, handyman . . .* The other dad, a beefy, blond Dallas businessman, clapped him on the back and boomed: *A Renaissance man!* And so on, and so forth, the afternoon went—three, four, five more of these conversations like little paper cuts, until Randy finally got in his truck and drove away.

The game went on with girls in my dorm easily offering their answers. Most of these girls had gone to all manner of camps—summer camp, tennis camp, even murder-mystery camp—their whole lives and had honed their skills in *getting-to-know-you* games to an almost lethal degree. And what I'd soon find out was, even with a game as simple as Deserted Island, there was always a loser.

"My iPhone," a girl named India said. "Easy."

"It wouldn't have 4G," her roommate said, laughing.

"We're taking this game a little *too* literally," India retorted, tossing her long braids back, and I admired her cool, unflappable confidence. She

was one of only two Black girls in Smith.

“What about you, Faith?” Kelly asked, smiling encouragingly.

I had prepared my answer right away, so when twelve faces looked at me, expectantly, I shot out, “Flint,” too quickly. “To build a campfire.” It was a reasonable answer, but unmemorable. Twelve faces looked away.

“And you, Katie?”

“Kayak. I grew up in Seattle. Mercer Island.”

“Nice. It’s beautiful there. What about you, Cathy?”

“Um. A La-Z-Boy maybe?”

There was a long, surprised pause; then one of the girls let out a barely muffled giggle. India folded her arms. Kelly blinked. “Um. It has to start with your first initial.”

Cathy’s cheeks deepened to a bright red. I’ve since forgotten what she said next, but from then on, everyone, even the freshmen boys in the other dorms, called her *Cathy La-Z-Boy* behind her back. It was my first, brutal lesson at Harkness: If you failed to pay attention, if you lacked social vigilance—which was prized as highly as good grades—you became the clown. The butt of the joke. The prey.

That first night, I neither laughed at Cathy nor offered her a sympathetic smile. Instead, I averted my gaze, chewed the bottom of my lip, and listened to Kelly’s rundown of the rules: no smoking, no drinking, no drugs. “As you know, a central tenet of the Harkness community is our student-run Honor Code,” Kelly said meaningfully, looking around. “Well, all right.” She clapped her hands. “I’m down the hallway—you know where to find me. Welcome to Harkness!”

Girls got up, giggling, yelling, jostling, laughing. Bright, cheerful chatter of dorm parties, grabbing a free doughnut at the student café. I lingered, hoping that somebody, anybody, would strike up a conversation. Notice me. All these months I’d spent dreaming about Harkness, and I was going to spend my first night alone in my empty room. “Hey,” Kelly said, catching my eye as I was walking out. “Faith, right?”

I nodded, tried to smile. The RA didn’t count; she *had* to be my friend.

“Too bad about Evelyn,” Kelly said. “Great for her, but bummer they didn’t assign you another roommate.”

I stared at Kelly. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t they tell you? Evelyn got off the wait list at Harvard. They didn’t tell the school until last week, and the girl who was supposed to fill

her place got her parents to pull some strings last minute so she could get a single. On the plus side, all of that space is yours!”

“Oh *my God*,” came a voice behind me. I looked over; it was the willowy blonde, Blake, with Danielle glued to her side, looking at me with newfound interest. “Faith, you could throw massive parties,” she said breezily, with a cosmopolitan air. I looked at Kelly, half expecting her to remind us about the rules we’d just gone over. But instead, Kelly just laughed.

“But—” I thought about the rigamarole of enrollment: the forms, the money. That somebody would go through all of it only to jump to a bigger, slightly better school—in August, no less—was baffling. “What about her deposit?” It was \$1,500, nonrefundable.

Kelly let out an awkward laugh. “I mean, it’s Harvard.” Danielle brushed past me, and based on the way Blake threw a final, pitying glance in my direction, I knew I’d committed my first faux pas at Harkness.



The first few days, I drifted through campus like a ghost, scurrying out of my room twice a day for lunch and dinner in the dining hall. Shoveling down my food alone, I berated myself for not being more outgoing, social. *Just go sit down next to them*, part of my brain hissed as I passed by a group of girls I recognized from my floor. Instead, I walked quickly past them, clutching my tray. During orientation, the freshmen dorms buzzed with anxious friend making as alliances were hastily struck, then disbanded and redrawn, but I seemed to exist outside this relentless striving. I made a key discovery about myself that first week: I had no clue how to make friends here.

Those early days, I heard a lot about the “Harkness experience.” Students (and alumni) took a collective pride in the Harkness experience that bordered on cultish obsession. One Thursday evening after lunch, I took the long way from the café on the North Grounds back to the dorms and came across a throng of student protestors holding up signs in front of Banks Hall. From far away, I assumed that they were protesting reproductive rights—we were in Louisiana, after all—or racial justice or climate change, but as I got closer, I read the signs: **HARKNESS EXPERIENCE = WALKABILITY** and **NO TO BUSES** and **SAY NOPE TO DOBSON!!** A girl in pink

Birkenstocks came up to me and asked if I'd signed the online petition. My endorsement of their views, it seemed, was a foregone conclusion. "Oh, you haven't heard?" the girl asked, wide eyed, mistaking my confusion for ignorance. "They want to build the new computer science building north of the Observatory. That's, like, one and a half miles from Old Campus. They want to *put in buses*," she emphasized.

"What's wrong with buses?" I asked.

She looked at me as if I were an idiot. "Walkability is central to the *Harkness experience*."

"But isn't the new building needed because the CS classes are getting too big?"

She gave me a dirty look and flounced away. Like I said, I was terrible at making friends.

My only friend, after all, was Kayla, and she was no longer speaking to me. All summer, my texts went unanswered. On Instagram, Kayla had posted the graduation photos with cryptic hashtags like #HannahsGraduation, #dreams, #endofachapter, #nowherebutup. After that, @HannahPrimrose was dark all summer. Followers sent DMs that neither I nor Kayla responded to: **Hannah what're your plans after graduation??; hey do you wanna collab; hey babe are you alive?**

Then, a week before school started, I got a notification on my phone: **@Daveeeeeed has mentioned you in their story.**

Kayla and a brunette on some windswept balcony, both in plunging black dresses. Their arms were linked and they were looking at each other, laughing. **TGIF with these gorgeous gals @HannahPrimrose @BriannaLux** was David's caption. I quickly went to the girl's account—fifty-three thousand followers, not bad—and scrolled through her photos. The Kayla I knew would've dismissed the Brianna Luxes of the world as "Kim Kardashian copy and pastes." Now she was hanging out with them on a Friday night.

I took a screenshot. The photo was just there on my phone, all throughout that strange, buzzy first week—registering for classes, picking up my ID card—a photo I couldn't help returning to again and again, like picking at a scab. The more I stared at the photo, the more Kayla's beatific little smile looked like a smirk. It seemed to say: *See? I've moved on.*

Two could play at this game. The night before classes started, I pulled up my camera roll, which was filled with the photos I'd been taking while

aimlessly walking around campus: the clock tower, the flying buttresses on North Campus, jasmine blossoms blowing across the sidewalk. Finally I settled on one I'd taken of the ivy crawling up the redbrick wall right under my window. I posted it to my personal Instagram—@FaiththiBodeaux34578—which had a gray profile, no photos, and only a dozen followers, including Hannah. **New view** 🥰, I captioned. Not my best work.

I went to bed early. Lying on my back, I stared at the ceiling, letting my thoughts wash over me, hoping they would eventually drown out the pop-rap song on blast as my hallmates partied, yet again, into the early morning. Around midnight, I heard a knock on my door. There was some whispering, then Danielle from Dallas's voice: "Oh, don't even bother with her. She doesn't really hang."

I reached for my phone and checked on my photo. Kayla hadn't liked it.

Chapter 3

My first class was Microeconomics 101, held on the second floor of Banks Hall—otherwise known as “Bankers” Hall—in an auditorium that was freezing during the fall and subarctic in the winter. The professor was a harried blond woman in her forties, with a short bob and the modulated inflection of a Southerner who spent too much time in New York. I thought the first class would be a breeze, easing us into the semester. But Professor Sullivan spent ten minutes going over the syllabus, then launched straight into her lecture.

“Can anyone tell me the four factors of production?”

Nearly every hand in the room shot up, except mine. Despite Harkness’s reputation as a world-class liberal arts school, I soon learned that most students were Econ majors, their sights set on Wall Street after graduation. I turned to look at the row after row of glowing Apple logos. Looking down at my secondhand Dell, I wondered if there was a reading I’d missed.

Professor Sullivan called on the girl next to me. “Land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship,” she said crisply. “But there’s been a shift lately among economists to describe the fourth factor as technology, rather than entrepreneurship.” When Professor Sullivan nodded and moved on, the girl returned to typing furiously on her MacBook, her green Van Cleef bracelet jangling against the keyboard. For the rest of class, I darted glances at my neighbor. She was waifish, blond, dressed in a blue oxford shirt and black trousers, a sleek bun tucked under a blue cap with Greek letters: $\Lambda\theta$. But what really caught my eye were her shoes. Gleaming black loafers with tassels in a rich crocodile leather.

The girl was not beautiful; her best feature had to be her classical nose, which reminded me of the profile in a Victorian brooch. But she had a certain grace of movement that only the truly beautiful or rich have, a lack of self-consciousness in taking up space. After class ended, I took the bus to the DSW nearly an hour outside Franklin. They had a pair of black loafers on sale for fifty-nine dollars. It was the most I’d ever paid for shoes.



By the end of the first week, I was convinced that Harkness had made a grave mistake in admitting me. Three days later, my second Microeconomics class was, at times, maddeningly abstract, delving into concepts such as *mercantilism* and *elasticity* that made my head spin. Just as I thought I was beginning to get my bearings, we would pivot in an entirely different direction, going from the history of rational decision-making into a series of calculations about the elasticity of demand that might as well have been hieroglyphics to me. When the class was over, I felt totally, thoroughly fucked.

On Thursday, I started my campus job. For work study, I understood that I'd shave off \$2,000 per semester if I worked some magical number of hours—I couldn't work more than twenty hours per week, the lady at the financial aid office told me sternly, and no less than ten—but the precise set of circumstances that led me to take the night shift at the dining hall were complex and difficult, even then, to follow. The IT and library jobs were all taken; I had to qualify for the tutoring jobs. In any event, on a muggy September night—the first big party night of term—I passed by multiple pregames in Smith and walked across the quad to FoCo—short for Food Court, it was the main dining hall on campus. The inside was wood paneled, lined with portraits of alumni and trustees and former presidents, with a soaring ceiling that took my breath away; it reminded me of the inside of an old train station. By nine o'clock, the dinner crowd had thinned.

My supervisor was Regina, a tall Black junior from Memphis whom I remembered seeing a few nights before at the library circulation desk; in fact, I'd learn, she had three jobs: at the cafeteria, at the library, and—on Sunday afternoons—as a barista at North Grounds Café, making latte art for the international students. Her long curly hair was swept up in a colorful scarf, and her almond-shaped eyes crinkled in the corners when I asked her how she managed to do it all. “Time management!” Regina replied mockingly, and we laughed. During orientation, scholarship students had to take various modules in order to register for classes. Time Management was one of them, a three-hour video of the dean of Academic Affairs extolling the virtues of calendars, office hours, and the new Student Wellness Center.

Regina gave me a tour of the facilities. As we walked through the bustling kitchen, she introduced me to the students who manned the fryers

and washed the dishes and walked in and out of the large freezers in the back: Quan, a short, cheerful girl with large warm eyes and a nose ring; Cody, who was from Nebraska; and many, many others who flitted in and out of my life that first semester at Harkness. The “front of the house,” as Regina called it, was the sandwich line, the entrée line, the grill, and the halal counter that, for some reason, served freshly baked cookies, such that the two students who worked there had to pull cookies out of the oven every fifteen minutes or plate halal salmon and chicken—a strange combination of odors. “Leftover cookies you can take home with you,” Regina told me. “My advice? Stay away. The freshman fifteen can quickly become the freshman thirty if you work here.”

I smiled. Already, I liked Regina. She was the first person at Harkness I’d had this long of a conversation with, a conversation that hadn’t begun with “Excuse me.”

The schedule was set every two weeks. At this, Regina looked at me apologetically. “Listen, don’t take it personally,” she said. “We just go by seniority here. Everybody’s got to do their time, you know?”

As it turned out, the most unwanted job at the dining hall wasn’t what I expected at all; I thought it would be something menial, like washing the dishes or chopping onions. But *those* jobs were the ones everybody wanted.

I got stuck at the cashier register.

Twenty-four hours later, I stood in front of my till at the end of the row, shredding my cuticles under the bright-red number 6 sign. My shift was until close, and I was the only cashier. At half past eleven, a wave of students came trickling in from the library, from various clubs, from a movie at the old-fashioned theater on Main Street. As I rang up their cheeseburgers and turkey clubs, I heard snippets of their conversations: parties that weekend, the hand-wringing over what classes to drop before enrollment period ended. They mumbled *thanks*, barely flicking a glance my way. A brunette in a Tri Delt sweatshirt was rattling off all her clubs and rec sports to her friend. “Tuesdays and Thursdays are my *woooooorst* days,” she proclaimed as I typed in the special code for a buffalo burger with no bun. “I’m in classes from eight to friggin’ four, *then* I have Chapters where we’ve got all the recruitment stuff to plan for, *then* I have practice for volleyball, *then* I have Glee. I don’t know how I’m going to do it all!”

Maybe they should make her take the Time Management module, I thought.

After the Tri Delt left, I glanced at my phone, sitting down on the shelf in the till, and stopped breathing. Because on my phone was a notification: **@HannahPrimrose has posted two hours ago.**

Hannah's first post in four months.

Hannah's first post *without me*.

A cool, familiar voice interrupted me: "Hi, are you open?"

I looked up to see the blonde in Microeconomics, the one I'd sat next to for the past week. She was smiling at me politely but showed no sign of recognition. She took her time reaching into her New Yorker tote bag and fishing her ID card out of her wallet. When she swiped it, I caught her name: Andy Burwell. But all I could think about was what Hannah had posted.

Finally, as soon as Andy left, I grabbed my phone. Two swipes and there it was, too bright on my screen. The photo looked like the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* posters that hung in the boys' dorms. Kayla stood in a pool in a green triangle-top bikini, beads of water rolling down her popped booty and shoulder blades so sharp, they looked like they could kill. The comments were mostly from men:

FINALLY

yes

hot pic 😊

18 now?

finally follows through



So she'd listened to David, after all. It was a stinging rebuke, a slap across the face. It confirmed for me what I'd already known deep down inside: @HannahPrimrose had never truly been mine.



A few nights later, Randy called me. He asked if I still wanted to stay on the same phone bill. I told him that I'd manage. After a surprised pause, Randy said, "Well, okay then," and asked how I was doing, if I liked my classes, if

my roommate and I got along. Classes were fine, I found myself saying. I said nothing about my roommate.

“What about that work-study gig?” Randy asked. “Did you start that yet?”

I told Randy that I worked in the library. “I just sit at the desk and study,” I said.

I don’t know why I couldn’t even tell him I worked at FoCo. On the nights I came back from my shifts—fingers buzzing with a nervous kind of energy, the smell of fryer oil clinging to my clothes—I often thought of my uncle. All my life, Randy had worked as the property manager at Gator Park, but it only paid for our rent, so five nights a week he drove twelve miles up I-55 to the closest McDonald’s. When you took the gas money into account, Randy was flipping burgers for less than minimum wage, but he never complained. When I thought of how desperately I’d wanted Randy to leave on move-in day, I felt the trickle of shame like a cracked egg running down my face.

“How’s Kayla doing these days?” Randy asked. “Brenda tells me she moved out.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, trying not to sound bitter. “She won’t talk to me anymore.”

“Give her a break,” Randy said. “It probably isn’t easy on her, with you doing so well at Harkness. She’ll come around eventually.”

“Yeah. Right.”

Before hanging up, Randy said, “Your mother would’ve been proud of you.”

“She would’ve loved it here,” I replied, my voice unnaturally bright.

The second Tuesday of first term, I was working another late-night shift at the cashier. As the flyers around campus advertised, Tuesdays were “Late Nite @ FoCo”—a school-sanctioned night where they featured specials like molten lava cake and had a sushi bar with chefs from the only Japanese restaurant in town. In hindsight, I’m sure the administration wanted to promote sanctioned events where students weren’t holed up in some dorm room getting wasted.

Late Nite @ FoCo was everybody’s least favorite night to work. Something always went wrong with the specials, like the pies were left too long in the oven or a key ingredient ran out; for me, I quickly realized that bored, hungry college kids ordered sushi rolls in combinations that were

sociopathic. Some guy in a Lakers jersey had me ringing up a fourteen-ingredient roll that had potato chips, eel, and tempura. Then he argued with me about whether roe counted as a topping.

Past midnight was my favorite time: when my shift was almost over, and the dining hall was emptying out. All I could hear was the hum of the power vacuum, the clatter of dishes dropping into hot, soapy water. Harkness felt most like it belonged to me then: when I could luxuriate in the in-between moments. Staring out at the empty row of tills, I started thinking about my mother again. It still seemed impossible to me that Harkness was the last thread connecting me to her; more impossible, still, that I'd had no inkling that she'd once harbored such dreams.

Then I remembered: There'd been that book.

I could still see its tattered cover, of red-carpet steps leading up to a museum. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* was a children's book, and yet I could not recall my mother ever reading it to me. A few months after my mother's death, I found it in a box with her things—old DVDs, white cardboard jewelry boxes with cheap jewelry. I fished it out, its pages soft with mildew, and read it right away. Two children hiding in a museum. Nights spent prowling the corridors, collecting coins from the fountain. I even read the book to Kayla; she loved it too. But while I loved the cozy, enveloping mystery, the idea that anything as grand and adult as the identity of Michelangelo's masterpiece could be hidden away in an old file, Kayla loved the grift. Kids somewhere they shouldn't be, getting away with something. Ringing up an apple, I wondered what my mother had loved about it.

"That's one expensive apple."

I looked up to see an older man—probably in his sixties, I thought. Later, I'd learn he was on the precipice of fifty. He had a wild mop of curls and dark eyes slyly twinkling in a scraggly Roman face. "Even here." He gave a small, almost imperceptible nod toward the price on the scanner: fifty dollars.

I apologized, fumbling to undo my mistake. "It's only the second week," he said, a little teasingly. "Don't tell me you're burning out already." I noticed his tan corduroy jacket, his white shirt with the top button undone, revealing a hint of dark, coarse hair. The thick watch bulging on his wrist. But then I glanced down at his fingers and was surprised to see that they weren't the hands of a professor, well manicured and soft. The skin around

the cuticles was rough, cracked, and there was something caked in his fingernails. He worked with his hands.

Maybe this was why I found my tongue loosening: “Sushi Night isn’t for the faint of heart,” I said, cracking a wry smile. “Makes you lose faith in our future leaders of tomorrow.”

“You must’ve seen some truly toe-curling combinations,” he deadpanned.

“The jalapeño cream cheese with four different kinds of fish was particularly traumatic.”

His face became thoughtful, and I flushed under his direct gaze. It was one of those moments that made me realize, I had never been *seen*, truly seen before. Like I’d been hovering between the channels as black-and-white static, and with one look he’d flicked me into dazzling Technicolor.

“You have one of those faces that shows everything,” he suddenly declared, and I was so taken aback all I could do was gape at him. Then he said gently, almost as if it was a reproach: “Somehow I think you had more on your mind than your classmates’ sushi orders.”

“I was thinking about this book I loved,” I finally said.

“What book?” he asked. I told him. “Okay,” he said, taking a bite of his apple. “*That* I wasn’t expecting.”

It was the second-longest conversation I’d had with anyone at Harkness. I told him what it was like ringing up my classmates’ meals, night after night, feeling like *they* were the students, and I was just an automatic kiosk, there to scan their chicken tenders, count up the add-ons, confirm the gluten-free options were, in fact, gluten-free. But that the strange, magical time past midnight, when the dining hall was about to close, made me feel, in some small, immeasurable way, that the place was all mine: the crumbs strewn on the maple tables, the eyes of the portraits that seemed to follow me. “The place feels like—like a *secret*, you know?” I was rambling now. “The way the museum felt like a secret to the kids in that book.”

I’d said too much. Mortified, I stopped talking.

The man took another bite of his apple. He looked thoughtful as he chewed. “You know, I’ve always thought the janitor had the best job at the Met. Every night mopping the floors, alone with all those paintings. Only the stewards of a place can know it fully,” he added, and I could tell this thought delighted him.

“I like to think that,” I said, giving him a watery smile. “Instead of the NPCs that we essentially are.”

“NPC?”

“Sorry. Video game term. It means nonplaying character. A nobody. A person who’s in the background but not part of the story.”

“NPC.” He chuckled. “I’m going to remember that.”

The next night, the man came back around midnight again, and when our eyes met, we both smiled. It felt like we shared an inside joke. This time he had a banana and a yogurt. He also had a small, glossy paperback. “I owe you a book recommendation.”

For such a small book, it was surprisingly heavy. The cover was dark maroon, and the title was printed in small Roman typeface: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art—Catalog: 1983–2016*. Inside, there were dazzling reproductions on every page: Virgin Marys and stormy landscapes and dappled fields. “Every painting that hangs in the Met,” he said.

I looked up, and he smiled, almost shyly, at my excitement. “I thought you might be interested in seeing what those kids saw.”

“Thank you,” I said.

As he turned to leave, he paused and looked back. “Still think you’re an NPC?” he asked, smiling. He pointed to the name tag on my uniform I’d left blank.

“Here I am,” I said with a wry smile.

He held my gaze for a second too long. “Well. For the record I think you’re wrong.”

Chapter 4

Instead of doing my Econ assignment that night, I stayed up late, poring over the pages of the Met catalog. There were paintings even I recognized—*Starry Night*, Monet's flowers—but most were a gilded mystery, impenetrable, holy, and it was with a kind of rapture that I drank them all in: like I'd been wandering in the desert my whole life, and all of a sudden there were streams, rivers, oceans.

For the record, I think you're wrong. I sat in bed in my still-sparse room, wondering if he'd been hitting on me. At that point, I'd been kissed only twice in my life, both times involving zero flirtation. Doug McCombs grabbing the back of my head in a dark closet during Seven Minutes in Heaven; the cousin of a guy Kayla had a crush on, playing "keep the friend occupied" at a bar at 3:00 a.m. The man was probably one of those professors who gave their cell phone numbers to students and talked about mental health during office hours. He was probably just being nice—keeping an eye out for kids who rang up apples wrong. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about how easily we'd fallen into banter. It was a shock, really: that the part of me that was witty, quick, could be brought out by someone who wasn't Kayla.

"How're your classes?" my adviser, Dean Walters, asked the next day. I'd heard the students called her "Bugz" behind her back, owing to the large, expressive eyes that took up most of her face, giving her a bug-like, ancient quality. She was a Harkness institution; she'd been at the school for nearly three decades and had a penchant for quilted jackets and gold-buckle loafers. I was told that I was lucky to have her; it was one of the "advantages" of my Stegner scholarship.

"Um." I stared at the Zen garden on Bugz's desk, the ripples of sand and the smooth stones. "Honestly? I don't know if Econ's right for me."

Bugz frowned and tapped her pen. "Well, what would you like to major in instead?"

"I don't know." I thought of the glow of the screen, the cursor blinking. All those hearts ticking up, up, up. "I like to write, I guess?"

"Terrific!" Bugz said, but there was an obvious false note in her voice. "A seminar, perhaps, or one of the literature classes." Then she looked at

me for maybe the first time since I'd sat down. "If you want my unvarnished advice, dear, I'd suggest you stick it out with your Econ classes. It's up to you, of course, but as I'm sure you're hearing from your parents—"

"Uncle."

"Right. Of course. My point is, I'm sure he'd want you to give Econ a fair shot. It's a tough job market out there." Before I got up to leave, Bugs gave me a brochure for the Academic Resources Center. There were appointment slots I could sign up for online.



That week Hannah Primrose posted multiple times. Thirst traps, mostly. A mirror selfie of her in cotton briefs, her phone covering her breasts. Bikini photos—sometimes alone, sometimes with other girls. The captions were always a few cryptic words—**Morningggg**, she captioned a photo dump of her doing yoga in see-through leggings with a string of nonsensical emojis.



On Sunday I went to the campus bookstore to buy a book I needed for class. The bookstore was under a green-and-white-striped awning on Main Street, between a small grocery that sold brown eggs and kombucha and the theater. Inside the air smelled of burned coffee and ink. I browsed through all the used copies of *Principles of Accounting* on the shelf, trying to find the one with the least highlighting. Eventually, I decided that a book with every sentence highlighted was preferable to one with every other sentence, and drifted toward the cashier, book in tow. On tables and along the walls were books on every subject taught at Harkness: applied mathematics and Egyptology and the poems of Emily Dickinson; there was even a seminar on Bob Dylan, notorious on campus for the jocks showing up to class secretly high.

Toward the front of the store, by the seating for the café, a poster board announced a book signing. I did a double take. **Talk & Book Signing 10/15! Lost Daughters: Reclaiming the Workshop in Renaissance Italy,**

by Harkness Professor of Art History Charles Wyman. Beneath the title was a photo of the man from the dining hall.

He was slightly younger in the photo. A distinguished-looking man in a dark blazer and blue oxford shirt. **Charles “Chuck” Wyman is one of the most eminent art historians of the twenty-first century. Introduced at an early age to art, Mr. Wyman came under the influence of the connoisseur and legendary dealer Bernard Brown. At the age of twenty-seven, Mr. Wyman was appointed head curator of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. In *Lost Daughters: Reclaiming the Workshop in Renaissance Italy*, Professor Wyman dismantles the myth of (male) solitary genius—and discovers the astonishing women artists behind some of Western painting’s most celebrated works.**

I reread it twice. *Head curator . . . Metropolitan Museum of Art . . .* His words from the other night running through my head: *You know, I’ve always thought the janitor had the best job at the Met.* He’d said it so lightly, nothing in his tone betraying that it was anything but a casual statement. Had I really been talking about a *children’s book* with a former director of the Met? I felt embarrassment, then a swooping thrill.

I asked the cashier, “Where are the books for Professor Wyman’s class?”

Every one of the books for Professor Wyman’s Introduction to Art History was a gorgeous, lushly illustrated tome tightly wrapped in plastic. The list hanging off the shelf had the prices: \$125.34 for *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*, \$97.12 for Stokstad and Cothren’s *Art History*, \$15.37 for Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* . . . I picked up the Gardner. Like an anchor, the textbook sank into my hands. On the cover was a famous abstract painting of a lone cypress tree in the hilly countryside. There were no used copies.

Chapter 5

“Can you roll?” the host, Esther, asked me, taking out a pill bottle from a box covered with resin hearts and holding a thin white paper. I shook my head; I’d never liked weed. Earlier that day Blake had invited me to this pregame, mostly out of politeness when I’d given her some quarters in the laundry room. For the past hour I’d nursed a White Claw on the futon, petting Esther’s emotional support bunny, Wilbur—an obese black-and-white fluff ball with lopsided ears—while the other girls talked about rush. Esther’s boyfriend, Arno, was in and out; there was another pregame the floor below in a lacrosse player’s room. Arno shuffled in every twenty minutes or so, changed the song on the laptop, then left again.

Esther crouched on the floor. She was pale and skinny, with a long neck that was accentuated by her space buns. Wilbur hopped over to her. She scratched him between the ears with one hand and uncapped the pill bottle with the other. As pungent, bright-green buds fell on the cover of her textbook, I noticed the cypress tree: *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*.

Ripping apart the buds with her fingers, Esther asked, “Are you going to rush?”

“Oh. I don’t know,” I said. “What about you?”

“I mean, yeah,” Esther replied, her eyes intent on the joint she was rolling. Wilbur sat perfectly still in the crook of her arm, staring at me with black, unblinking eyes. Clearly the bunny was used to this. “I don’t want to just party in gross frat basements for all four years.”

I asked if she was in the Intro to Art History class. Flicking her lighter, Esther looked at me. “Yeah, I am. Are you?”

“I’m still shopping around.”

Esther passed the spliff to me, and I took it; I didn’t want it, but it was at least something to do with my hands. I inhaled, letting the smoke fill my lungs, and then exhaled slowly, deliberately. “Do you like the professor?”

“Wyman?” She shrugged. “He’s a good lecturer, but I’m not, like, obsessed with him or anything. Why?” she said, arching her eyebrow. “Are you?”

“No,” I sputtered. “Why would I be?”

“I’m just messing with you.” Esther grinned; she reminded me of a cat taking lazy swipes at me, all because I was in her territory. In her room, smoking her weed. I turned down a second hit, and Esther, shrugging, continued to puff. “Personally,” she said, “I’m skeptical of Wyman’s whole”—Esther raised her brows higher—“shtick. I just don’t believe that men can be feminists. He publishes anything and everybody goes nuts because, wow, he’s such a *good ally*.”

“You seem pretty knowledgeable,” I said. “Are you an art history major?”

“Yeah,” Esther said in a tone that suggested an existential crisis. “My mother really wants me to. I’ll probably intern at Sotheby’s next summer.”



Time passed quickly at Harkness. Days turned into weeks, until one morning I opened my eyes in the warmth of my bed and realized that I’d been at Harkness for an entire month. A month of classes that got only more difficult, breakfasts of black coffee and lunches of wilted salad from the salad bar, parties in dorms I passed by, uninvited, late at night, on my way home from the library or dining hall. Most nights, I still checked Hannah’s Instagram.

When people ask me about Harkness, they always ask some variant of this question: *Would you still have gone?* The implication, of course, is that I might’ve been happier somewhere else. But happiness, I think, is beside the point, because I don’t know who I’d *be* without Harkness—or without Kayla, for that matter. When I think of October, I always think of that October, the first one—the smell of campfire and peat in the air; the sidewalks littered with bright-red leaves; the toffee-nut-flavored coffee they served in North Grounds Café; and the houses lit up like lanterns on Greek Row.

Two things happened in October. One somewhat accidentally—I went out for rush. One day, passing by the Student Pavilion, I saw dozens of booths, draped in a wide range of colors and Greek letters: pink and white for Delta Nu, silver and blue for Delta Delta Delta, blue and gold for Alpha Rho.

I recognized the blond girl behind the Alpha Rho booth. We’d graduated to occasional hellos in Econ class, awkward smiles when I rung

her up at FoCo. “How *are* you?” Andy exclaimed. “Are you going to rush?”

Andy, as it turned out, was a rush adviser as well as on the Panhellenic Council (and the Honor Committee, and SGA), which meant she viewed assuaging my concerns with the Greek system as on par with solving world hunger or getting out the vote. Rush at Harkness, she assured me with twitchy-eyed determination, was different from other schools in the South with their letters of recommendation (“Everybody just asks the one lady they grew up with in the neighborhood”) and their headshots (“over the top”) and their rush #OOTD (“I don’t believe in mass consumption”). Then she extolled the virtues of her house, Alpha Rho: Philanthropy! Sisterhood! A house with a pool!

“Of course,” Andy quickly added, “all of the houses are amazing. There’s a house for every girl.”

And maybe it was that promise—“*There’s a house for every girl*”—that made the loneliness of the past month well up inside me. I wrote my name down on the sign-up sheet.

A week—and countless #RushVlog YouTubes—later, I trudged along in my black DSW loafers as we were led on a tour through Alpha Rho’s house, a white-columned mansion in the heart of Greek Row. This was my rush group’s last stop that hot, muggy afternoon—an afternoon of sweet tea and frenzied small talk; blisters and curls drooping from the heat—but I could feel the *tick* in everybody’s spines, straightening up as we were herded under the *Aø* glinting in gold above the blue double doors. “*Cerulean blue*,” Andy tossed over her shoulder with an easy smile. “Those are our colors. Cerulean blue and gold.”

The foyer had a crystal chandelier and a grand wrought iron staircase with plush carpeting as wide as an aisle in Walmart. On the right there was a living room with beige couches and gold-accented furniture, and on the left there was a library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The hallway was lined with composite photos of every pledge class (“As far back as 1899!” Andy chirped) and no doubt led to any number of rooms, all rumored to be fabulous. A snack room. A movie theater. A bowling alley. There were fifteen sororities at Harkness, but only seven had the distinction of having a house on Greek Row, and three were considered the most prestigious: Tri Delta, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and Alpha Rho. According to Greekrank.com, Alpha Rho lagged behind the Tri Delts and Kappas in popularity, clout. But they edged the others out by having the best house on campus.

“Ladies!” Andy clapped her hands. “Who wants to see the yoga room?”

The tour ended at the rooftop pool. The Alpha Rhos burst out in shrieks of welcome—no terrifying door chants here, thankfully—and I blinked, momentarily stunned: by the brilliant blue pool, the sweet smoky air, the glossy blowouts, and practiced charm. I’d never seen so much Lilly Pulitzer in my life. Sisters in bright floral shifts, their clavicles bony and spray tanned under glittering gold necklines as they paired off with the recruits. Within earshot, I heard one of the sisters, a tall, lanky blonde in a blue-and-pink romper, approaching India. “Oh, I *love* your hair,” she cooed. “How do you get it so shiny?”

“Oh! Thank you,” was all India said. Later on, I’d hear that she’d accepted a bid from Theta Sigma, one of the Black sororities on campus.

“Faith!” Andy came up to me, beaming. “Have you met our president, Ginny?”

The tall brunette who was with her gave me a once-over, a flick of a glance that betrayed boredom, which she quickly masked with a saccharine smile. “How *are* you?” she asked in a honeyed Southern drawl, and instantly I thought: *cottage cheese*. That was her order, every time I saw her on my shifts: a scoop of cottage cheese sprinkled with cranberries. Not surprisingly, she was the epitome of effortful beauty from head to toe: salon highlights, perfect tan, a nose she’d likely been contouring since she was twelve. She wore a Lilly Pulitzer dress that, with ice-cream hues and bows tied on the shoulders, looked remarkably like the one Kayla had found at Goodwill that summer.

Before I could respond, Danielle appeared next to me. “Danielle Shipley-Carpenter,” she gushed, addressing Andy and Ginny. “My mother was legacy.”

My smile faltered. Earlier that day, stepping out of 403D, I had run into Danielle. She looked down and smirked at my DSW loafers. “Prada?” she asked, mockingly.

For those who think women shouldn’t serve in the army, they’ve clearly never met a PNM in October at a Southern university.

“What class was she in?” Andy asked eagerly. “My mother was ’88.”

Danielle hesitated. “She was Texas Tech.”

“Oh,” Andy said, clearly disappointed. “Two very different chapters.”

Ginny laughed. “Don’t worry,” she told Danielle. “Andy’s a stickler for the details.” Then she turned to me again, frowning. “Have we met before? You look familiar.”

I laughed too easily. “Same class, maybe?”

“No, it isn’t that,” Ginny said, refusing to drop it. “I’m mostly doing independent study this year.”

Danielle looked back and forth between Ginny and me, something eager, and rapacious, overtaking her dull face. Finally, Andy spoke: “She works in FoCo.” Everybody looked at me, and I felt the color rising on my cheeks, a deep, embarrassed flush. “Twenty percent of the sisters at Alpha Rho do work study,” Andy quickly added.

“Right, of course!” Ginny said. “I can be such a ditz sometimes.”



The second thing that happened in October was that I went to Professor Wyman’s book signing.

The bookstore was crowded that Sunday afternoon, and the weather had turned: I remember the chill in the air as I stood outside, looking through the window. Just beyond the latest bestsellers propped up like pastries, there were four rows of white chairs—and at a quarter to the hour, every single seat was filled. Mostly by women: students, like me, in their Harkness sweatshirts, but also older women who wore designer glasses and scarves. Standing in the back by a group of art history majors—I spotted Esther’s space buns among the black turtlenecks—I overheard one of them say archly: “God, this is a bit disgusting, isn’t it?”

Esther muttered a name I didn’t recognize under her breath, and they both burst out laughing. Later that night, I Googled the name: that of a very famous art critic who was known to be a showboat, charged by *his* critics with “dumbing down” art for the general public. The point of comparison, I gathered, was that Professor Wyman had sold out.

In this way I came to know: Professor Wyman was a big deal.

“I’ll give the guy this, though,” the friend continued. “At least Wyman never makes us buy his books for class. Did you see Haller’s list for his seminar? The man made us buy every monograph he’s ever published, including one that’s been out of print for twenty years.”

It didn't seem like Professor Wyman needed his undergraduates to buy his books. Up and down the rows, I saw copies of *Lost Daughters* peeking out of handbags, or on laps opened to heavily underlined pages; a girl in the front row was actually reading it, flipping the pages deliberately, as if she were cramming for a pop quiz. I stared at the cover of the top book stacked on the table next to me. It was a dark, gloomy painting of an old man and a boy. The old man—tall, pale, gaunt—sat hunched in his chair, an expression of worn contemplation or perhaps just the confusion of old age raking his face. Only the boy looked directly at the viewer. In the back-right corner, the boy had a somber, but winking, quality—the true source of the painting's narrative power. I wondered who, exactly, the daughter was supposed to be.

At that moment, Professor Wyman walked in.

He was late to his own book signing. In the bustle of the bookstore, I hadn't heard the door open, but I felt a gust of cold air on the nape of my neck, and something like the wind skittered its way across the rows of chairs, ushering in total silence. Heads turned as the man from the food hall stopped to shake hands with the owner of the bookstore. The woman he was with—Professor Hopper, her name in smaller typeset on the signboard, short and frizzy haired—at least had an apologetic look on her face. Perching, somewhat awkwardly, on one of two stools angled toward each other in front of the room, she cracked a joke: “You'll have to excuse our lateness. We're on Renaissance time.”

Titters in the crowd.

Eventually Professor Wyman made his way to the front. Unlike the woman, he swung his legs over the stool with ease, sitting with his knees wide, but not too wide, apart. He was not a tall man, nor was he particularly fashionable in his dark wool sweater and creased trousers, but still: The man had presence.

Professor Hopper was clearly in love with him. As she introduced him—*John L. Schwab Chair of the Humanities . . . former head curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*—she kept tucking, and untucking, a lock of hair behind her ear. “So tell me about the cover,” she segued, smiling widely. “*Old Man and a Boy*. This was long considered one of Tintoretto's most famous paintings, but in 1920, they reattributed it, didn't they, Professor Wyman?”

Professor Wyman took a sip of water. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Finally, he put the bottle of water down and smiled at her: "Who's going to buy the book now, Professor Hopper?"

Everybody laughed.

"You know, I dislike the word *retribution*," Wyman continued, more gravely. Instantly, we fell silent again. His dark eyes roamed from left to right. "It's so bloodless. So technical. When really, the stakes couldn't be higher. Who do we remember in the annals of history? Whose names are on the title cards in museums? Whose art do we preserve for hundreds of years, through war and peace, feast and famine? The Tintoretos, the Titians." He smiled ruefully. "Not Marietta Robusti, who was Tintoretto's daughter and whose signature was discovered in the lower-right corner of *Old Man and a Boy* in 1920. She worked in her father's workshop from a young age—Tintoretto even dressed her up as a boy so she could go to appointments with him. Of course, that didn't stop him from marrying her off, and she died in childbirth at twenty-three. After her death, not so coincidentally, the quality of Tintoretto's work declined." A wry twist in the corner of his mouth. "Explained away by his contemporaries and male art historians as grief."

"In your book, you assert that the painting is actually a self-portrait. That Marietta is the boy."

"I do," Professor Wyman said simply. "Now, my detractors—of which there are many—will say it's pure conjecture. But for all the reasons I just set forth, I believe it to be true. And, of course, there's the most important part of it."

"What's that?" Professor Hopper asked, smiling.

"When *I* look at the painting, that's the emotional truth of it," Wyman said. "I see Marietta Robusti. I *feel* her. And that's good enough for me."

I'd never heard of these artists or the painting, but that day in the bookstore was like a skeleton key, turning. In telling this particular story of *Old Man and a Boy*, Professor Wyman—and Professor Hopper—were adding their own distortions, their own little truths, to a larger conversation about Art and Beauty that made the clumsy, half-baked thoughts I had crowding in the back of my mind seem as shallow as an Instagram post.

I was breathless, dazzled.

Esther raised her hand. "Doesn't it bother you that, in publishing this book, you're privileging your voice over the female art historians who've

actually made these discoveries? Whitney Chadwick, for example, has been writing about Marietta Robusti since the 1980s.”

“Hello, Ms. Fishburns,” Professor Wyman said affably to peals of laughter—even Esther cracked a smile. “Good to see you.” More laughs. But then Professor Wyman’s face got more serious, and he tented his fingers together. “I agree with you—I shouldn’t be the authority. In a crowded room, I don’t want my voice to be loudest.”

“But that’s just what happens,” Esther replied. “Look at Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, which everyone considers, like, this revolutionary text on feminism in art and the male gaze, but really he just ripped off—”

“Berger was a synthesizer,” Professor Wyman said, nodding. “Look, you’re not wrong. But isn’t it fascinating, still? That the study of the problem becomes the problem itself?”

Right before they wrapped up, Professor Wyman passed around flyers for a new Art History Department initiative. *Art Meets Conservation, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 9 PM, Wendell Observatory* read the text, accompanied by a photo of what looked to be binoculars. “Anyone can join,” Professor Wyman said.

For a flicker of a moment, I thought he was looking straight at me.



That night, I Googled Wyman. Photo after photo filled my screen. Wyman profiled in *Ocean Drive Magazine* during Art Basel last year; Wyman, much younger, in a black turtleneck and wire-framed glasses, his lips pressed into a thin smile on the steps of the Met. On the third page of search results, Wyman’s Rate My Professors rating was 4.5/5. **The man can teach but he literally does business with Russian oligarchs so that’s a no for me,** vermeergirly wrote.

When I was done, I closed my laptop and went to bed. I reached for the book Wyman gave me, on the nightstand, and flipped through the pages. Naked women were enshrined on every page—lounging in the shady grass, dancing in twos or threes, bathing, picking flowers. I flipped the pages for a long time in search of a female artist. The only one I came across was Clara Peeters; a still life of a bouquet of flowers, the tulips drooping and the petals edged with rot.

I put down the book and reached for my phone. I checked Instagram for the first time all week. Earlier that day Kayla had posted a naked photo of her, two flower emojis covering her nipples.

Are you real



Qqqqqqttttt



Sexy

why don't you stop acting like a whore and go to college?

My brain skipped over it, at first, then returned to that last comment, reading it over and over, grasping for a different tone than the one that was clearly there. It had been posted eighteen minutes ago by a man who wore sunglasses in his profile picture and lived in Arizona or maybe Nevada, judging by his handful of photos of cacti and guns. *Loser*, I thought. I flagged the account for Instagram and turned off my phone.

But brushing my teeth in the bathroom, I still couldn't shake off the tingle of unease. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something about that comment that was peculiar, menacing.

That night it took a long time before I fell asleep.



I woke to my phone blowing up. For a hazy, still-groggy moment I thought I was back in Gator Park with Kayla and we'd just posted to a steady stream of hearts cascading down our screens . . .

But then, remembering, I bolted up. There was a red dot when I opened my private account: **AndyBananas01, itslauuuuuuren, ginny_spearsMS, and 212 others have requested to follow you.**

Three hours later, I was standing in a line of twenty-five girls snaking along the composite-lined hallway and down the basement—Alpha Rho's new pledge class. I still couldn't believe it. Had *Andy*—of all people—vouched for me? When I ran through those blue doors—past the columns outside covered in blue and yellow balloons, past the throngs of screaming sisters—Andy pulled me in for a hug. Her perfume was a woodsy citrus. “I was rooting for you,” she said in a strangely matter-of-fact tone.

“Thank you—” I began to stammer, but she cut me off, flashing a perfectly white smile.

“We all thought you were *adorable*.”

The girl in front of me in line turned. “Hey there,” she said warmly. “I’m Callie.”

“Faith.”

“I’ve seen you around Smith. I’m on the third floor.” We both watched as Ginny and Andy floated by in white dresses and flower crowns. “I was *positive* I’d get dinged,” Callie said in an awestruck tone. “I’m not really what they look for, you know?”

Her self-deprecation took me aback. Callie was tall and pretty with broad shoulders and dark-brown hair in a thick braid down her back; she was the daughter of two dentists in Westchester, as I’d later learn. If a girl like Callie didn’t think she’d get a bid, how the hell did I get one?

Callie leaned in. “This girl on my volleyball team got dinged last year. During deliberations, they put up on the projector every PNM’s photo, and when they got to her, they all yelled *nope* and moved on. Brutal, right?”

“Ouch,” I said. “Why her?”

Callie grinned. “She hooked up with one of the officers’ boyfriends. They were on a break, in her defense.”

In return, I offered up what little dirt I had on sororities. Crowdsourced on the internet, of course, but I passed it off as casual gossip of which I was personally privy to.

“At Bama, the girls open their envelopes together on Bid Day. Imagine hundreds of girls jumping up and down because they got a bid, right next to girls sobbing because they opened up their envelope and it was empty.”

Callie’s eyes widened in horror. “That’s medieval,” she said, hushed, reverential. I decided I liked her.

When we got to the basement, Callie grabbed my arm. “Oh my God.”

The basement was a dance party, blue and yellow streamers dangling from the ceiling and Beyoncé on blast. There was a large neon sign that read **ALPHA RHO** in cursive, in front of which girls were taking photos, posing with their “new sisters for life!” as I overheard some of them scream into the camera—for their vlogs, I assumed. “Let’s go to the bar!” Callie yelled in my ear, and I followed her lead as we fought our way through the crowd of ruffled skirts and pin-straight hair. I spotted Danielle taking shots of something pink at the end of the bar, with two Alpha Rhos wearing

cowboy hats and feather boas. She caught my gaze and arched her eyebrow. *You?* she seemed to say. I grinned. Not even Danielle from Dallas could ruin my mood today.

Behind the bar a sister looked us up and down. “Be cool,” she said sternly. “No photos. Don’t be *that* freshman.” Then, with impressive alacrity—she must’ve made good use of the yoga studio—she pumped the keg, filling two red Solo cups with foamy beer, which she handed to Callie with a smile. “Welcome to Alpha Rho.”

“Chug?” Callie asked with a mischievous glint. We clinked cups, laughing. “I can tell we’re going to be good friends,” she yelled above the music.



The hangover lasted all day. When I showed up for my afternoon shift, Regina took one look at me and snorted. “Damn, girl. What’d you get into last night?”

Throwing an apron over my head, I made a wry face. “Is it that obvious?”

“That you fell into a vat of beer? Um, yeah.”

“Well, I’m covering for Quan. The clientele doesn’t have to smell me.” A week ago, Quan had texted asking me to cover her shift; but it struck me that Quan—a junior in EKT—had pulled one over on me.

Regina pulled a basket of fries out of the fryer, giving them a little shake. “Trust me,” she snorted, “the clientele doesn’t smell any better. The day after Bid Night is the worst. You’ve never seen so many brain-dead sorority girls in line for their chicken tenders.” Regina darted a glance at me. “Wait, did you get a bid?”

Feeling like a little kid with a brand-new bike I couldn’t ride yet, I nodded.

“I didn’t even know you rushed! Congratulations. What house—EKT? Chi Omega?”

“Alpha Rho,” I said.

The pause stretched out a little too long, and when Regina put down the basket with a clatter, she turned to me and spoke in a tone that was noticeably cool: “Oh, well, that’s great. Alpha Rho’s a top house.”

“What?” I laughed. “What’s wrong with Alpha Rho?”

Regina shrugged. “You just don’t seem like the typical girl who gets a bid from them.” And then, seeing the look on my face, she softened. “I mean that as a compliment.”

“What’s the typical girl?” I asked, even though I knew.

“Rich blondes,” Regina replied.



For the rest of the afternoon, I made grab-and-go sandwiches. The prosciutto came in thin, transparent slices, redolent with fat, and left a crust of salt on my gloves; the mozzarella I sliced off with a knife, from white doughy orbs that floated in a container of cloudy water. My headache made me feel like I was floating in my own scuzzy water. Worse was the bottomless pit of my stomach, twisting in hunger for grease and salt. I was tempted to pop a slice in my mouth.

Regina’s words kept slipping and sliding in my mind, but I couldn’t get traction on them. Deep down inside, I knew she was right: Yesterday I stood out at Alpha Rho just as much as my DSW loafers. At Harkness I was constantly being told—by Bugz, by Regina, by the girls I met during rush—who I was, and who I could be; all these identities shrugged on for size, but they sagged on me like a bad suit.

Then it came back to me, like the whine of a mosquito. *Why don’t you stop acting like a whore and go to college?*

I hadn’t had time to process it in the tumult of yesterday. Even as far as misogynistic internet comments went, it stood out for its barbed specificity; like the incel who wrote it had taken the time to workshop it, like he knew *exactly* where to twist the knife.

I shook my head. *Her problem now, not yours*, I reminded myself.

Five minutes later I checked to see if Kayla had responded.

My breath caught when I opened Instagram. It’d gotten worse; *much* worse. Comments piled up, one after another, like a virus replicating quickly:

Didn’t even try

Whore

Dumb attention sucking slut

Have you tried college
Didn't even try
Did you try—

The ugliness of the words—*slut*, *whore*, *dumb*—rang in my ears; I tossed my phone away from me, as if that would head it off at the pass. But it would get worse, so much worse, in the days to come—though I didn't know it yet. All I felt in that moment was a crushing wave of sadness. It was Hannah's first backlash, and Kayla and I weren't even talking.



On Maps, Wendell Observatory stood on the northernmost part of campus, nearly a mile past the sports complex at the edge of a marshy nature preserve. After my shift I walked, following the sidewalk as it curved by the river—a black, flat expanse, just visible beyond the thick groves of cypress and sycamore. It was warm and balmy out, but there was a tinge of a chill in the air, and the students who walked by me had windbreakers tied around their waists. I listened to a podcast about Donna Tartt as I walked past Shearman Library, past the houses on Greek Row, all dimly lit, until the bright corridors and stone pavilions gave away to quiet roads lined by stately brick colonials.

The Observatory stood on a hill, a scrap of gravel road leading up to a white building with a circular tower topped by a silver dome, gleaming softly like talc under the full moon. There were, of course, no streetlamps here, and the near-total darkness outside made the lights in the windows all the more warm, inviting. As I got closer, I saw that one of the doors was propped open, and I heard voices. Laughter.

I stepped inside the door into a bare foyer that smelled of Pine-Sol. On my right was the entryway to a small living room with a checkered couch, a white-mantel fireplace, and framed maps and clippings. Up the stairs was, presumably, the main deck with the telescope but, instead, I took out my headphones and followed the drift of voices downstairs to the basement.

Professor Wyman's back was to me as I walked into the well-lit, cluttered studio. “—so he calls me from his superyacht in the Maldives,” he was saying to two girls—one was Esther, and the other had dirty-blond hair

and wore Carhartt overalls. They both clutched paper cups of wine. “And says, ‘Oh and by the way, you know that little painting we bought? How’s that going?’”

Esther laughed. “*Little* painting? Wow.” Her teeth were stained purple from the wine.

There was such a dizzying array of interesting objects, textures, and smells that I didn’t notice the cheese and wine on the table directly in front of me, one of four tables in the studio. A bottle of red was open next to a sleeve of paper cups. A hunk of Brie lay on a plate, half shrouded in its paper. Eight girls had shown up, including me; they were interspersed in twos and threes around the table, chatting, taking small sips of wine like they’d grown up going to cocktail parties. Still, their eyes darted like mine did, to the paintings hanging on easels or rolled up as casually as vintage posters in a secondhand shop; to the pharmacy-like wall of beakers and measuring flasks and plastic jugs above the industrial sinks lining the back wall.

The thought of wine nauseated me, so I wandered. Two of the other tables were empty, but there was something lying flat on the table in the back. Large and black, it had a sheen that caught the overhead lights like a lacquer beetle. As I walked closer, I saw that it was a badly damaged canvas, the edges frayed, like it had been ripped out of a frame.

It was the first real painting I’d ever seen up close, but at first glance it was grubby, entirely unimpressive. Nearly black with age. At the time, I didn’t know how to describe what I was seeing: the spidery *craquelure*, the old varnish oxidizing once-brilliant colors into a dull yellow. But I recognized water damage; parts of the canvas had the same wavy, bloated quality of photos and books and debris that I’d seen wash up after storms.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that Professor Wyman was still deep in conversation. I leaned in closer. The smell hit me, then: heady, complex. In the center of the painting, underneath the sandstorm-yellow grime, I thought I saw it, like a flicker: the ghostly apparition of a girl’s face.

At that moment, Professor Wyman clapped his hands. “Welcome!” he said in a booming voice, his gaze sweeping across the room.

He smiled. “Well, then. Shall we begin?”



Rule number one of Conservation Club, Professor Wyman joked—he liked his pop culture references—was to never, God forbid, call it *restoration*.

“Restoration is what you do to the antique chair you find at the rummage sale. Hobbyists restore. Conservators, on the other hand, are caretakers. They deploy all of their skills, all of their training, all of their artistry—yes, artistry—to the extraordinary task of preserving the life of an artwork. They are, in a sense, cocreators, along with the artist, and the artist’s assistants, and the conservators who came before—all these hands that have touched this painting, bringing to bear their own sensibilities, philosophies. Desires.” He smiled. “So when we are faced with the task of conserving a painting, we must contend with its ghosts.”

Here, he paused. We’d taken our seats in the hodgepodge of barstools around an empty table—mine, I noticed, had antlers for its legs—and stared at him, in rapt silence. The silence stretched, long and luxurious, broken only by the banging of old pipes. Finally, Wyman asked: “Why are we here?”

Another silence. “C’mon.” The corner of his mouth twisted up into a teasing half smile. “Don’t make me go around in a circle. I’ll do it.”

There was nervous laughter from the group, then, all at once, several girls spoke up. To work up close on paintings. To be competitive for internships. Backup for a likely useless visual arts degree.

“It’d be useful to know.” This blithe, breezy pronouncement came from Designer Overalls, whose name I’d later find out was Meredith Banks—Banks, as in Banks Hall, which was named after her family.

When Professor Wyman asked who’d taken art history, everybody’s hands shot up except mine. His eyes flicked to me. Warm but blank, they betrayed no sign of recognition. “Good,” he said lightly. “But if you haven’t, there’s no need to worry. You’ll learn quickly.” He drummed the tips of his fingers on the table. “Chemistry? Who’s taken that?”

The girl next to me raised her hand; she was the only one. “It’s required, isn’t it?” she said. “For most master’s level conservation programs.”

“You’re ahead of the curve already,” Wyman said, and my neighbor smiled, cupped her chin in her hand. She was Asian, shorter than me, with pale, delicate features under the blunt sweep of her black bangs. Right away I noticed that, like me, the way she dressed made her stand out from the others. Baggy T-shirt, jeans. A red beanie with the Firestone logo, which

might've looked hipster on the visual arts major, but on her looked utilitarian to the extreme.

"Most people get tripped up on that. You wouldn't believe how many of them have to go back to school just to take Organic Chemistry." He gave a dismissive shrug. "Also, not a problem for anybody in this room."

Then he gazed at the wall behind us, as if reading the labels on the bottles. "The third is the trickiest," he said. "It's something that can't be learned. And I say this not to discourage anyone, or to gatekeep, but to emphasize that, above all, conservation is a *craft*." He smiled ruefully. "I can tell right away when somebody's got it. And I'm usually not wrong."

"But what *is* it?" Esther asked, her space buns tilted at a jaunty angle as she leaned forward.

"Some conservators call it hand skills," Professor Wyman said thoughtfully. He flicked his dark eyes back to us. "Me? I think it's more of an orientation. The way a person moves through the world."



Wyman was a good talker—the kind who, quite literally, made watching paint dry endlessly fascinating. In the whiplash course of that evening, we went from fatty tempera grassa to the canvas of Botticelli's *Venus* to the history of the Industrial Revolution; Wyman was looser, more expansive, and a whole lot cooler than any teacher I'd ever known. Not once did he so much as look my way, and by the end of that first night of Conservation Club, I'd resigned myself to thinking that our connection was all in my head—the flirtatious banter in FoCo, the way he'd pinned me with his gaze at the bookstore that afternoon. I felt silly but also relieved. I wasn't stupid, after all. Worse than stupid, I didn't want to be a cliché.

Two nights later, we learned about just colors; Wyman lectured for the better part of the hour on the history of white. Lead white, San Giovanni white, zinc white, titanium white. Then yellow: Indian yellow, for example, was made from the urine of Indian cows fed a diet of mango leaves; Naples yellow was the same tone as *giallolino*, the yellow made famous by the Renaissance masters, made out of a volcanic stone that no longer existed. Then green, red, blue, black. I was enthralled, I'd never given any thought to colors—their infinitesimal shades, where they came from, how they were made. That a color could exist for centuries and then, one day, simply

disappear. (With a pang of tenderness, I remembered the shade of pink my mother had painted our trailer all those years ago.) Late at night I pored over the Met catalog, registering all these colors I'd never noticed before: Vermeer yellow, Hopper white, Goya blacks, Picasso blues.

I don't think I slept a wink that week. On top of Conservation Club, my classes, and my shifts at FoCo, I was pledging Alpha Rho. Friday afternoon—a few hours before initiation—I ran into Callie in the third-floor bathroom, her mouth filled with bobby pins as she scrutinized her skirt in the mirror. “Is this cerulean blue?” she asked out of the side of her mouth. “Or is it actually lavender? What is cerulean blue anyways?” Alpha Rho's colors, our pledge trainer Lauren took pains to drill into us, were *cerulean* blue and gold—not navy, or cobalt, or cyan, but *cerulean*. Picasso had nothing on these sorority girls.

“My skirt is wrong too,” I reassured Callie. “We'll be indigo in a sea of cerulean blue together.” Callie high-fived me, and we laughed.

Then she got serious, a spasm of fear crossing over her face. “They wouldn't fine us for this, would they?”

Truth be told, I'd been so focused on getting through Pledge Week—a blur of meetings, practice for a skit we had to perform, Starbucks runs—that I still had all the naiveté of a lottery winner; I was so glad I won, I'd forgotten to read the fine print. Dues and initiation fees for the semester were \$1,000, and then there were all the miscellaneous expenses: \$50 for a house T-shirt, \$100 for a pin, not to mention all the costumes and clothes we needed to buy for special events.

I wanted friends so badly, I was willing to bankrupt myself to become an Alpha Rho.

“How much are fines?” I asked Callie nervously.

“Oh, only like one hundred bucks,” Callie said with a wave of her hand. “You just don't want to have it on your record with Standards.”



Callie became my first friend at Harkness. During Pledge Week, she came by my dorm room nearly every day, sitting on the empty bed, hugging her calves under the tent of her legs, and twisting the necklace she always wore—a sweet little opal, her birthstone, on a gold chain—around her neck, as we dissected the arcane mysteries and petty tribulations of Greek life.

Callie was funny. She was the first person I'd known who had grown up comfortable—she came from a sprawling, riotous Jewish clan from Westchester, and her parents were celebrity dentists who called her every night; with some mixture of pride and embarrassment Callie showed me their Instagram of twenty-four thousand followers: shiny white veneers, gold grills, invisible braces. I'd always dreamed of the largesse of a big family but, looking back, I can see how all those personalities blurred the edges of Callie's—in the time I knew her, she was so eager to please, almost neurotic. Because I was from the South, Callie seemed to think I was an authority on all things “Southern.” She had the vague idea that I was Southern in the way that Harkness was Southern—genteel and cozy, like something out of *Steel Magnolias*. It was an idea that I subtly encouraged. Putting a filter on my life before Harkness came naturally to me; Paradise, I alluded, was just like Franklin, with all the charming mystique of small-town Southern life—winding streets, wooded lawns, stone walls, little tchotchke shops.

“Who're you stalking?” Callie teased one night as I was bent over Hannah Primrose's account. She'd disabled comments and hadn't posted in over a week.

Oh, *Kayla*, I thought. My heart broke for her. But to Callie, I just said, “A girl from back home,” and quickly exited out of Instagram.

I'm not sure, now, why I revealed so little of myself to Callie. Maybe I felt I needed to wipe the slate clean. But whatever the reason, holding back from her meant my friendship with Callie lacked any subtext. We did not define ourselves against each other. It was natural to be happy when Callie was happy, sad when Callie was sad. But for all the time we spent together as pledges that fall, I maintained a distance that ensured we were two very different people passing the time, like strangers on a plane making small talk. No matter how many nights Callie and I stood in line for beer in some dark, sticky basement or zipped the backs of each other's dresses, our friendship was as lightweight as vapor, as insubstantial as air. Kayla and I, we'd grown up in the same soil. Long, tangled roots, pushing down deep in the darkness, in the same hard-fought scrabble to survive.



Two days later, Kayla deleted all @HannahPrimrose's photos, all our posts dating back from that very first summer. Everything, gone. Even her profile photo, which reverted back to the gray Instagram default. Just like that, @HannahPrimrose disappeared. Kayla had erased her.

It was a gut punch. The losses that sting the most, I've come to realize, are always the ones that are the most difficult to claim. That morning, sitting in Professor Sullivan's lecture on supply-side economics, I kept replaying Kayla's words the night we created Hannah. *Think about it. My face. And you're so good with words, you could write the captions. She'd be perfect.* A dark, vicious urge suddenly overwhelmed me. She had no right. She should've asked my permission. Hannah had been just as much mine as hers.

The text was half dashed on my phone—**Hey, I know we haven't talked in awhile, but don't you think . . .**—when I stopped short. Kayla had made it obvious that she wanted nothing to do with me. Maybe, in some strange way, it would be easier now. I'd finally stop checking Hannah's Instagram, keeping tabs on Kayla.

Maybe Hannah was the fraying rope that tied me to Kayla, and, in one swift motion, she'd done what I couldn't. She'd cut us loose.

Professor Sullivan's irritated voice snapped me back. "Faith, can you please at least pretend to be paying attention?"

Tuesday night I was so lost in my own thoughts, I walked down the steps of the Observatory and into the studio and ran smack-dab into a whispering circle of Art Girls. On the easel in front of them stood a ruined face: the painting I'd seen lying on the table that first night. It loomed over us, much larger than I remembered—the *size* of it, its sheer physicality, jolted me awake. I tiptoed and peered over Meredith's shoulder to catch a glimpse of the girl's face. But directly under the overhead lights, only the flaws were glaringly obvious. The embossed welts, like ripples on the surface of the bayou. A large showy crack blossomed from the upper right to the middle, almost violently so—like somebody had taken a knife to it.

According to Professor Wyman, the painting had languished in a New Orleans storage facility for the last twenty years. It was sixteenth century, likely Italian Renaissance, and the painter was unknown. The last owner of record was a New Orleans peanut heiress who was known for her magpie-like collection of women artists, numbering in the thousands; for every O'Keeffe, there were dozens of paintings by amateur hobbyists. "There

wasn't a beach artist Bunny Reiss didn't like," Wyman said with a certain fondness in his voice. "God bless her."

Last winter, Wyman bought it at a lot auction for \$500. It was, in many ways, the perfect painting for us to work on this term—old but anonymous, of dubious value. Which, Wyman was quick to point out, often meant *female* in the art world.

"Usually there's endless consultations with the owner, the museum, the gallery. How much of the varnish to take off, how much to leave behind . . ." He sighed, then flashed a droll smile. "Here, nobody gives a shit."

"Avery," Professor Wyman said, tying on his blue apron. "What do you see?"

This took all of us by surprise, I think; we hadn't gone around with names last week, though many of the Art Girls seemed to already know each other from his classes. Last time it almost seemed like names were unimportant to Wyman, who had been breezy, conversational, like we were strangers at a party, just talking casually about Degas's use of colors. Invoking names now, three meetings in, felt intentional; like we had all passed some test.

Avery flushed under her blunt bangs. Her long sleeve read *Hughes Aerospace & Aviation*. "What do I see?" she said faintly. From across the table, the painting yielded few answers. There was the ghostly outline of a girl's face, but, like thick fog, centuries of grime obscured her pose, her clothing—all the signifiers of who she had once been.

Professor Wyman smiled. "It isn't a trick question." Then he turned to me, and my whole body felt feverishly hot. "What do you think, Ms—?"

"Thibodeaux." Our eyes met, and the corner of his mouth tugged upward, and then—I could've sworn—he *smirked*. Like he was remembering my blank name tag that night at the dining hall. "Thibodeaux," he repeated softly. "Well, Ms. Thibodeaux, tell me what you see."

There was nothing else I could come up with. "It's yellow," I said.

This prompted a few laughs, but Wyman's serious, pensive expression quickly silenced them. "Exactly," he said, nodding. "That's one of the most fascinating things about this painting, actually. There are four layers of varnish, going back to the sixteenth century." His voice was almost husky with wonder. "Sad, isn't it? For hundreds of years, this painting fell into the

hands of people who cared enough about it to go through the expense, the effort, of conserving it. Then, something changed.”

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Chapter 6

At Chapter on Thursday, all anyone could talk about was the Halloween party Alpha Rho was throwing that weekend. Halloween in college was Serious Business. All the houses on Greek Row threw parties: The Kappas had an elaborate corn maze on their lawn, with scarecrows and stacked hay bales, and the football frat, I was told, had hired Nelly to perform in their backyard.

Competition was fierce among the sororities to cohost events—or “tails,” as they were called—with top-tier fraternities; the hierarchy of which seemed to shift every year but nevertheless seemed to be settled by October. After roll call Ginny announced that Alpha Rho was hosting the Delta Omegas. Some of the girls clapped. Others whispered with their neighbors, darkly significant looks on their faces.

I thought I understood why. Out of all of the fraternities at Harkness, Delta Omega was no doubt top-tier, but they had a reputation. The typical Delta Omega played lacrosse, had a father who worked at Morgan Stanley, and while handsome in a broad-shouldered and ruddy-cheeked kind of way would give no fewer than three girls on campus chlamydia by the time he graduated. Their house was across from Alpha Rho, a dilapidated mansion with a sagging porch and white portico and odd chairs scattered on the lawn. Callie and I had gone there once for a party that fall, and never before had I seen such grime and filth. The basement was a dark labyrinth of crammed bodies, the floor was slippery with beer, and there was the distinct odor of urine. By the end of the night, my white canvas tennis shoes had turned so gray, I had to throw them away.

“Ladies, I want one hundred percent participation,” Ginny said unflaggingly. “Anybody who has a *problem*”—here, her voice hitched upward—“with that is getting written up.”

Next to me, Callie leaned forward and asked the juniors sitting in front of us: “What’d she mean by that?”

One of them—a tall blond girl with a pixie cut—snorted. “It means Ginny’s pimping us out. Some of the girls wanted to host tails with Phi Nu because their boyfriends are there, but they weren’t cool enough for Madam Ginny. What’d she call them?” she asked, turning to her friend.

“Future Deloitte accountants,” her friend said in air quotes.

We all laughed. The girl with the pixie cut beamed at me and stuck out her hand. “I’m Michelle.” With her easy smile and long, chunky cardigan knit, she was the kind of girl who’d tell you if your clothes tag was sticking out.

“Michelle’s the philanthropy chair,” Callie prompted, and I recalled the name that popped up in my inbox every week asking for volunteers: bake sales, food drives, a charity 5K. I flushed, wondering if Michelle noticed that I hadn’t replied to any of her emails, but she didn’t seem perturbed. She leaned in closer and lowered her voice, conspiratorially. “Oh, and there was that thing last year,” she said. “The Delta Omegas threw this ‘CEOs and office hoes’ party. There was a huge backlash. Between that, and the Phi Nu stuff, Ginny’s worried that a bunch of the sisters aren’t going to show up.”

After Chapter, I was grabbing a banana in the dining room when I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Can I talk with you for a sec?” It was Andy, a tight little smile on her face.

Feeling like the kid sent to the principal’s office, avoiding the curious looks of the other pledges, I followed Andy into her room on the third floor. I took a seat in a pink scalloped chair while she sat across from me on the matching sofa. A small pink refrigerator with a see-through door, stocked with skin care, hummed in a corner.

“You’re two weeks behind paying your dues,” Andy said.

“Oh, right—” I began to say, and I was about to give her an explanation, which was the honest-to-God truth: I needed a payment plan and a few more days for my next FoCo check to clear.

But Andy headed me off: “We have scholarships, you know. And payment plans. There are *lots* of resources here for girls like you.”

I felt like my insides had plunged into ice. There was something so baldly matter of fact about Andy’s tone; it was a naked assertion about who I was, and how she saw me. In that moment it became clear to me that all my interactions with Andy—her encouragement, her insistent friendliness during rush—had been driven by pity and patronage: Andy never liked *me*, she just liked the kind of person she was—and the type of house Alpha Rho was seen as—sponsoring somebody like me. I was no different from the bake sales and charity runs Michelle sent emails about every week.

I opened my mouth, and the lie slipped out so easily.

I gave Andy a story: parents who were traveling, bohemian, a little neglectful, who had no way of wiring money until they returned to Mississippi. If she knew that I was lying through my teeth, Andy gave no sign of it. “So you *can* pay. It’s just a matter of timing.”

I affected a laugh. “Yeah,” I said. “I can pay.”

Andy sighed. “All right, I’ll deal with Standards for now. Just please, take care of this as soon as you can?”



My lie nagged at me all day Friday and into the weekend. People mostly lie to make their lives less complicated—not me. In a whizbang flash of pride, I’d promised to pay \$1,000 I didn’t have. *Maybe*, I thought glumly as I swept candy corn off the till, *I can get a second job*. But I was struggling: Just a few days before, Regina had told me, kindly but firmly, that I was missing too many shifts. “You’re doing too much,” she said. “Something’s got to give.” She was right; by and large, scholarship kids didn’t go Greek, they only had time to study and work.

On top of that, sitting across from Andy in her Pinterest room, I’d made up *parents*—the pair of them, a mother and father, solidly middle class, their tweed-jacket-and-polo-shirt existence like two dolls I’d slipped into my pocket at a toy store. With a sinking heart, I saw my time at Harkness stretching out in front of me—family weekends, move-out days, graduation; all land mines now. I doubted Randy would’ve wanted to come to, say, a barbecue at the president’s house, but already I heard my voice, thin and reedy, trying to keep up with the ruse: *Oh, they’re still traveling! You know how it goes!*

I’d made my bed, as they say—now I had to sleep in it.

Halloween fell on a Saturday. I woke up that morning to the smell of pancakes, coffee. In the lounge the RAs were cooking breakfast, jostling each other with spatulas in the kitchen. Plates of food had been put on the island, which was decorated with fake spiders and cobwebs. By the napkins and bottles of ketchup, a plastic pumpkin filled with candy and condoms and cards with the number for Student Health Services was the butt of many jokes; a piece of paper taped on it read: *Party Safe Tonight!!!* I recognized the handwriting as that of my RA, Kelly, who was dressed up as Wednesday Addams. Her braids hanging messily, she looked manic, like she’d pulled

an all-nighter. “Happy Halloween! Eat, eat!” she screeched, waving her spatula when she saw me, and then Callie, who appeared behind me in her volleyball whites.

“I don’t know how Kelly does it,” Callie said, dropping a few slices of melon on her plate.

“I think she’s studying for the LSAT,” I said.

Callie snorted. “Trust me, I know. Kelly cornered me in the bathroom the other night, she wouldn’t shut up about the LSAT. Like, we get it. The LSAT is hard.” She eyed my full plate. “That looks good.”

Poor Callie. Among her many quirks, she had a mild eating disorder; nothing too hardcore, but she often went whole days without eating anything substantial except a muffin and Diet Coke, unless we were drunk—which was often, that fall—and then all bets were off: She’d pile fries and mozzarella sticks and chicken nuggets on her tray, more food than the two of us could possibly eat, and order pizza at three in the morning, passing out before it arrived. For Halloween, all of us pledges had to wear a black latex cat costume. This sent Callie into a vortex of anxiety and anticipation for days; I can’t tell you how many times that week I caught her in a kind of catatonic daze, staring longingly at a 140-calorie protein bar or a tub of hummus and pretzels.

I held out a piece of bacon, waved it in the air enticingly. “Have some.”

But Callie’s mouth was pressed into a thin line of grim determination. She swatted my hand away. “Don’t be a bad influence,” she snapped.

Later that night, the sight of the costume—out of its plastic wrapping, lying shrunken and shriveled like pantyhose on my bed—filled me with dread and regret. I wriggled into it, holding my breath. I yanked the zipper hard as it went up my thighs and over my back. Looking at myself in the full-length mirror, I smiled. I looked, if not good, then not bad. Better than good—different. In the latex I was a shape-shifter: every bulge smoothed away, every curve defined. As I lingered over my reflection, I imagined running into Professor Wyman on campus, dressed like this.

On the bed, my phone pinged. Callie: **OMG IT FIT. Okay. I’m officially excited for tonight!!!! I think a sloppy dance floor makeout is in the cards, lollljk**

Flinging open the doors of my closet, I stared at my shoes, all three pairs lined up in front of the mostly empty hangers: tennis shoes, flip-flops,

and that damn pair of DSW loafers I'd worn during rush, scuffed with white marks. I'd have to wear them. Already, I could see Ginny's withering gaze. Worst of all, there was Andy and the lie rattling in my mind like a fly trapped under a glass. I imagined her that night, taking one look at my knockoff loafers and realizing that I'd lied. I wondered if Andy would be the type to report me to the Honor Code. The thought gave me chills.

I grabbed the shoes and threw them across the room in disgust. My phone began to buzz on the bed, an incoming call. I picked it up, thinking it was Callie.

It was Kayla. Kayla, whom I hadn't heard from in five months. Kayla, my best friend who'd ghosted me, replaced me, left me screaming her name in the parking lot of a club at two in the morning. I stared at the screen, paralyzed. The call went away, only to be replaced by a text.

I'm outside.

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Chapter 7

I crept out of my room. The hallway was bright and empty. Most of the girls, I assumed, were already getting Halloween started, pregaming in dorm rooms and basements. I caught a glimpse of Danielle, in the same catsuit and applying a face mask in front of the vanity mirror in her room. At my footsteps, she turned around, ghostly. Only Danielle could smirk through a face mask. “Where are *you* going?” she asked. “Roll call’s at nine.”

“Ordered some food,” I lied.

Lifting the face mask off with her French tips, Danielle side-eyed me with naked curiosity. “Hey. What’d Andy want with you after Chapter?”

I pointed at my phone, pretended not to hear her. “They’re outside!” I chirped. With that, I kept walking. As I pushed the button for the elevators, there was a sharp ringing in my ears. What was she doing here? Was Kayla actually outside, or was this just some crude joke, a way of getting to me just when I was finally, *finally*, beginning to move on?

Downstairs, the doors glided open automatically. Nobody was on the sidewalk; all I could see was the access box and dark grass. I called Kayla back, and it went straight to voicemail. Classic.

I walked around the dormitory toward the parking lot behind Smith, the ringing in my ears louder and louder. In the distance I could hear thumping bass and shouts of laughter on the quad.

As I got closer to the parking lot, I stopped short. There was a blond girl sitting on the curb by two gallon-size kitchen bags bursting to the seams with clothes. She was smoking a cigarette, its cherry a flare in the dark. Her back was to me, but the blades of her shoulders—angular, delicate, almost butterfly-like—stirred something familiar in me.

“Kayla?” I called out, incredulous.

The blond girl turned. “What took you so long?” Kayla said, her voice a little deeper than I remembered but laced with that acidic combination of mirth and confidence I knew so well. She took a drag of her cigarette, then threw it in the grass, where it hissed softly. Then she got up, brushing off flecks of ash on her scuffed knees.

I stared at her. It wasn't just Kayla's hair; her *face* was different. Swollen, hard. Like walking into a room with all the furniture slightly out of place: The feline slant of her cheekbones was even more pronounced, and her lips seemed grotesquely plump. In a bright-pink eyelet dress and strappy iridescent green heels, Kayla looked Very Online. Her buttery-blond highlights, I noticed, were salon blond, not straight-out-of-the-box blond. Still, there was something sad about Kayla as a blonde.

Kayla laughed. "What the hell are you wearing?"

This jolted me; I was so distracted by the changes in Kayla's face, I'd failed to notice that just as I was staring at Kayla, she was staring at me. I became painfully aware of how ridiculous I must've looked in this getup to her, who'd never seen me in anything tighter than a turtleneck. I folded my arms, trying to cover myself. The nighttime chill prickled goose bumps all over my exposed body, making me shiver. "What're you doing here?" I asked.

"I need to stay with you awhile," Kayla said.



"What happened?" I watched, helpless, as Kayla slipped off her heels and dropped them, with a clatter, in the middle of my floor. She walked around barefoot in my still sparsely decorated room, running her fingers along the old wooden bedpost, the stacks of books on my desk. "Where have you been all these months?" I persisted. "And how'd you even find out where I lived?"

Kayla examined the corkboard above my desk. On it there were a couple of stray Post-it notes and a little blue-and-yellow flag with *Aø* emblazoned in gold. "You're a sorority girl now?" she asked, bemused.

A prickly defensiveness creeping into my voice, I said, "I guess so."

"Is that where you're going tonight dressed up all scandalous?" Kayla waggled her eyebrows up and down, flashing me a sardonic little smile; she was enjoying getting a rise out of me. "To a *frat* party?"

I sighed. "Answer the question, Kayla. How'd you know my dorm?"

Kayla had moved on to my closet, rummaging through my clothes with a *flick* of her long acrylic nails. "You know," she said, pulling out one of my pledge shirts and wrinkling her nose. "If you're going to post yourself online, you should maybe not be so stupid about it." She took her

phone out, tapped it a few times. Then she tossed it to me. “You posted the name of your dorm.”

I looked down at the photo I posted back in September. Just a few months later, my attempt to romanticize my life—to capture that halcyon moment of ivy stirring in the breeze on the redbrick wall of the dormitory—seemed as contrived as slapping a filter on an oat latte. Kayla was right: In my desperate, fumbling attempt to get her attention, I’d somehow overlooked that the plaque—**SMITH HALL**—was just visible behind the trailing green tendrils.

“You never did get it,” Kayla mused.

“Get what?”

“What it’s like to put yourself out there,” Kayla retorted. “To risk exposing yourself to strangers.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

Kayla folded her arms. “Where were you when shit got real? I didn’t exactly see you rushing to my defense.”

For a while, neither of us said anything. When she spoke again, it was with a deliberateness that was uncharacteristic of Kayla. “Nobody tells you when you’re fifteen and posting photos of yourself online that there will be men who will beg and plead for you to show skin. Nobody tells you that the minute you turn eighteen and finally give them what they want, they’ll turn on you.” Then Kayla laughed, a short, bitter laugh that carried with it all the pain of the last few weeks. “Turns out, being called a slut at all times of the day and night takes a toll on your mental health.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly.

“You were right,” Kayla admitted. “I should’ve listened to you, and not David.”

We went to the vending machines in the lounge; Kayla eyed my ID card as I swiped it, and she pressed the button for a Hot Pocket. “You get whatever you want with that?” she asked, trying to hide the tinge of wonder in her voice. I told her I had to pay for a meal plan, but nobody on campus walked around with credit cards, or even cash; most kids just had their phones and their campus IDs.

“Weird,” Kayla pronounced.

When we got back to my room, I got a text from Callie: **meet in 5 mins downstairs??**

“I’ve got to go,” I said. “I’d invite you, but tonight’s sisters only.”

This was a half-truth: The event with Delta Omega was private, but that just meant that we were getting a couple hours' jump on drinking and playing pong in the basement. By midnight, the doors would be open to whoever wanted to walk in. Still, I clung to that veil separating Kayla from the fragile shoots of my new life at Harkness. Alpha Rho was *my* world, a carefully constructed one I was fighting to keep a toehold in. What the hell was I going to do with Kayla at Alpha Rho? Even the sight of her standing in the middle of my room felt like a glitch, something my brain was a half second too slow to fully process.

"Whatever," Kayla said, not skipping a beat. "I have zero desire to hang out with a bunch of stuck-up bitches."

I felt guilty. Shrugging on my jacket, I put my hand on the doorknob. "Text me if you need anything."

I was halfway out of the door when I heard Kayla's voice: "Wait." When I turned around, Kayla was holding her sparkly green heels. She thrust them into my hands. "Wear these," she said. "They'll match your outfit better."



"Those shoes," Callie exclaimed as we walked up to the house. "Are they Gucci?"

"Oh, um, I think?" I said. Luckily, right at that moment, Ginny Spears stalked toward us, dressed as a Greek goddess with a long, flowing toga and a gold headband.

"Hurry up," Ginny hissed. "They're here."

Tall, sandy-haired types guffawing and clapping themselves on the back, the Delta Omegas were half-heartedly in costume, or maybe it was just that Halloween, like most things in life, required less effort from them: The basement was a sea of porn mustaches, togas assembled out of unwashed bedsheets, hairy masks, and red Mario hats. "My loins are burning," I remarked to Callie, standing at the bottom of the staircase.

Callie laughed, her fingers fiddling with her necklace. "Some of them are cute. See that guy over there?" She pointed to a boy playing pong a few feet away, whose defining feature was a backward John Deere ball cap, under which dirty-blond hair curled out. "That's Henry. He's the president."

I looked at Callie, arching my eyebrow. “Ma’am. You’ve done your research.” Callie winked at me.

It wasn’t just Callie who was excited; everywhere I looked, girls acted differently, like a radio station crackling into sharp, unnerving clarity: their smiles just a little wider, their laughs dialed up a few notches. Wandering from the basement through the rest of the house, Callie leading the way in search of liquor, I overheard snippets of conversation: who went with who at Exeter, who was interning at J.P. Morgan, who got busted for hazing. “Butt naked, man,” the Delta Omega said meaningfully, as if this crowned the achievement. “Butt naked in a U-Haul.” He had his arm draped over Andy. Andy, who aced every quiz in Professor Sullivan’s class, who was a Dean’s Scholar and would get into every law school she’d apply to. Giggling, she gazed up at him in the crook of his arm as he took hits from his vape.

In the kitchen, Callie and I found a bottle of Jim Beam sitting on the island. As Callie rummaged under the sink for cups, I took my phone out and texted Kayla: **This party is kinda lame. You doing okay?**

Immediately Kayla responded. Ellipses, and then: **Ofc it’s lame. Because I’m not there 😊** A few seconds later, she sent me a photo: my laptop, playing *Love Yacht*—our favorite reality show—on the crumpled blankets of my bed.

Leaning against the counter, Callie sloshed Jim Beam into two cups, her dark hair falling past her shoulders and into her face. “If I’m going to get through tonight,” she said nervously, “I need a real drink.” It occurred to me, then, that I didn’t know Callie’s favorite show—I didn’t even know if she watched TV, and this struck me as something I ought to at least be curious about, after all the time we spent with each other. Even the way we drifted through this party, clinging together, in search of alcohol because it gave us a purpose, felt like going through the motions. Over the summer, counting down the days until Harkness, I thought college was exactly this: people, parties, the hunt for booze in strange kitchens. But those moments, in my mind, were always cast in a kind of shimmering light, whereas reality, these past few months, was a pale imitation.

“Cheers,” Callie said, raising her cup.

“Cheers,” I echoed. Right then, the boy from downstairs—Henry—walked into the kitchen, followed by three of his brothers. Talking jocularly, they called each other nicknames like *Wag! Nov! Mers!* while Henry

opened the refrigerator, rummaging through the contents as casually as if he were standing in his own kitchen. Pulling out a bottle of Skinnygirl dressing, he made a funny, mocking face; the others laughed.

Henry took out four cans of Bud Light and opened them sideways with his keys. All of them began chugging and slammed the empties on the floor as if, in drinking beer as quickly as possible, they had accomplished something extraordinary. *What a charade*, I thought. The way they presumed our attention, which we gave so readily. The way we fought for theirs, with our latex and high heels.

Callie flitted her eyes away from me, twisting her necklace. She was the one who spoke to Henry first.

“Do you want to take a shot?”

Henry turned. Up close, he had watery blue eyes framed by surprisingly long lashes and a square jaw nicked in a few places from shaving. His eyes flicked over Callie, sizing her up momentarily. He smirked. “Do I? What about that vampire blood stuff?” He was referring to the batch cocktails the next room over, which was Ginny’s idea, but it missed the mark. There was something fussy, and deeply uncool, about ladling a drink out of a cauldron.

“Yeah,” Callie said nonchalantly. “Some of the girls treat Halloween as, like, a religious experience.”

This wasn’t that funny, but the boys roared in laughter, then quickly introduced themselves. Henry’s three other fraternity brothers were diluted, less attractive versions of Henry; I forgot their names as soon as I heard them. One of them—the ugliest one, short and squat, with red-rimmed eyes and pale eyebrows—turned to me, with a hard glint in his eyes. “Girls love Halloween because they have an excuse to dress slutty, right?”

I pretended not to hear him.

Henry twisted open the handle of Jim Beam and drank straight from the bottle—prompting tributes like “Beast!” “Animal!”—then passed it to Callie, who glanced at me. She was still twisting her necklace, the opal flashing around and around. I wanted to put my hand on hers, to still it. “You don’t have to drink,” I said in a low voice.

Combatively, Henry said: “Why don’t you let your friend decide for herself?”

I stared at him. “Really?”

Henry shrugged. “I’m just saying, I’m not the one telling her what to do. But whatever.” Ignoring me completely, he turned back to Callie. “Wanna play pong?”

Callie’s eyes darted back and forth between him and me. I’d been dismissed, we both knew it. *Just say no*, I want to tell our eighteen-year-old selves, shivering in that cramped kitchen in our fishnets and too-high heels. But back then neither of us had mastered the art of saying no—no to shots, no to pong. No, no, no. At Harkness, we were researching cutting-edge technologies and learning how to restore centuries-old paintings, but that simple two-letter word was not yet in our vocabulary.

Plastering a smile on my face, I told her to go ahead. I needed to use the bathroom.



When I stepped back into the foyer, it was so crowded the windows were fogged, and somebody had propped open the front door with an industrial-size trash can to let cold air in. Students streamed in from other parties, flinging their North Faces in a pile on the sofas, stomping the grime from other basements on the plush red carpet. Pushing my way through the crowd, I wandered aimlessly from room to room. Pretended to study the composites in the hallway, then killed time scrolling on Instagram, my feed filling with photos from this very party: a pledge sticking out her tongue, her cat makeup perfect; Andy and Ginny in their gold-braided sashes, skinny arms out. Somebody jostled me from behind, spilling beer on me. *There must be a German or Japanese word for this feeling*, I thought. The loneliness of standing in the middle of a crowd. I thought of Kayla, watching our show in my dorm room alone, her new blond hair illuminated by the glow of the laptop.

“Hey.” I looked over my shoulder to see a girl in a red M&M’s costume, her face visible through a hole. She was looking at me like she knew me. “Faith, right?” she asked, smiling shyly.

I recognized her then; it was the other non-art major in Wyman’s club. “Hey, Avery,” I said, eyeing her curiously. I never would’ve pegged her as a partier, though she seemed sober. As always, what she wore made her stand out: The M&M costume was bulky, and so deliberately *not* sexy, like

something a little kid would wear trick-or-treating, that I couldn't help but smile. "Your costume's amazing," I told her.

"Thanks," she said, brightly. "Want some candy?"

I looked at her and laughed. "You know what? I'd actually love some."

From the depths of the shell of her costume, she took out a handful of candies in their shiny wrappers and dropped them in my hand. I unwrapped a Hershey's Kiss, the chocolate slightly melted, and popped it in my mouth while we talked about Wyman's club. Up until then, I hadn't spoken about Conservation Club with anyone, and it had retained the slightly foggy quality of a dream. Every girl who had shown up the last month I'd stalked on Instagram—cataloging their interests, their tastes, their family's multiple homes—but truth be told, I was the most intrigued by Avery. She seemed suspiciously normal. She did *not* seem like the Meredith Bankses of the world, growing up eating Frosted Flakes under a priceless Goya hanging in the dining room.

"Why conservation?" I asked. In wanting to know what she stood to gain learning a skill that would be relevant for only 0.001 percent of the world, perhaps I was asking for myself too.

"I like it," Avery replied. "To be honest, I think I thought it would be, like, something out of *Antiques Roadshow*." She smiled. "I grew up watching that with my parents. And I'm a chemistry major, so it's cool seeing practical applications in different fields. But some of the art history stuff goes over my head." As she spoke, I detected the faint twang of a Southern accent—not Louisiana or Mississippi, but flat and melodious, vowels drawn out like a cow chewing its cud.

I wondered if she'd picked up my accent too. "Same," I said. "I'm pretty sure up until a week ago I thought da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Donatello were the same person, all rolled up in one." Avery laughed.

Suddenly Danielle appeared behind Avery. "God, finally," she said, looking annoyed and a little rattled. "I've been looking for you."

"What's going on?" I asked, jarred by the shift in her voice.

"It's Callie. She's passed out downstairs."



I ran down the back stairs to the Chapter Room, which was cordoned off during parties and pooled in moonlight. I walked quickly by the white

columns, the rows and rows of empty folding chairs and the wall of the sorority's oldest composites, black-and-white and eerie in the dark, until I got to the door on the right of the podium, which revealed a small anteroom and then a basement I'd never even known existed, cluttered with stacked-up chairs and noisy from the boilers and underground pipes. The laundry room was tucked away in a corner, washers and dryers gleaming under the fluorescent lighting of a single bulb.

I felt a bright stab of fear. *This was a strange place for Callie to wander off*, I thought. Drunk or not.

Inside, Andy and Lauren were crouched on the concrete floor by Callie, who was lying prone on her side. Her hair was tangled, falling over her pale and clammy face. Right away, I noticed that the seams to her catsuit were crooked, running in a zigzag up her thighs, like they'd been stuffed in with difficulty. Her winged eyeliner—sharp as a knife earlier that night—had caked, talc-like, into the folds of her eyelids, which were fluttering a little, as if she was slipping in and out of a deep sleep.

By her head was a small, glistening pool of vomit.

"We need to call CSS," somebody's voice behind me said loudly.

I looked over my shoulder. Avery. I hadn't noticed she had followed me. Her hands were on her hips and, in her red M&M's costume, she cut a pathetically comical figure. "We need to Good Sam her," Avery repeated, looking to me to back her up. "Do you have your phone? I left mine in my room."

CSS—or Campus Safety and Security—had stickers pinned on bulletin boards in the dorms: *Save a Life, Don't Think Twice!* During freshman orientation, the head of CSS—Officer Greg, a former marine in a baggy suit—had explained the vagaries of Harkness's Good Samaritan Policy: *Alcohol and other drug violations are forgiven when students seek help for themselves and others.* The upshot, of course, was that to be "Good Sam'ed" was a dubious rite of passage on campus.

Andy and Lauren exchanged a look. "I think she's going to be okay," Andy said. "Why don't we give it a couple more minutes?"

Avery's mouth dropped open. "She's unconscious," Avery said, appalled. "What if she needs to get her stomach pumped? And what's the big deal, anyways? It's not like she'll get in trouble."

But immediately, I understood. If Callie got caught underage drinking at the house, Avery was right: Callie wouldn't get in trouble. But Alpha Rho

—and Delta Omega—would.

Ignoring Avery, Andy knelt down. “Callie,” Andy said a little sharply. “Callie, wake up.”

After a few seconds, Callie stirred. Mumbling something under her breath, she shifted her weight and tried to sit up, wincing a little. It was then, I noticed it: her bare throat, her fingers fluttering instinctively there, to feel nothing but air. Her necklace was gone.

Callie started crying. “I’m so embarrassed,” she said hoarsely, trying valiantly to smile, but that just made her cry even harder.

“You’re okay,” Andy whispered, rubbing her arm in slow, rhythmic circles. “Shhhh. You’re okay.” Nobody called CSS that night.



“How’s Callie?” Danielle asked as soon as the bathroom door closed behind me. The look plastered on her face was of concern, but there was no mistaking the morbid curiosity in her voice.

“She’ll be fine,” I said shortly. “She’s sleeping it off in Andy’s room.” I ran the water in the sink and washed my hands. Maybe it was just my imagination, but the smell of vomit still hung off me. The stench of guilt. I was the one who left Callie with those Delta Omegas. She’d gone off to play pong with them, and I hadn’t bothered to check on her, not even once.

Danielle clicked her compact shut. “Did you know Callie went to a math and science high school?”

I didn’t even know what that was, but I wasn’t in the mood to ask. “So?” I said.

“So it’s nerd school,” Danielle said with a delicate curl of her lip. “Callie probably never drank before college. She doesn’t know her limits. I just hope Alpha Rho doesn’t get punished. It’s not our fault Callie can’t handle her liquor.”

“Shut up, Danielle.”

I couldn’t believe I’d said those words, but I did. Danielle’s mouth fell open, slack jawed in surprise, before she quickly recovered. “What’s with you?” she shot back. “Did you decide to try on a personality for Halloween?”

“Whatever,” I muttered, drying my hands with paper towels as the shot of adrenaline still coursed through my body. I turned to go. But right before

I walked away, Danielle said something that chilled me to the bone: “Or is it that new roommate of yours?”

I stopped, not sure if I heard her right. “What?”

In the bathroom mirror Danielle’s eyes glittered, sensing she’d hit her mark. “I just met Kayla downstairs. Her charm must be rubbing off on you.”



Sometimes I wonder if I’d always known. All those years bent over a glowing screen, the internet pure and limitless under our fingertips. Daisy-chaining the best parts of ourselves, until I never knew where I ended and she began. How could anything have truly been mine?

It was so easy for Kayla, so frictionless. To brush aside my feeble attempts to tell her not to come. To do without a second glance what took me years to accomplish. To just saunter right through those cerulean blue doors, in the thumping heart of one of America’s most elite campuses, as if she belonged.

My throat dry, I pushed my way through the crowd. The party had taken on a late-night, blurry quality: loose limbs and spilled beer. In the hallway I bumped into two dark huddled figures groping each other against the wall. “Hey!” the girl bleated, her face flapping open in red and black. *HELP* was smeared in crimson on her cheek. “Watch where you’re going!”

I was halfway down the stairs when I heard Kayla, her lilting voice, low and unmistakable. It was the voice she used around strangers, the one I’ve seen her perfect over the years, on Instagram and in person: Talk slowly and a little lower than everybody else, so they’ll have to lean in, make an effort to really listen. From across the basement, I saw her.

Leaning against the wall as if she’d been there all night, taking tiny sips out of a red Solo cup. Talking, calmly and confidently, with Ginny and Henry. At something she said, they both laughed.

She looked straight at me. Raised her brow as though to say, *What now?*

In a single glance, there was a dare, a challenge. That thin invisible thread unspooling between us, connecting us, like it always did. Lips curled in a smile, Kayla raised her cup at me, and I walked toward her.

As soon as Kayla grabbed my hand, I knew. I knew what would happen, what could only happen. All my time at Harkness, up until then, was like that photo I'd posted on Instagram: lovely but lifeless, a bunch of props, and Kayla walking into the frame breathed life into it. "We just met your roommate," Ginny said in an almost accusatory tone, as if I'd been hiding something from her.

I felt Kayla's grip tighten, and suddenly I was falling, falling down that well, the flash of her green eyes like two brilliant cracks of light, shining out of the darkness. *Follow me.*

I squeezed Kayla's hand hard and smiled at my classmates. "I'm so glad she's here."

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Part II

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Chapter 8

Here's the thing: I never expected we'd get caught. Saying this out loud now, it sounds so utterly brazen and reckless and yet, back then, the thought never entered our minds that *any* of what happened would happen, much less that Kayla pretending to be a Harkness student was anything but a lark—no different, really, from telling her thousands of followers online that she was Hannah Primrose.

I hadn't changed much, in other words. At eighteen, I was still no different from the girl I was at twelve, slipping Kayla a twenty in the back office of Gator Park. And while I knew, even then, that the stakes were higher this time—that some lies were so big they had their own zip code; that there was the Honor Code and I was risking expulsion, my future—I still believed that, whatever Kayla did, I could fix it, just as I had so many times before.

I couldn't have known, of course, what waited for us. Expulsion was what preoccupied me those days, what kept me in the grips of fear when I allowed it in, but in the end fate would exact a much crueler toll. One day there would be regret, and pain, and blood. But up until then, some of the happiest moments of my life were that November, when Kayla and I lived together in 403D.



To anyone who asked, Kayla was a psychology major from “just outside New Orleans” who'd gotten mono right before term started. Psychology, because of the large introductory classes, taught in a darkened auditorium that fall by an octogenarian who hadn't looked up from his lecture notes since 1988. “You're in Fairchild's survey? *I'll see you in class,*” Kayla learned to say with a wink.

The ID cards were a tad trickier. You needed a student ID to go anywhere on campus—to swipe into buildings, buy meals, even do laundry. At first, I left my ID card with Kayla while I was in class or working at the dining hall, but after she lost it twice in a week—earning me strange,

exasperated looks from the ID office ladies—I told her she was on her own. This, out of everything, was not the mistake it could’ve been. Something as pesky as an ID couldn’t stop Kayla: “God, I’m so out of it today,” she’d say, lingering by the door outside Smith. Then, she’d toss out some charming non sequitur. “Carbs make me stupid. Any chance you can . . . ?”

She’d “borrow” an ID card for a day, lifting them from the unattended heaps of belongings that were everywhere at a school like Harkness. Kayla was amazed that my classmates could be so cavalier, so naive—laptops left open all day on tables, expensive jackets tossed haphazardly in piles at parties. “You’re acting like you deserve an award,” I said, amused, when Kayla told me, with a dignified air, that she *could’ve* nicked something—but didn’t. She scowled. “I’m just saying, the ID card is so not a big deal. I’m not even putting charges on them! Besides, if these trust fund kids are going to leave them out like that, aren’t they pretty much communal property?”

Then there was the matter of my dorm. Seemingly overnight, the room looked like Kayla had always been there. On my own, I’d lived like a monk—single toothbrush in a cup, a few dresses hanging in the closet, my shower flip-flops lined up neatly by the door. “Where’s your stuff?” Callie once asked. Now, bodycon dresses were draped over the door of the other closet, always flung open to reveal a colorful menagerie of Instagram ads: corseted bustiers and oversize blazers and trendy tops. On the second bed there always seemed to be a curling iron, still plugged in, hissing ominously next to empty Bubblicious wrappers and false eyelashes. Makeup and perfumes cluttered every inch of her desk. I couldn’t believe that Kayla had lugged all this around—for months—in two trash bags. Not like I had any idea what she’d been doing in New Orleans, really. Every time I brought it up that first week, she gamely deflected, or shot back some snarky retort: “What’s it to *you*, Ivy League girl?”

Kayla might’ve come back into my life, but that didn’t mean the scars had fully healed. She still hadn’t forgiven me for leaving her behind.

Kelly was nonplussed by Kayla’s sudden arrival. “You’d think they’d email me,” she mused when we swung by her room. She frowned, tapped her pencil against the LSAT books splayed open on her desk. Then she shrugged. “They never tell the RAs anything.”

Kayla and I left Kelly’s room, giddy with relief. It was so easy, so stupidly simple. Like we had waltzed out of a museum in broad daylight,

the Warhol tucked under our arms.



“Friends don’t let friends dye their hair alone,” Kayla said one morning, upending a plastic shopping bag on her clothes-strewn bed. Three red Revlon boxes fell out along with a filmy hairnet.

I looked up from the Econ textbook perched against my knees, and on the same page it had been since before Halloween. It was November now, and a week had passed since Kayla had showed up in the parking lot. “Later,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t keep skipping Econ.”

“*Dude*. Just go tomorrow.”

“I can’t. They’re not every day here.”

“I’ll botch it, I know I will,” Kayla pleaded. “I need you, Faith. I look terrible as a blonde. Don’t you want a roommate who doesn’t look like Draco Malfoy?”

At this, I laughed. Feeling my resolve quickly fading, I sighed and put my highlighter down. “Fine.”

To the floor bathroom we dragged my desk chair, its legs scraping the linoleum, my towel, and some old issues of the campus newspaper. In front of the last sink, Kayla plopped down backward in the chair and gazed at her strange reflection. Her finger hooked a pale strand of hair. “I can’t remember the exact color of my hair before,” she said, a little wistfully.

“You’ve only been blond for a few months,” I said, laughing.

“Feels like longer,” Kayla replied. She tossed the box to me. “You pick. You’d know better than me.”

As I began experimenting with different mixes of the colors—a dab of Cherry Red, a smear of Bright Auburn—the bathroom filled with blistering fumes. Kayla was right—I *did* know the color of her hair, better than I knew my own: The way it was as dark and dense as red wheat, but shimmered in the sunlight with coppery reds. I dipped the brush into the tray; a deep pearlized red coated the sides of the brush, like egg yolk. My fingers tingled pleurably. *Is this what working on a painting feels like?* I wondered. Going by some strange alchemy of feel, memory. Grasping toward what had once been, like fumbling in a dark room.

I’d skipped the last two meetings, had gone out with Kayla instead—one night to a disco party at KKG; the other night, a pregame at an

international kid's dorm, Kayla charming both the Chinese kids dressed head to toe in Balenciaga and the Swiss boarding school types. At four in the morning, we'd all piled into an Uber to get milkshakes, with Kayla getting into a heated argument in the back seat about Beyoncé. It was too bad Kayla nearly flunked high school; college suited her.

Right as the dye set and was ready to rinse, I got a call. It was Andy. "You still haven't paid," she said, her voice brittle and exasperated. "I've tried texting and emailing you all week. It's *November*."

"I meant to get it to you, I just—"

"Be careful what you say here," Andy said, cutting me off. "We've got an Honor Code." There was a long, dizzying pause. "If you don't pay the dues, plus the late fees, by the end of this weekend, you're suspended." Then, *click*—Andy had hung up.

I felt Kayla's gaze as I set down the phone. "How much do you owe them?" she asked after a long pause.

"How'd you know it was about money?"

Kayla smiled. "It's always about money."

When I told Kayla that I owed my sorority nearly \$1,000, she held one finger up and pulled out her phone. After a few swipes, she waved her screen, triumphant. In her checking account on the Capital One app there was \$1,001.12. "I have enough!" she chirped, which was so quintessentially Kayla: to proclaim that *it's always about money*, and yet not know how much money she had, a smash-the-piggy-bank approach to personal finance that made me recoil.

"It'll clean you out," I said, shaking my head. Then, suspiciously: "How'd you get this money, anyways?"

"Content house," Kayla said to my surprise; I hadn't expected her to answer me honestly. She closed her eyes and settled her head back. Picking up my cue, I began carefully removing the plastic cap from her hair. "You know," Kayla said lightly, lazily—she reminded me of a cat basking in the sun—"when David wasn't trying to screw every girl in that house, he wasn't half bad getting sponsors. At least on YouTube." She laughed. "He thought he was P. Diddy to our Danity Kane. There was another redhead in the house, this girl who rode all night on a bus from Chattanooga with nothing in her backpack except for her toothbrush, and a bunch of bikinis. She'd follow David around like a puppy. According to her, there couldn't be

two redheads in the house—something about archetypes?—so I had to dye my hair blond. I was so over it. Luckily, I only blew David, like, twice.”

“What?” I said, aghast. The dye was getting all over the sink.

Opening her eyes, Kayla shot me a defiant glare. “I’ll take David over rotting in Gator Park any day.”

After her hair dried, Kayla smiled at her reflection. She looked like herself again. “Take the money,” she said. With a dark, humorous flick of one corner of her mouth: “From one brothel of women to another. Besides,” she added, more softly, “after all these years, you’ve earned it.”

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Chapter 9

That chilly November evening, we walked in the milky twilight all over North Grounds, which was a twenty-minute loop of the College's most scenic buildings: the red-gabled chapel, the Academical Village, the café that had on display in the window a late eighteenth-century carrying case that Paul Harkness used for his bourbon. Giving me the money I needed for my sorority dues had chipped away, at last, at Kayla's frosty indifference, and, no longer bothering to hide her awe, she oohed and aahed like a kid at Disneyland for the first time. Relief and gratitude toward Kayla made me giddy. Laughing, linking arms, we passed under the famed stone arches whose inscription —**HONOS, VERITAS, FIDES**—had inspired so much terror in me hours earlier. "I'm just imagining Andy's face tomorrow when I pay her," I said, grinning, and it felt like old times.

"Making up parents was a nice touch," Kayla pronounced, taking a selfie with her damp red hair. "I'm actually kind of proud of you."

To warm ourselves up, we ducked inside Shearman Library. It was the smallest of the five libraries on campus, known mostly for housing special collections works and rare manuscripts, with a soaring, light-filled atrium and marble floors. "Holy shit," Kayla exclaimed under her breath as we entered the reading room. Dark mahogany tables gleamed under the sparkling light of two large brass chandeliers, and leather armchairs were nestled in an alcove of bookshelves overlooking tall Georgian windows. I had only studied there once, and I'd felt self-conscious the whole time. Shearman tended to attract a small but cultish following of girls who dressed like they belonged to a past century: tweed jackets with elbow patches, long pearl necklaces, ribbons in their hair.

Kayla sat down at a table with a thick leather and gold-embossed book, *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta*, she'd pulled from a shelf. "Say *that* five times fast," she said loudly, drawing the glare of a girl reading Nietzsche in a nearby armchair. She sat back down and opened to a page in the middle. A dreamy, serene look settled over her face as she pretended to read.

"Book's upside down," I pointed out, amused.

Kayla gave me the middle finger. "Just take the picture, bitch."

“You’re not dressed right,” I said as we scrolled through the photos. Kayla looked gorgeous: her thick wavy hair framing her down-turned face, her long sooty lashes and the curve of her cheeks glowing in the dim light like it was carved out of Carrara marble. But she looked like an influencer. She was wearing *activewear*, for God’s sake.

“What am I supposed to dress like then? Rory Gilmore?”

“You’ve never read a novel before, have you?”

She snapped her gum, “Babe, that’s what I have you for.”

I opened Instagram and searched for #DarkAcademia. Images populated: dimly lit photos of grand pianos and secondhand books and teacups, old masters’ paintings turned into memes, beat-up leather messenger bags and gold locket and letters written under candlelight. As I watched Kayla scroll accounts like @Dark.Academia and @GraveyardCandelight and @DarkAcademiaFits, her long nails clacking on the screen, I felt vindicated. All those years Kayla had made fun of me for my bookish aspirations, for *fetishizing college* and watching *Gilmore Girls*. Now here was an entire subculture on the internet of which I was fluent—and Kayla wasn’t. “Well?” I asked. “What do you think?”

Slowly, deliberately, Kayla looked up from the screen and grinned. “*This is a gold mine.*”



“Lost and found?” The girl at the circulation desk barely looked up from her phone. “Third door on your left.”

“Thanks.” Kayla looked over her shoulder at me and winked. “We’ll take a look.”

“Kayla—” I hissed, but it was too late; Kayla breezed past the entryway and down the corridor, her steps echoing against the high walls.

I spoke too sharply, and the girl finally looked up, her curiosity aroused. “What’s she looking for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A sweater, I think.”

“I’ll totally keep an eye out for it,” she promised, already back on her phone.

I walked in on Kayla in a cluttered coatroom of sorts, rifling through a large dark pile of sweaters and jackets with alarming alacrity. “*Bitch,*” Kayla said breathlessly, holding up a black sweater with gold mother-of-

pearl buttons. The label was frayed but unmistakably bore the famous logo. “Who the hell forgets they lost their vintage YSL jacket?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “We can’t take these, Kayla.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong. And there’s an Honor Code. If I get caught stealing, I’ll get kicked out.”

Kayla gave me a droll look. “We’re telling everybody I’m your roommate. I think we’re way past caring about the Honor Code at this point.”

It was then that I felt it, for the first time: the magnitude of our lies. Like I’d been walking on a tightrope and all of a sudden I’d dared to look down at the tumbling depths below. Kayla was treating this week like just another caper, but this was my *life*. Suddenly I remembered Kayla’s words all those summers ago: *You would’ve risked nothing while I risked everything*. How was this any different?

Then tell her to go, that voice inside me whispered. But I knew I wouldn’t.

Kayla turned back to the black YSL jacket, a soft, hungry gleam in her eyes. Then she shook her head. “Fine,” she relented. “Maybe I shouldn’t be walking around in Grandma Marjorie’s jacket.” Reluctantly, she threw the jacket back in the pile.

Moments later, Kayla pulled out a deep emerald sweater—it looked like cashmere, the stitching fine and precise. In little gold curlicue lettering, the label read *Made in Scotland*. Still, it was nondescript. It could’ve been anyone’s sweater. When Kayla pulled it over her head, her bright-red hair tumbling in waves over the green Scottish yarn, even I had to admit: The transformation was remarkable. She looked like she’d walked out of the pages of *The Secret History*, like she spent her nights studying medieval manuscripts by candlelight. She looked more like a Harkness student than I did.

We looked at each other, and started laughing.

That night Hannah Primrose posted a photo of her studying in the library, on an unnamed college campus. For days afterward, her followers would debate in the comments whether it was Duke or Yale or Cambridge, a mystery only compounded by Hannah’s refusal in the captions to explain her long absence, her new wardrobe, her sudden interest in Donna Tartt. But

even if the circumstances were murky, they all agreed on this: The bitch was *back*.

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Chapter 10

In just twenty-four hours, the post got over twelve thousand likes. A few days later, we uploaded a Reel of all the troll comments back in September: *didn't even try college, didn't even try, why don't you stop whoring on the internet and go to college?* We captioned them: *How it started . . .* Then the video jumped to a fluttery ribbon of photos, one after another in a quick succession: Hannah leaning against an ivy-wrapped stone wall, looking pensive in a black turtleneck and plaid miniskirt; Hannah looking up at the clock tower, her bright-red hair the same shade as the leaves littering the quad; Hannah sitting in a leather armchair, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* open in her lap—*How it's going*, we captioned, and it felt like a victory lap. And when the video racked up 325,000 views in two hours—the most engagement we'd gotten, ever—it was a victory lap, thousands of likes piling up, hundreds of comments, our phones pinging like pinball machines as we stayed up late into the night, hitting refresh:

**I'm obsessed with your arc
Omg
Needed this crossover**

By the following week, Hannah Primrose hit sixty-five thousand followers, and I resumed going to classes.

"This will be on your finals," Professor Sullivan said briskly in front of a whiteboard filled with indecipherable cosines and graphs. "You've been warned." In Accounting, my TA returned my problem set with so much red ink the pages looked like they were bleeding.

A strange, sour feeling settled in the pit of my stomach: I was a bad student. For some reason, *this* of all things—a C+—precipitated the first full-blown crisis of conscience I'd had since Kayla's arrival. "What if someone here finds the account?" I fretted Tuesday night, lingering in the mirror as I applied one of Kayla's lip products. It seemed impossible that the same reflection was staring back at me; I was bewildered by this person I was becoming.

“So what?” Kayla popped her Bubblicious gum. “I’ll just say it’s mine. God knows there are enough wannabe influencers at this school. *This is what I eat in a day at Harkness!*” she savagely aped, putting two fingers to her head. “Kill me.”

“Yeah, but *they’re* not lying to everybody,” I pointed out. “They’re actually students here.”

“Not a lie,” Kayla claimed, with wide-eyed sincerity. “Nobody’s entitled to our truth, that’s all.”

I let out a small, incredulous snort. But before I could respond, Kayla flashed me a wicked grin. “Where are you going, wearing lipstick on a Tuesday night?”

“It’s ChapStick,” I said, stiffly.

“It’s *tinted*. It’s got color, you naughty girl.”

“Tuesdays I have that art club I told you about.” I gathered my books and stuffed them in my backpack, avoiding the sly flicker in Kayla’s eyes.

“Aren’t you just living the life,” she remarked. “Do you sit around in a circle feeling special while some fifty-year-old man with a midlife crisis reads Greek to you?”

Refusing to take her bait, I shouldered my backpack. “Glad you’re catching on to the aesthetic.”

As the door to 403D closed after me, I heard Kayla call out: “Hey. If there’s some mysterious professor you’re sneaking off to see, Hannah’s followers deserve to know!”



Kayla couldn’t have known her words had hit the mark. And yet I couldn’t shake off Kayla’s joke, walking across campus in the dark to the Observatory. Cresting that hill, until I spotted the white brick and lit windows, the familiar dome gleaming under the bright moonlight, I felt a strange electricity building inside me. Without quite knowing it, Kayla had sensed a change in me, like females do of all species at a molecular level. But it wasn’t until Kayla put it in words that *I* realized it too.

“Miss Thibodeaux.” Professor Wyman smiled as I took the last seat at the middle table. “I was beginning to think I’d scared you away.”

At the center of the table in front of us stood a half dozen white plaster Roman busts. We eyed them, a little underwhelmed. They were low-value

reproductions, the classical features rough and misshapen, like they'd been forged out of molding clay. Wyman was amused by our disappointment. "Lighten up," he said sprightly, tying on his apron. "At the Palazzo Spinelli, students spend a year just practicing how to hold a paintbrush."

Wyman demonstrated. Dipping a soft, round No. 6 paintbrush in a palette smeared with onyx black and working in small, feathery brushstrokes, he filled the brow area. "Nice and easy," he said. "Pair off in twos and give it a go."

On my left, Esther twisted away from me so quickly, I could practically hear the muscles snapping in her neck. "Want to be partners?" she asked Meredith Banks. The other Art Girls were already getting up to grab paintbrushes and palettes, their stools scraping against the floor. This left me and Avery Chen. Our eyes met across the table. I hadn't seen her since Halloween. From under her *Zion for Lovers!* baseball cap, she nodded.

The task was much harder than Wyman made it look. My hands trembled slightly, no matter how hard I tried to keep them still; Avery's problem was getting her brush to coat evenly. Leaning back to survey our work, I caught Avery's eye and we stifled a laugh. Our Roman man looked like a cross between Liza Minnelli and Frida Kahlo.

The tension now broken, Avery asked: "How's your friend?"

I frowned. The afternoon after the Halloween party, I'd gone by Callie's room only to find her Swiffering the floor with twitchy, intense concentration. Her headphones were in. I called her name and she didn't hear me. "Callie," I said louder. Finally I tapped her on the shoulder and, under my fingertips, I felt her flinch.

The Swiffer fell to the ground with a clatter. "Dude," she exhaled, and I saw it then: a kind of raw animal hurt, before cauterizing again. I asked, gently, how she was feeling. Fine, she insisted. I offered to search Alpha Rho for her necklace; maybe it was lying in some corner of the basement or had fallen into the crevices—

"Can you please just drop it?" Callie snapped. After that, I never mentioned that night again. When I saw Callie a few days later, she seemed normal—upbeat, even. Her hair was blown out to a sleek shine. Her room was sparkling clean. But index cards were now taped on the wall above her desk. Mantras, handwritten in Callie's neat cursive. *Love yourself enough to*

set boundaries. You ARE the healing emotional energy that courses in your life.

Now, of course, with the benefit of hindsight, those index cards were a sign. Of a friend who needed my help. Of the kind of stain that can't be scrubbed away, no matter how hard one might try. But the truth is, it never once occurred to me that fall to tell Callie what she needed to hear: that what happened to her was wrong, and that she needed to report it to the school. It's strange, especially given the time. Thousands of women marching in cities around the country; Harvey Weinstein walking into the courtroom on a walker with old tennis balls on its two back legs.

But all of that seemed so far away from Harkness, where kids cried over a B+ and the biggest decision on a Friday night was whether to go to Sig Nu's "Kountry Kwencher" or Delta Gamma's toga party.

"She's fine, I think," I told Avery.

"That's good," Avery said softly.

"Yeah," I said lamely. "It is."

Avery straightened up, placed her paintbrush neatly across the palette. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Why are you in a sorority? What do you get out of it?"

"It's just what you do here," I replied, shrugging, even as I remembered the odd, floating detachment I'd felt during the Halloween party. *Was this all college would be?* I'd wondered. Dressing up to go to questionably themed parties, drinking pee-warm beer in a dark basement, watching boys play pong, hoping one of them takes you upstairs, and doesn't rape you, or maybe even takes you out on a date or two. Rinse and repeat, for four years.

Wyman came into view then, over Avery's shoulder. Leaning with one elbow on the table littered with Roman busts, he corrected Esther's grip on her paintbrush. Easing the distance between her fingers, before quickly letting go. *Less like a tennis grip*, he was saying, a wiry curl of dark hair falling in front of his eyes. *Looser gives you more control.*



I lingered at the sink, rinsing my brushes. Behind me the studio was emptying out, and I heard the sound of backpacks zipping, coats buttoned.

Esther and Meredith and the visual arts major sat at the table for a while, exchanging Instagrams and making plans to study at the café on North Grounds later in the week, before they filed out one by one. Avery, I got the sense, was waiting for me, but then she, too, turned for the door.

Finally, I was alone with Wyman.

He was reading a paperback at one of the tables. There was a buzzing in my fingertips now, that strange, palpable energy from earlier running through them. I pictured him locking up the studio, getting in his car, and going home. Sliding his wedding band back on his finger, now that he was no longer working. I imagined his wife, her hands as delicate and well formed as a Degas model leaning over the stovetop, stirring the ladle. I'd scoured the internet for references to her, but there was nothing in *Architectural Digest* or *Artforum*, no photos of them together at a gala or arms wrapped around children . . .

Placing the dripping brush in the Mason jar, I turned off the faucet and turned to face him.

At the same time Wyman looked up from his paperback and smiled. "Those brushes are awfully clean," he said quietly.

"Why do you act like we hadn't met before?" This slipped out with sudden, awkward force. As soon as I said the words out loud, I realized it had been bothering me. Wyman's studied oblivion, growing more and more pronounced with every night we met in the Observatory, so starkly different from the familiarity he struck with the other girls. *Ms. Thibodeaux*. That indifference was what tinged our interactions with possibility.

Wyman closed his book, and studied me. "Are you hungry?" he asked.



From behind a curtain that roped off a storage area under the stairs, Professor Wyman grabbed a hot plate off the shelf. Briefly, in the thirty seconds the bare bulb illuminated the tangle of appliances stacked along the wall—a copper pot, an instant-egg-cooker—I got a tantalizing glimpse of Wyman's inner life. Confirmation, really, of what I already instinctively knew: There was no wife.

"Some nights I just eat pasta straight out of the pot here," Wyman said, bringing his fingers to his lips in a mock whisper. "Don't tell anyone."

I grinned. "I won't."

From various cabinets and shelves—a small, well-stocked refrigerator I hadn't noticed before, tucked in the corner—Wyman assembled the ingredients: a tin can of linguine, a small bowl of coarse, flaky salt. Irish butter and whole peppercorns in a wooden mill.

“Cacio e pepe is a deceptively simple dish,” Wyman said, turning the knob. “There’s only four elements. Every component needs to be well executed; otherwise it’s just a gloppy mess.”

Before that night, I’d never had pasta that wasn’t out of a box or bag. I can still see all of it now, so clearly: the bundle of pasta that was the circumference of my wrist, its delicate, translucent strands fanned out in the rolling water; the look of quiet concentration on Wyman’s face as he turned off the burner, cut the butter in, bit by bit, and cracked the black pepper.

We ate at the table. I lifted a few tendrils out of the knot of pasta on the paper plate, then took that first rich, buttery bite.

“Good?”

“Good?” I said. “This is, like, grown-up mac ’n’ cheese. It’s *great*.” When Wyman laughed, I felt a shivery, almost delirious kind of happiness.

As we ate, Wyman asked me questions. Where was I from, what classes was I taking, and what did I like so far about Harkness? We might as well have been in a crowded classroom or nibbling hors d’oeuvres at the Student-Faculty Welcome Dinner. It occurred to me that there was a movie trailer in my mind of the way these things ought to go: I had *put myself out there*, and therefore it was incumbent on Wyman to tell me I was the most special student he’d ever taught and put his hand on my knee by the time we’d cleared our plates.

Disappointment warmed my cheeks as I chewed the last bites of my pasta.

“Can I ask you something?” Wyman said abruptly, putting his fork down. “Why didn’t you come last week?”

I hesitated.

“My roommate,” I said finally, parsing my words carefully. “She has the tendency to get me in trouble sometimes.”

“I know the type,” Wyman said. Something about his gaze made me hot, feverish.

Without noticing it, I’d been shredding my paper napkin. Brown bits stuck to the half-congealed sauce on my plate as I changed the topic. “How did you get started in conservation?”

“I was eighteen and needed a place to stay in Florence for the summer. A conservator who knew my father had a downstairs flat she was renting out. Flat out, she told me that she had no need for a studio assistant—she hadn’t taken anyone on in more than twenty years. But I could stay in exchange for cleaning her apartment once a week.” He shrugged modestly. “A month later, I was her studio assistant, helping her with del Castagno’s fresco in the grotto of the Sant’Apollonia.”

Smiling at the puzzled look on my face, Wyman explained: “It was in the way I cleaned her apartment, she said. That’s what convinced her.”

“Hand skills,” I echoed, remembering what he told us during our first club meeting.

“Exactly,” Wyman said, nodding. “Attention to detail. Total absorption. At the end of the day, they’re all just shorthand for this elusive quality I’m speaking of. Conservators say that they can always tell when another conservator walks into a room. Or when they ring up your apple.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. *He remembered*. It bloomed between us: a moment of perfect understanding.

He gestured toward the other end of our makeshift dining table, where the plaster busts stood in rows, gaping at us with their grotesque, smeared expressions. “None of these assignments really matter,” he said, dismissing them with a wave of the hand. “It’s nothing that can be taught.”

There was a long silence, after which Wyman cleared his throat, got up, and told me that it was late, and I should be getting back to the dorms. “Good night, Professor Wyman,” I said, holding the glass Mason jar of leftovers he’d insisted on packing me.

“Please,” he said, returning my smile. “Call me Chuck.”



After that night, I began stealing away to the Observatory when I had pockets of time—between classes, after Chapter or my FoCo shifts.

Wyman was always there, working—writing letters to labs to test samples of pigment; relining a canvas; touching up the gold-leaf inlay of a panel with a brush so tiny, it must’ve been a few hairs. A crease always deepened between his eyes when I alighted the doorway, but other than that he’d say nothing, accepting me wordlessly into the fold of his studio. “This is my office away from my office,” he’d joked once. “Before finals,

undergrads are buzzards. Nothing knocks them out like cold, and distance.” Sometimes he’d take a break and make us ham-and-butter sandwiches with grainy mustard, or a little lettuce salad with dressing that didn’t come from a bottle. As we ate, he’d tell me stories about the art world with the Homeric relish of an old warrior. The secrets, the lawsuits, the tax havens in Switzerland. Knavish dealers and bickering curators; the Rubens he once found hanging above the hot plate in some ninety-five-year-old’s kitchen in the South of France.

I’d come back to my dorm from the Observatory, smelling faintly of turpentine. Always I felt like a part of me was still there, hovering in the frame of one of the paintings Wyman was working on, trapped somewhere between foreground and subject. Kayla’s voice—“Where’ve you *been?*”—snapping me back to reality as soon as I opened the door to 403D and slipped from one secret world to another. “I’ve got to study for finals,” I’d tell her, irritably. “I’m actually a student here, you know.”

But whatever the reason for my sudden flightiness, Kayla didn’t prod. All she cared about was a consistent posting schedule.

“We’ve *got* to keep up!” Kayla said, finally fed up one night. “Who cares about grades? We should be hitting 80K by the end of this week, 100K by Thanksgiving.”

“We’ve already gotten back all the followers we lost in October,” I pointed out. “If anything, we should tone it down. What if—”

“Are you kidding?” Kayla’s eyes glimmered. “We’re just getting started.”

Revitalized by Hannah’s pivot to dark academia content, Kayla had become obsessed with learning from the mistakes of the past. Often I found her on my laptop, with twenty-five tabs open to *Forbes* articles about brand growth and identity, *Wall Street Journal* interviews with social media strategists, digital gurus, entrepreneurs. The backlash in October, Kayla diagnosed, wasn’t a matter of content, but of *timing*. David had been a partner at Hype House, and in trying to open his own content house, he’d leaned on strategies for the Bella Roses of the world, rather than the Hannah Primroses. With their millions of followers, *late-stage creators*, as Kayla called them—she sounded like she was getting an MBA in becoming an influencer, at this point—could get away with posting a no-caption photo of them in a bikini, then dropping an Amazon shop link.

But to get there, Hannah needed to build that audience. Hannah needed to give them what they wanted; this, Kayla and I had instinctively understood since the very beginning, from that first summer, when we'd pulled that Lilly Pulitzer dupe out of the bin in Goodwill and taken the bus to downtown Greenville. Now, of course, it needed to be on a grander scale. In the same way that they'd watch *Love Yacht* or *Real Housewives*, Hannah's followers wanted a season, plot, a clear beginning, middle, and end. They wanted more than just dark academia vibes—they wanted a *story*.

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Chapter 11

The weekend was unseasonably warm, the sky a cloudless blue on Saturday, with bright sun. Alpha Rho held a barbecue on its front lawn, and Andy had gone out of her way to invite Kayla the day before, stopping me after Econ class. “Bring your roommate,” she said, excitedly. “Ginny and I were just saying the other day that we want to get to know her better.”

“*Moi?*” Kayla said, rolling her eyes when I told her. But I could tell that she was secretly pleased, and that afternoon she took longer than usual getting ready, coaxing waves into her hair with the curling wand; applying strips of lashes to the outermost corners of her eyes, with surgical precision; then “borrowing” my loafers to go with another sweater-collared shirt combo that, I suspected, came from the lost and found. To top it all off, Kayla braided a blue ribbon into her front tresses.

“How do I look?” she asked, twirling twice.

“Like those loafers are Prada,” I said, with grudging admiration, remembering Danielle’s dig at rush. She beamed.

Dozens of girls were already on the lawn by the time we got to the house. There was a sweet, smoky smell in the air, and I spotted Andy flipping burgers on a large propane grill next to a long line of girls waiting, their features bleached by the sun, their heels sinking in the grass. Next to me, I felt Kayla’s fingers stiffen in my hand. Startled, I looked at her, and for a moment, I glimpsed it: the strain of her performance. Then it was gone, expertly smoothed away, the dazzling mask sliding back into place on her face. Right on time, Ginny walked toward us.

“Girls! So glad you could make it!”

Ginny hugged me, as if we’d watched movies in pajamas together. When she turned to Kayla, there was a moment of hesitation, which Kayla leveraged. “Ginny!” she said, bridging the gap with unblinking warmth. “When Faith told me about the barbecue, I was like, *I’m there*. You girls were so sweet to invite me.”

Disarmed and called out, Ginny softened. “Oh my God, *of course*. We’re so bummed we didn’t get a chance to meet you during rush. That’s crazy you had to miss so much of school.”

“Yeah,” Kayla said, breezily. “Mono’s a bitch.”

Ginny smiled, with a knowing glint in her eye. “Well, you’re making quite the splash this week, aren’t you?”

What the hell did she mean by that? I wondered. But Kayla just tossed her head back and laughed.

“C’mon.” Ginny hooked her bony arm in Kayla’s, with a soft jangle of her multicolored bracelets. “I’ll introduce you to some of the girls.”

Led by Ginny, Kayla disappeared into a crowd of girls by the side patio, her ribbon a flash of bright blue. Ginny’s words lingered in their wake, strange and inscrutable. What had she meant, that Kayla was *making a splash* this week?

And why had Kayla acted not surprised, but proud?

I’d find out soon enough. Eating a cold hot dog on one of the white plastic chaises under the shade of the pines, I was joined by Callie, whom I hadn’t seen much of since Halloween. “Have you seen this?” She handed me a newspaper, flipped and folded to a middle page.

It was that week’s edition of the *Harkness Lampoon*, the student comedy magazine. The headline at the top of A5 read: *A Very Casual (and Unbiased) List of Harkness’ 50 Most Beautiful People on Campus!*

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I swore.

Because there, right below the fold, was Kayla. It was a black-and-white photo of her standing on the quad, wearing the sweater we’d filched that first week from the lost and found—and grinning into the camera, as if she had every right to be there.

Dizzy with terror, I read the accompanying text. *Latest polling is in from the hockey team, the lacrosse team, and the Robotics Club! A healthy cross section of the Harkness male body is quite taken by this redheaded native of Mississippi who lives in Smith, majors in Psychology, and most mercifully has recovered from a bout of mono—not that that would stop anyone.*

“Unbelievable,” I said, tossing the paper down and looking wildly for Kayla. I couldn’t see her on the lawn; she must’ve gone inside.

“I know,” Callie sighed, picking the bun off her burger. “Some people are so good looking, it isn’t fair.”

I found Kayla upstairs in Andy’s room. Lil Nas X blasted from a portable speaker; a chilled bottle of rosé was almost empty on the dresser; and Kayla was dancing in the middle of the room, with Andy and Ginny. “Where’ve you been?” Kayla cried, pulling me into a bear hug. Her blue

ribbon had come undone and was hanging messily like loose bits of confetti, and in the tangle of her hair I caught the glint of something shiny.

“Why are you wearing those?” I asked Kayla, momentarily distracted. They were earrings, with a familiar crisscrossing design, and mother-of-pearl inlay—earrings I’d seen Andy wear in class.

Flushed and giddy, Andy wrapped her arms around Kayla. “Don’t they look super cute on her? Keep them,” she shouted in Kayla’s ear. “I have three pairs!” Suddenly, with a strange apprehension sinking in the pit of my stomach, I was reminded of that summer afternoon at Claire’s, the bracelets and necklaces thrust in Kayla’s hands. The girls fluttering to Kayla’s charisma like moths to a flame.

I took Kayla’s hand and dragged her into the hallway.

“Are you *insane*?” I hissed once alone, swatting the paper at her. “You let them take your *photo*?”

“Oh jeez.” Kayla took the *Lampoon* and began fanning her cheeks with it. “This is why I didn’t tell you. I knew you’d act this way. They came up to me while I was eating lunch last week. What was I going to do, decline?”

“Yes!”

Kayla shook her head. “That would’ve been even more suspicious. Besides, it’s not even digital! I checked. A couple of hundred kids are going to read this and throw it in the trash.” She laughed. “Hannah’s got eighty thousand followers now. Why are we fighting about some stupid college newspaper?”

Before I could answer, there was a commotion in the hallway, as a freshman boy I recognized from my Econ class dashed upstairs. Slightly out of breath, and carrying with him the distinct whiff of whiskey, he seemed cowed at the sight of Kayla and me. “S-sorry,” he said. “I know I’m not supposed to be up here, but—”

Andy popped her head out of the door. “Hey, you’re one of the Delta Omega pledges, right?” He nodded. “What’s up?”

“Henry sent me up here. He wants to know if we can play pong?”



Night had fallen, darkening the lawn when Henry and two of his brothers showed up. Standing in the foyer, tall and hunched in his black

windbreaker, Henry Taylor was spinning his John Deere hat with his finger when Andy and Ginny came downstairs, with Kayla and me closely following. Henry's eyes lingered on Kayla.

"Did you guys run out of beer?" Ginny asked teasingly.

Henry shrugged. "We just thought we'd come hang out." There was an affable, courteous tone to Henry's voice I hadn't heard before. "Hey, Kayla," he called out, the hat stilling, and in that moment he had planted his flag, he made his intentions for the rest of the night known: He was here because Kayla was here.

Everybody looked at Kayla. Tucking a sweaty strand of hair behind her ears, showing off her new earrings gifted from Andy, Kayla looked every inch the pretty Harkness freshman as she smiled at Henry. "Are we playing pong, or what?"

Downstairs, Henry ran into Callie in the stairwell.

"Baker!" He clapped her on the back as if she were one of the boys.

There was a long sickening pause, and Callie swayed in one place, as if absorbing the blow of a punch. Then she laughed loudly, too loudly. "Hey, Henry."

I looked away. I didn't want to see the mask of strained joviality that had settled on my friend's face. Then I noticed Kayla. Standing between them on the fourth step; her eyes flicking back and forth, coolly observant.



"Stay away from that guy," I told Kayla later back at Smith, drunkenly eating Kraft mac 'n' cheese at three in the morning in the lounge. We'd played several games of pong, during which I helped drink Kayla's sunken cups of beer; she wasn't very good, as it turned out. Henry glowered at my presence but said nothing. Right before we left, Henry took Kayla's phone and put in his number. *Call me sometime*, he'd said.

Lowering her chopsticks—the only utensils we could find in the drawers of the kitchenette—Kayla looked at me for a second, then narrowed her eyes. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"Just stay away from him," I repeated, my voice sharp, high-pitched. "Okay?"

Kayla frowned. "You know what I think?" she mused. "I think you just can't stand the idea I might have my own life here. My own friends. You

just want me under your thumb.”

“Funny,” I mumbled. “Because I could’ve said the same about you.”

Not talking, we went to bed early. Late as it was, I couldn’t fall asleep; neither could Kayla—from under her comforter, I heard the clacking of her nails against her phone. I watched the clock on my desk read three thirty, then four thirty, then five. *This can’t last forever*, I thought, with a growing sense of dread, unease. We’d known when we started that there was always going to be an end, a thin vanishing line in the horizon. *Somebody finding out*, I thought with a shudder; but really, how would they? More likely, our game would end the way all games ended: when it stopped being fun. And then I’d just have to explain Kayla’s sudden disappearance. A transfer to another school, a family obligation. An academic leave. Wasn’t it as simple, as easy, as that?

(But what would *Kayla* do? The thought hadn’t crossed my mind then.)

Eventually, I fell asleep.

The next morning, I swung by Callie’s room to walk to our classes together. My eyes were gritty from the lack of sleep. Callie was dabbing on concealer when I walked in. As I waited, I looked at the wall of index cards above her desk. There were a few new ones: *You must be vigilant about protecting your energy and your boundaries. I honor and validate my feelings. Healing is an art.*

“Sorry, almost done,” Callie said. She took her jacket off the hanger in the closet. As she turned away from the mirror, the blue ribbon, shiny against her dark hair, caught my eye. It was a slightly lighter blue than Kayla’s but braided the exact same way, the ribbon crisscrossing down the back in two plaits.

“New hairstyle?” I asked. Callie blushed.



That damn ribbon. The next few days, I spotted ribbons of various colors on a lacrosse girl, a girl in my Econ class, and three more Alpha Rhos, who all wanted to know if my roommate was now dating Henry Taylor. Nearly overnight, Kayla had become a minor celebrity on campus, embodying so effortlessly the qualities that mattered at a school like Harkness—charisma, wit, style—that nobody seemed to notice, or care, that she had appeared out

of nowhere. Years later, some of my old classmates would tell me that, knowing what they know now, it was still hard to divorce their memories of Harkness from Kayla Lightfoot, that girl they'd admired so fervently. "Remember she wore that ribbon to a party?" they'd say, almost fondly. "And then everybody started to wear it?"

I'd made a mistake. Thinking I could have Kayla *and* Harkness, my old life and my new one. Whenever that week I saw a blue ribbon dangling in some girl's hair, I *knew* it, even then. But like a driver who'd taken a wrong turn and still refused to get off at the next exit, I couldn't admit it, even as the road got darker, less familiar, even as the exits were fewer and farther between.

Instead I kept on driving.



When I got to the Observatory on Thursday, Avery was standing outside in the cold, eating a wilted salad out of Tupperware. She had that mildly deranged look I was seeing more and more of in the weeks leading up to finals: glazed over and stunned; twitches from too much caffeine and not enough sleep.

I rummaged in the front pocket of my backpack and curled my fingers around one of Kayla's Sonomas. I'd taken up smoking, a habit that was more of an aesthetic than an addiction. Hannah's posts lately were darker, more saturated: Kayla holding a lipstick-smearred saucer of coffee while reading Berger's *Ways of Seeing*; oversize cardigans and headbands and references to the Italian Renaissance painters whose techniques we studied in Wyman's club. Smiling to myself, I realized, for the first time: Hannah had become an art student. Of course, she wouldn't smoke Sonomas, we just did because they were cheap; she'd smoke Marlboro Reds. I lit the off-brand cigarette with a match. Struggling, at first, against the light wind.

"Is this your new thing?" Avery inquired politely.

"No." Then, relenting, I said: "What gave it away?"

Avery smiled. She forked more salad into her mouth and chewed, looking at me. "The way you hold it."

"Well," I said, taking a drag. "Not everybody can pick up a kale habit."

"I don't even like kale," Avery said.

For some reason, this struck me as funny; the cigarette was making me lightheaded. “Why’re you eating it then?” I asked.

“The guy I’m seeing made this for me. He said I looked like I was getting scurvy.” This I didn’t disagree with. She swallowed and made a face. “Kale’s white people food.”

I laughed. I thought of the salad Wyman made me a few days ago; purple veiny leaves that he called *radicchio*, slivers of almonds, a bright splash of acidity. “I tend to agree,” I said, stubbing the Sonoma out.



Wyman switched off the lights, plunging the studio in total darkness. Then a soft *put-put*. Purple bars of light beamed in a wide arc above our heads. “Dark places are the varnish,” Wyman said, the handheld UV lamp glowing in his hand. On the table at the center, the painting revealed itself, like the ghostly prow of a ship: the dark webbing, the cracks, became shining blue filaments, and then an outline.

A young woman gazed out at us. Standing in front of a curtain, she glanced over her shoulder, and now I began to dimly trace the fur-lined lapel of her robe, falling down to reveal the swell of her belly. Sometime in the last few weeks, Wyman had mended the torn canvas; a ripple of its violence was still visible in the thin, hairline seam connecting like a highway her long, ring-adorned fingers and the small, humble hill of her breast, which they cupped.

Somebody wolf whistled. We all giggled.

Smiling, Wyman switched out the handheld UV lamp for a bulky Nikon camera and began taking pictures. “Documentation,” he explained. “As we begin conservation, we must provide an accounting of what we do every day. Like an anthropologist taking field notes or a scientist creating lab reports.” For a while, all we heard was the soft *click* of the camera.

Staring again at the girl, I remembered what Wyman had told us about the painting’s prior owner. I imagined Bunny Reiss as some aging New Orleans doyen cooped up in her dilapidated beaux arts mansion with paintings and trinkets everywhere, covered in a thin layer of dust and cobwebs. Privately, Wyman had told me that he regretted showing his cards, back in October; that he should’ve allowed us to come to our own

emotional truths about the painting, without the benefit of Wyman's hypothesis: that the painter was a woman.

But the more I looked, the more convinced I was that Wyman was right. Unlike the other female nudes I'd studied in the book Wyman gave me, the expression on the girl's face wasn't of surprise or fear or desire. There was a frankness in her gaze, a self-possession. A strange sort of power convalescing in her dark eyes. *Here I am*, she seemed to say.

With a sudden *clap* that made us jump, Wyman turned on the lights.

"Raking light photographs are just as important," he said, pointing with two fingers at the places in the painting illuminated, at a slant, by the light. "Like a woman's face in bare light, you see? Every freckle and blemish is exposed."

Turning to face us, Wyman crossed his arms. "Remember that everything we do needs to be documented. Every day, no excuses. I take this very seriously. The last time an apprentice forgot to take a photograph, I fired him."

After our break, Wyman turned off the lights again and we took turns handling the UV camera while the laptop on the table populated with densely colored images. Ringlets of hair, glowing in eerie green. The satin sheen of a sleeve, in a bioluminescent blue. "Different types of varnish fluoresce differently," Wyman said, pacing back and forth around the table. "Conservators from different time periods used the materials that were in vogue. Rabbit glue, unfortunately, was popular in the nineteenth century, which is why you see all these exit holes in the right corner. Wood beetles."

"Professor Wyman?" Avery called out in the dark. "I have a question about the pose. It's pretty unusual, isn't it?"

"I was going to say that too," Esther said, nodding. "There's something Manet-like about it."

Next to me, Meredith handed me the UV camera. Surprised by its weight, I nearly dropped it. Large and unwieldy, with a million fiddly knobs and levers, it was difficult to maneuver, much less while I struggled to keep up with all the art-major references to mythological justifications, Manet and Raphael, the *bella donna* theme. Suddenly I heard Wyman's voice behind me: "Those are all good points. Esther, the parallel you've drawn to Raphael's *La Fornarina* is interesting. It might be good to take a look at it. Bring it up on your phone, won't you?"

Then, lowering his voice so that he could be heard only within earshot, Wyman said, "Interesting choice."

I'd focused on a section of the curtain nobody had photographed yet, snapping away. Half-intelligent response ready, I opened my mouth, but something about the tone in Wyman's voice made me pause. I was aware, then, of how close he was standing to me. He smelled of pine soap and the faintest trace of damp wool. Cocooned in darkness, Wyman and I just stood there, the heat flowing through our bodies its own language.

"I've got it," Meredith said after a long, still pause, and outside this cocoon I was dimly aware of a textbook passed around, flipped to a glossy reproduction. Whatever Wyman said next about Raphael's *La Fornarina*, I can't remember. Because his hand was on the small of my back, and I could've told you the exact place between my fourth and fifth vertebrae that his finger grazed my bare, hot skin.

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Chapter 12

My room was dark and empty when I returned. Most nights, I was so tired by my back-to-back schedule that I immediately went to bed. But I couldn't sleep. I turned on the lights and sat at my desk, taking all my pencils out of the red Stars Hollow mug and sharpening them to a fine point. Wood shavings fell on the floor around me. My skin still tingled from the imprint of Wyman's hand.

What just happened? Did something happen? Was Professor Wyman willing to risk it all in that dark, crowded room—his job, his reputation—for me? Or was I just losing grip on reality, concocting stories in my head, and on the internet, because I was so desperate for something to happen?

I texted Kayla **Where are you? I NEED to talk to you.**

Three ellipses, and then Kayla's reply: **Ohh?? I'm getting Speedy's with Callie right now. Want us to bring you back anything?**

Annoyed, I put my phone down. It wasn't just the pinprick of surprise I felt that Callie and Kayla were somehow now hanging out—it was the fact that men had always hit on Kayla with reckless abandon, and through all of these harrowing ordeals—David, Henry—I'd stood offstage, there if she needed me; and now that something had finally happened to me, Kayla was off getting french fries in the drive-through with Callie.

My whole body felt feverish. I shot up and paced the room from my bed to Kayla's bed, then to the window overlooking the lightened quad. I pried it open, letting in a chilly breeze that raised the little hairs on my arms. Late on a Thursday night, the odd student or two were still on the sidewalk, strapped with backpacks and bundled up in coats.

I'm not sure, exactly, how the thought entered my mind. Only that it came as a whisper, a murmur. *Could I?* I wondered, and a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold went down my spine.

There were, after all, thousands of strangers right at my fingertips, who were audience tested, primed, the perfect demographic, truly, for a dark, #morallygray professor.

We need to build an audience, Kayla had said. We need to give them a story.

Well. It looked like I'd found that story.



I was typing away when Kayla came back around midnight, the smell of fry oil wafting off her jacket and hair. She kicked off her faux-suede boots in one corner of the room and tossed her jacket on the floor. Then she stood over me at my desk and sipped noisily from her large Styrofoam cup. *Pfffft*. Irritated, I looked up from my phone, where I had the Notes app open. “Yeah?”

“What’s that?”

“A new post,” I said cautiously.

“Can I read it?”

“I’m not done yet.”

“What’s it about?”

“I’m not done yet.”

Kayla craned her neck toward the screen. “Why’s it so long?”

“I’m not done yet.”

“Fine, whatever.” Kayla plopped down on my bed and studied me with those bright-green eyes, before pulling out her phone to watch YouTubers give out money to homeless people. For a while, I continued writing, as performative pledges of support, prompting real tears and laughter, played on a loop. *People love a Cinderella story*, I remember thinking, thumbs flying across the keyboard. *Even if it’s exploitative*.

By the time I was done, the sky was lightening outside, a pale ghostly blue. Anxiously, I watched Kayla’s face as she read. “Well?” I demanded, when she finally looked up again.

“Faith Thibodeaux,” she said slowly after a long pause. “You sneaky little hypocrite.” Then, with the lightning strike of a grin, she said: “I’ve never been more proud of you.”

Kayla cackled. I stared at her, then began cackling too.

“I *knew* it,” Kayla said triumphantly, socking me in the shoulder. “I *knew* something was going on!”

Even now, our laughter still rings in my ears. Another sleepless night, many years later, I stumbled across my draft Notes from that night, backed up on an old hard drive. The post had long been deleted, but in one of these Notes I’d written a logline, of sorts: *From the moment she meets Professor X—dark and brooding, cutting a solitary figure in the Observatory among*

his books and paintings—Hannah is unafraid of taking risks, of putting herself out there . . . and taking her followers along for the ride.

Something unreeled inside me, reading it. The bravado, the blind optimism—I wasn't sure if I wanted to hug my younger self, or slap her across the face.



The next afternoon, I waited on the bench outside Wyman's office in McClellan. Jiggling my foot anxiously, tugging down the black pleated skirt, sent by a brand, that Kayla had tenderly insisted I wear that morning. All I had to do, according to Kayla, was ask Wyman to get coffee. *Just bring it up. He'll take care of the rest.*

The itchy wool blend made the insides of my thighs clammy. In my lap, my phone was lighting up with notifications from our post a few hours ago: **jach_000 liked your photo, dark.academia liked your photo, graywolf 5649 liked your photo . . .**

Friday before the weekend, the Department was surprisingly busy. Down the hallway, I heard students climbing up the creaky mahogany-paneled stairs, saying hello to Peggy, the Department's admin, who sat in the middle of the octagonal common area reading her *US Weekly*, before setting off in the direction of the warren-like maze of offices to the left or right. Several of them passed by Wyman's office, two girls and one boy, all modelesque, with chiseled features and impossibly shiny hair. "Haven't seen him, have you?" the blond boy asked me; he had the rootless accent I'd come to associate with international schools.

I shook my head.

"Of course," the boy muttered, walking away, the clank of his boots padded on the threadbare antique runner. "Of course, why would I *ever* think he'd actually be there for office hours . . ."

Several long minutes later, I wanted to give up. *This is stupid*, I thought bitterly. We'd finally taken it too far, Kayla and I; wasn't it enough that we had Hannah Primrose, did we have to copilot the avatar of *me*, Faith Thibodeaux, into the most cliché of situations too?

I stood up. My phone buzzed. Kayla was FaceTiming me; I ignored it. Then she texted me. A string of nail polish emojis meant to stiffen my resolve, along with the message: **Don't you DARE chicken out!!**

I plopped back down on the bench. And then I heard Professor Wyman's voice down the other end of the hallway, arguing about movies with another voice, a female one I recognized. "I'll have to rewatch it again, then," he was saying, as they rounded the corner. "I just couldn't get over the accent on, whatshisface—"

"Cary Grant?" Professor Hopper sounded amused. "Chuck, you might be the only person in the world who thinks Cary Grant is some up-and-coming actor."

They'd just had lunch, clearly; Wyman had a Diet Coke in one hand, and Professor Hopper was holding a takeout container with eggrolls inside. At the sight of me sitting on the bench, something flashed in Wyman's eyes, a warning.

"Faith," he said, and the courteous, public-facing tone in his voice made my pulse leap. Kayla was right: This *was* fun. "I hope you haven't been kept waiting long."

"Isn't this your office hours?" I asked with a straight face.

Opening the office door across the hallway with her thicket of keys, Professor Hopper chuckled: "She's got you there."

Wyman's office was unlocked; turning the doorknob, Wyman stepped briskly into a large, spacious room with bookshelves lining one wall and windows on the other, dappled in shadow from the bare branches of a tall elm; islands of books and papers and binders floating on a sleek Italian monstrosity of a desk; the distinct smell of bergamot and Windex. On a little ceramic saucer perched on a book about Syrian funeral rites, there was a damp used tea bag. He tossed his beat-up leather messenger on one of the chairs.

Following him, I turned to close the door.

"Keep it open."

There it was, that same warning. But when I looked into Wyman's eyes, they were warm, electric.

"Coffee?" I blurted out, at the same time that Wyman said, "Dinner?"

"Well," Wyman said, after we both laughed, uneasily. "This escalated quickly."

Chapter 13

The night I went to Wyman's for dinner, I Googled *How do you have sex?* After too many search results about STIs, I refined my question: *How does a woman have sex?* The algorithm led me to a baffling number of articles titled "How Do I Master the Woman-on-Top Position?"; "You Should Want to Have Sex on the First Date"; "22 Women Attempt to Explain What Sex Feels Like for Them"—the latter, strangely, was a *Men's Health* article from 2003, and the responses ranged from "flying on a magic carpet" to "wet and squishy, in a good way." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most helpful resource on the internet was porn, and, for an hour while Kayla was out, I studied the faces of porn stars as they cycled through various sexual positions, wondering if that wide-eyed, pliant look was one I could pull off—probably not. With a sickening flutter in my stomach, I thought of the proportions of my face stretching in monstrous ways. I thought of wiry black hairs and pore size and the folds in my stomach.

Kayla waved away my concerns. "Do you want to stay a virgin forever?" Her lack of sentimentality, unvarnished and almost brusque, didn't surprise me: Kayla had lost her virginity at fourteen to a nineteen-year-old senior in the back of his uncle's van. She'd shrugged it off, saying only that it was time. As if her virginity were like braces, something you outgrow.

Earlier that day, I'd gotten coffee with Regina at North Grounds Café, catching her at the end of her shift. I was worried she'd fire me or give me another warning I was missing work. But Regina was in an effervescent mood. "Don't you *dare* ask me for the flower," she joked as she pulled the lever of the espresso machine to make me a free latte. Then, as if she couldn't resist, she made a little leaf in the foam. It wasn't half bad.

"What's got you in such a good mood?" I asked as we took seats by the window. Regina took a sip of her iced Snapple and grinned widely.

"Don't tell anyone because it's not, like, official-official yet. But Nina Sharma is coming to Harkness. She's headlining some symposium the *Snark Review* is hosting. And they've asked me to be her student escort." Regina squealed. "*Nina freakin' Sharma!* I'm going to tell her that I'm applying for their internship program."

Nina Sharma was a household name, famous for her work on *SNL* and *The Daily Show*. She was also class of 1995. “That’s amazing, Regina!” I said. “I had no idea you—”

“Wanted to be a comedian?” Regina asked, twisting her Snapple bottle, energized. “I mean, I think I’m funny, but what I really want to do is be a showrunner one day. And I don’t have any connections, so getting into an internship at *SNL* would be *everything*.”

“That’s amazing,” I said again, but this time it came out more hollow. I was aware, even then, that I felt threatened, but it wasn’t because I wanted to meet Nina Sharma or be a comedian. It was because Regina, at eighteen years old, knew exactly who she wanted to be. I had absolutely no fucking clue.

At the pause in the conversation, Regina laughed nervously. “Maybe it’s cringe to go around telling people I think I’m funny.”

“You’re one of the funniest people I know,” I said. I meant it.

“Thanks,” Regina said, blushing.

We spent the rest of the hour just catching up, gossiping about our coworkers. Regina asked me about my classes and Alpha Rho, but I kept it superficially light: “Come December, they’ll have to unbury me in the Stacks. They’ll be nothing but beef jerky in my stomach, and I’ll be found clutching my Microeconomics textbook.”

Regina laughed, but a furrow appeared between her brows. “Listen, I’ll be in the library after dinner tonight. A bunch of us at *Snark Review* are going to snag one of the good tables on the second floor. Why don’t you join us?”

Maybe, I told her. But already I knew that I wouldn’t show up; I wouldn’t take her up on the invite. College was the time to make the friends you’d have for the rest of your life; a singular time for it, in fact. Wandering down to the food hall to get Froyo one Friday afternoon, instead of going to the gym or sunning on the Green, might’ve meant that Colleen from Mobile, Alabama, would be the maid of honor at your wedding fifteen years later, as opposed to someone else. Like back then we were all just floating atoms, colliding into each other, random and haphazard. At least that’s what I tell myself.

“I’ll text you later,” I told Regina, saying goodbye outside the café. I wouldn’t. Instead, I shaved that night in the shower and applied a blackhead

strip and drew the wings of my eyeliner, flicking it just so at the ends. When I was ready, I drank a beer with Kayla. We clinked cans.

“Go get ’em, tiger,” Kayla said.



I took the bus almost an hour outside of Franklin, down the four-lane shopping mecca that had the Bed Bath & Beyond and the Hampton Inn and the Target and the Cracker Barrel and the Waffle House, past smaller and successively larger townships—American flags fluttering off poles in driveways, fire departments, empty track fields lit up at night—until the two-lane road became a ribbon of smooth black asphalt, and, Franklin’s bus system sputtering to a halt, I was unceremoniously dropped off on the side of the road by a field. As the doors clattered shut, I pulled up Wyman’s email and put the address he gave me in Maps. Night was falling; his house was still nearly a mile away.

Half an hour later, I was out of breath, having walked by the black oval sign set back from the road twice without noticing it. *Live Oaks Farm*, it read in pretty gold trim.

It was chilly, dark, my breath fogging in front of my face as I balled my hands in the sleeves of my sweatshirt and walked up the long, winding driveway in the woods to Wyman’s house. I passed by a large, leaves-strewn pond with a dock; a garden with a gazebo; and long, narrow pits filled with fine pebbles—bocce courts, I’d learn later on. By the time I spotted a light-green Prius parked by a red barn—the only visible sign I was on a farm—I had stripped off my sweatshirt and tied it around my waist.

Beyond in a clearing, surrounded by gigantic live oaks, Wyman’s house floated into view.

“Wow,” I breathed out.

All glass and sleek wood, painted a deep aubergine, Wyman’s house looked not unlike a spaceship, its curved contours and lighted planes winking out at me in the dark. Where was the door? I wondered, with a flare of self-consciousness, and right then ground lights flickered in front of me, lighting the pathway up flagstone steps. “Faith!” Wyman called, his voice carrying from the pavilion above.

Climbing up, I saw Wyman, smiling broadly. Italian linen shirt ruffling lightly in the night breeze, jeans splashed with paint, and barefoot, Wyman

stood at the top step, holding a glass of red wine. He frowned. Taking measure of my flushed, sweaty face, he exclaimed: “Good God, Faith. Did you *walk* here?”

I wished I hadn’t gotten fancy with the eyeliner. “I took the bus,” I explained.

“Sorry,” Wyman said, shaking his head. “I would’ve insisted you take a cab.”

My jaw dropped when Wyman led me past the tall window-topped doors and into the foyer. The black-and-white-tiled floors were lined with beige globes of Japanese bonsai, the fireplace (one of five in the house) crackled with real logs. A Venus-like statue lounged in a sensual pose on the marble entry table. Instantly, I thought of Kayla. For a moment, my fingers reached instinctively for my phone; then I caught myself.

“Can I take your coat?” Wyman asked, holding out his hand.

Too late, we both realized his mistake. A deep, embarrassed flush crept up my neck as I looked down at the Paradise High sweatshirt tied around my waist. I loosened the arms and gave it to Wyman in a warm bundle. “Forgot my jacket,” I told him, with a bright, carefree laugh. My first lie of the evening; I didn’t own one.



Even thinking about it now, with all the places I’ve been, all the *Architectural Digest* videos I’ve envy watched on nights when I couldn’t sleep (so many actresses in LA with “farmhouse” homes), I still think it was the most beautiful house I’d ever seen. The curved walls, almost shell-like in their folds and ridges; the starkly lit Japanese bonsai in every room; the floor-to-wall windows a canvas of green in the summer, and linear light in the winter.

Leading me into the open living area, Wyman kept up a running commentary: The house was originally built in the style of a Scottish hunting lodge. The black marble slab for the kitchen island was imported from Italy and had to be airlifted by a crane through the skylight. He’d designed it himself, yes, to be like a treehouse in the woods.

I didn’t know anything about architecture; I’d grown up living in double-wides where the only choices were *beige* or *tan*. Many years later, I now see Wyman’s delusion, hidden as it was that night behind terms—

cantilevers, seagrass—and dates—1962, 2001—thrown out with such dizzying ease, I felt like I was in another one of his lectures. It takes a special kind of delusion, after all, to turn an eighteenth-century Scottish hunting lodge into a modernist, state-of-the-art home in the woods; to haul out thirty tons of dirt and open it up to light and air, when he could've just bought an empty plot of land. But Wyman always liked a project.

"This is cool," I said, stopping to examine a patchwork quilt made out of refurbished metals that hung above the large fireplace.

"A Serbian artist made that, out of cans her grandmother collected during the war," Wyman replied. "Everything I bring into my home has to pass a test: Is it beautiful or interesting?"

I felt his dark eyes on me. "Can't they be both?"

"Sometimes," Wyman said.

He poured me a glass of the red he had open, and I drank it by the real crackling fireplace while Wyman chopped parsley on a butcher-block cutting board, and checked on the roast in the oven. My cheeks warming from the wine, I looked around, trying to build upon my arsenal of knowledge of Wyman as a person, but behind the glossy carapace of good taste there was nothing of him: no clutter, no photographs, not even so much as a stack of unopened mail.

Wyman came over to me, leaning close to refill my glass. "Let's eat."

The formal dining room was off a dim gallery lined with abstract paintings, violent splatters of color spotlighted by recessed halogen bulbs; bringing in our plates and glasses, I almost made the mistake of asking Wyman why they were pointed the wrong direction. "Where are the rest of your paintings?" I asked, as I set our plates down on a massive cedar-planked table that could've easily sat sixteen.

"Were you expecting *Starry Night*?" Wyman teased. He filled our water glasses and placed them, to my dismay, at the heads of the table.

"No." Without missing a beat, I followed his lead with the plates, bringing them down with a clatter. "Just most of the stuff I've seen is contemporary. I just figured you'd have more paintings."

"At one point I had a Titian down here, and quite a good Rembrandt." Sitting down, Wyman began carving the roast. "They're back in New York. The insurance to keep them in Louisiana was astronomical."

We had lamb for dinner, with roast baby potatoes and salad. The meat left trails of red on my plate. Strangely, Wyman was quiet, almost taciturn,

as we ate. His loquaciousness from earlier had evaporated, and I was tempted to throw out bathroom tile or renovation just to prevent a total lapse into silence. Ten feet away, with nothing but the stirring strings of Vivaldi's *Winter* between us, Wyman seemed farther than he'd ever been. I missed the casual intimacy with which he'd made me *cacio e pepe* in the Observatory, our bamboo plates and knees knocking into each other under the table.

A shudder of a thought came over me. *Maybe he's made up his mind about me. Maybe I'm not interesting or beautiful.*

"You know," Wyman said, breaking the silence. "You never told me your thoughts. On the book I loaned you."

A book? Had I really taken an hour-long bus to his house just to talk about a book? Grabbing the stem of my glass, I pulled it toward me, jerkier than I intended, and wine sloshed out of its side. *Fuck it.* Boldly, I polished off the glass and got up to refill. "There's too many Picassos in the world," I said, grabbing the bottle off the long narrow table that only later would I know to call a credenza. "Like, did they really have to give him a Blue Period and a Rose Period? Seems a tad excessive."

"I take it you disagree with the Met's curators?" Wyman sounded amused.

"No offense." I stole a glance at him. "I know you—"

"Succeeded, as a man, a long line of male curators who headed the Met's European Paintings Department. Trust me, I have no excuse. Though I will say, I was personally responsible for the Met not acquiring three Rose Period paintings during my tenure." Wyman raised his glass. "But my reasons were less than noble."

We drank. "My father owned the three paintings," he said. "And setting aside the pesky issue of conflicts, I didn't want to give my father the imprimatur he so cravenly wanted."

Sitting back down, the angles of the room tilted. "Why?" I asked.

"Why what?"

"Why do you hate your father?"

Wyman laughed. "That's a very personal question," he said. For a moment I thought he'd fall back into a stony silence. But he looked less angry than thoughtful. "Both my father and grandfather were great collectors. Antiquities and European art, for my grandfather. Very, very famous collection. When he died, my father inherited the collection—or

perhaps I should say, the collection inherited him.” He took another sip and grimaced. “But you see, priceless art and children don’t mix. Growing up, whole rooms were off-limits to me and my siblings. We mustn’t do this. We mustn’t do that. We must be *custodians*,” he intoned in a mocking tone of voice.

“Once, when I was ten or eleven, my friends and I snuck into my father’s study. We lit a fire to make s’mores. The chimney must’ve not been cleaned for a while, because all this smoke came pouring out. A rare landscape by Rembrandt was damaged. Not irreparably, but damaged. I was punished.”

“That must’ve been very hard,” I said after a long pause. Then—I couldn’t help it—I stifled a giggle. I *was* drunk.

Wyman’s mouth dropped open. “Are you laughing at me?”

“No, no, I’m sure it was hard.” I tried to keep a straight face. “Is it, like, hard to find a support group?”

After a stunned moment Wyman laughed out loud. “You’re really something, you know that?” he said admiringly.

“Hey,” I said, feeling more relaxed than I had all evening. “Some kids have to make their s’mores in the microwave. Like me,” I said, with a quirk of a smile. “I’ve never had s’mores all proper over a fire.”

“Wait,” Wyman said. “Really?”



Balancing his wineglass with one hand, and in the other one of the bamboo skewers we used during Conservation Club, Wyman leaned toward the crackling fire in the dark living room, brow furrowed in concentration. Jumping back, he swore. “Clearly I haven’t done this in a while,” he said, his second marshmallow catching on fire.

“The tip of the flame is the hottest part.” My marshmallow was perfect: crispy on the outside, slightly smoking as I took it out. Leaning on my knees, I grabbed two squares of graham crackers off the plate on the low-slung coffee table. Topsy, Wyman and I had opened and closed all the cabinets in his kitchen—quite a few, as it turned out—looking for them, Wyman texting his housekeeper when all we could find were gluten-free ones, which we both seemed to find deeply funny.

They aren't bad, I thought, nibbling off a corner. A little stale, but the chocolate made up for it. Even Wyman's chocolate was fancy, with flakes of sea salt that dissolved on my tongue.

"Have it with the Malbec." Wyman sank his knees down on the floor, close to me. Truthfully, I didn't need any more wine, but I took a sip from his glass. By the fire, his face was nothing but peaks and valleys. "Much more interesting than the cab sav we had for dinner," he said. "Can you tell?"

There it was again, that word *interesting*. Wyman's gaze was now rapt, congratulatory. I'd risen to the occasion brilliantly, playing off his sullenness, teasing him, cajoling him out of his shell. But it hadn't been me, really; I'd been pretending to be somebody else.

Because who else did I know in my life who was beautiful *and* interesting? Who I could flicker into existence so easily, as if for years I'd been waiting offstage, an understudy rehearsing her lines?

As Faith, I would've pretended to like wine. But Hannah wouldn't. "No." I shrugged. "Not really."

Wyman's dark eyes gleamed. He grinned. "Sometimes I wonder if not everyone needs a Harkness education. You know yourself so fully, Faith. What else can anyone teach you? It's refreshing."

I almost laughed at the irony.

"You sound like my best friend from back home. She didn't want me to come to Harkness."

"Well. For what it's worth, I'm glad you did."

I met Wyman's gaze. And then I looked down to see Wyman's fingers, lightly resting on the back of my hand. It was strange: how hyperaware I was of the slight tremble in my hand; of the hairs, surprisingly fine and blond, that ran the length of his knuckles; of the way our breathing slowed down to the same cadence. Yet, at the same time, I felt far, far away. Like I was back in 403D, watching a scene on *Love Yacht* unfold on my laptop.

"You can tell me if this is okay," he prompted.

I swallowed hard, nodded.

"I need you to say it," he said, not unkindly.

"I like it," I said. Wyman didn't look convinced, so I slid a few inches toward him. He pulled me the rest of the way, until I was sitting in his lap, our noses touching. By then, the tremble in my hand had extended to the rest of my body—a gross betrayal, I thought, one of surely many that night.

“You’re shaking,” he said. “Are you cold?”

Images flitted through my mind: my cotton bra falling on the floor, white and grubby; the sour smell of my dried sweat and the pale stubble on my underarms. *Was it true that virgins bleed?* I wondered with sudden, panicking urgency. *Why hadn’t I Googled that?*

I heard Kayla’s voice then. *That’s your problem. You think too much.* “I’m fine,” I said; then I kissed him.



Sitting on the edge of the bed, I watched Wyman unbuckle his belt. The flickering candle in his bedroom cast long shadows on the starched white sheets and up the wood beams. Awash in the amber glow, Wyman’s chest looked darker than dark, an exaggeration of manliness, like something out of a paperback romance. He was in good shape. Any hint of age—a slight concavity in the sternum, some sagging of skin—was well hidden by thick, coarse hair.

I was still fully clothed.

Wyman walked over to my side of the bed. I looked up at him, and his hand cupped my face. His eyes were warm, almost liquid, but there was a flicker of shrewd intelligence. “The best models were larger girls,” Wyman said. “Botticelli, Titian, Renoir. Their models had bodies that could express movement. And their skin had this luminosity, this quality of reflecting light. Like you.”

I took his fingers and kissed them. Then I peeled off my sweater, my pants, my bra. Until I was only in my Gap underwear, humble but still carefully chosen. The pale-blush pink reminded me of the gauzy, tulle skirts in Degas’s ballerina paintings.

Wyman knelt down. Starting with my fingers, then the inside of my wrist, up the length of my arm, covered in goose bumps, to my left nipple, he kissed me. I liked the sensations, but I was also scared—scared by how quickly the kisses escalated, scared by his fingers, darting in and out of me, going deeper than I’d ever gone.

“I want to feel you,” Wyman whispered. “Is that okay?”

Underneath the weight of him, I nodded. I thought of what I’d read on the internet, all those articles about weird STIs. But then, slowly, Wyman

was inside me while I said nothing. I heard myself making these little noises.

When he was fully inside me, Wyman kissed my forehead lightly. I felt something, then: a vibration, an echo. Not quite like *flying on a carpet*, but not nothing either. I put my hand against the wall above me, which felt impossibly cool.

“I should’ve asked you before. But are you a virgin? It’s not a big deal, either way.”

“That’s a very personal question,” I threw back. But when I saw the look on Wyman’s face, I quickly said I wasn’t. It was my second lie of the evening.

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Chapter 14

I woke up to an empty bed. Next to me on the nightstand was a glass of water. The ice had melted to a few slivers. Light slanted in from the window, which didn't even have curtains, but opened up to a small terrace, with a view of the treetops, and just beyond, in the distance, the brown flat surface of the Mississippi.

Shrugging on my sweater, I slipped into the hallway and padded down the floating stairs. There was the wafting smell of coffee, but Wyman was not in the kitchen or the living room. The butcher-block cutting board, wiped clean, was leaning on a drying rack, and all traces of last night's mess—graham cracker crumbles, sticky residues of burned marshmallow—were gone.

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my sweater. Kayla was FaceTiming me.

For a second I thought of letting Kayla's face just disappear, of turning my phone off and exploring the rest of the house as I let moments from last night wash over me: the salty tang of the chocolate; the strange guttural noises, and the tiny fleck of blood I found on my underwear after. For a little while longer, I just wanted those moments to be mine. But then, if Kayla hadn't been goading me into action up until I got on that bus yesterday, would *this*—whatever this was—have happened at all?

I answered.

"Dude, I've been texting you all morning. Are you alive?"

"Shit," I said, noticing the time on my phone. It was past noon. "I slept in."

"Wait. Are you still *there*?"

I swept the camera to show Kayla the kitchen, the living room, the curve of the walls even more spectacular during the day, chasing the light.

"Holy shit. The *fuck* kind of professor is this guy?"

I flipped the camera back. *How strange*, I thought, looking at the mixture of jealousy and wonder fight for control over my friend's face. *How strange for Kayla to be looking at me on the screen for once.*

Before we hung up, Kayla told me to take photos. "Lots of them," Kayla said briskly. "Our posts tonight are going to be *legit*."



With still no sign of Wyman anywhere, I wandered from room to room. An interloper, I felt like those little kids at the Met Museum as I paused to run my fingers on a Ming dynasty cabinet, to sit on a couch and admire a de Kooning. Every now and then I took out my phone, glancing around to check that I was alone. Then I quickly snapped a photo.

A sharp, illicit thrill mingled with guilt. Last night, while Wyman rummaged in his drawer for a flannel shirt to loan me, he mentioned that, out of all his homes, the Franklin one was the most special. “*Architectural Digest* keeps calling my publicist. But it’s good, I think, to keep some things sacred.” He threw the flannel at me, with a coy smile. “You know, some of my closest friends haven’t even been here.”

Here I was, standing in my socks and taking photos for Hannah’s feed later. No better or worse, I rationalized, than a tourist at the Palace of Versailles or Mount Everest. After all, there was no guarantee I’d ever be back here.

On a cube-like coffee table, I picked up a small sculpture of a woman kneeling with a fan, scarcely the size of my thumb. He liked East Asian art, Wyman. I picked it up and quickly snapped away.

I heard Wyman’s voice behind me. “Enjoying the self tour?”

Startled, I turned. Wyman was in black running attire, holding two steaming mugs of coffee. Cheeks burning, I stuffed my phone deep in my pockets.

“I don’t mind, you know,” Wyman said, smiling slightly. “Take all of the pictures you want. I’m just glad you can appreciate the *tchotchkes* of an old man.”

I blushed. “You’re not old.”

Wyman cocked his head. “Well, I turned fifty recently. Ghastly affair. We’re talking toasts, speeches, the whole nine yards. When they start memorializing you, that’s when you know you’re cooked.”

Strangely, it was only then I was reminded of that bare, incontrovertible fact: As much as I felt guilty that I was using Wyman, he was also, of course, using *me*. I wondered, suddenly, if Wyman had slept with other students in the past.

Something must’ve shown on my face, because Wyman frowned. “Are you okay, Faith?”

“Fine.” I grabbed one of the cups of coffee from Wyman and wrapped my hands around its heat.

He smiled. “Remember what I told you the night we met? Your face shows everything.”

“Fine,” I said again. “Is this—” I paused, then started over. “Have you —”

“Slept with any students before?” Wyman finished, looking into my eyes. “I dated a graduate student of mine years ago. It didn’t work out, but we’re amicable. Since then, no. Not until you.”

Disarmed—I hadn’t expected him to answer me honestly—all I could say was, “Cool.”

Wyman smiled, a real smile this time. “Cool,” he said.

He asked me if I liked eggs and pastries for breakfast and told me that he could drop me off on campus after. But right before we left the room to head toward the kitchen, I looked over my shoulder to see Wyman, still standing there, frowning at the small sculpture, which I’d set hastily on the coffee table. Wyman leaned down in an almost furtive crouch, and tilted it back to its original position.



That night, Kayla and I posted. We decided to do four posts, uploaded within seconds of each other. Maximum exposure. The Instagram equivalent of flashing a room. The captions practically wrote themselves, and altogether they made up a twenty-four-hundred-word story with a beginning, middle, and end. It combined all the elements that Hannah Primrose was known for—a storybook setting, quirky details, a pithy, self-aware narration—but, by the time Hannah showed up at her art history professor’s home, breathless and sweaty (*To Be Continued . . . 2/4* was the cliff-hanger), it had something all the other captions I’d written lacked: Honesty. Verve. Chutzpah.

Kayla cackled, looking over my drafts in Notes. “This is messy and unhinged,” she said. “In the best way possible.”

The photos hung over the narrative like the perfect black dress. There was a selfie Kayla took a few days ago in the car with Callie, her face aglow with the orange light from the streetlamps like something out of a dreamy Hong Kong film. There was a close-up of a gold-and-pearl bracelet

glittering on Kayla's wrist—it was sent from one of those brands that was just two feminine names mashed together (Taylor Rose, Brandy Lane) and cheap and gold plated, but, on Kayla, it looked real. And then, pulling it all together, casting its glow of *vérité*, was the photo I'd snapped of the tiny sculpture of the woman kneeling with the fan. We'd come a long way from posting Lilly Pulitzer dupes dug out of the bargain bin of Goodwill.

It was two in the morning by the time the post was live. We collapsed, giggling, on my rumpled bedsheets. "Is it monstrous of me to want to check already?" Kayla asked, staring at the ceiling.

I held my phone up to my face, logging out of Hannah's account and logging in to my own. Looking at the posts on my feed, I felt light, effervescent—those were *my* words, white against the black, and somehow the fact that they were for Hannah's tens of thousands of followers made it all more real, made *me* more real. I felt flushed and at ease, like last night had crystallized, hardening into something brilliant and shiny and impenetrable.



I woke up the next day, my mood effervescent from the dream I'd had: Wyman was driving me in his light-green Prius to a boutique in Greenville, where the sales assistants took away my Paradise High sweatshirt, pinching at its ratty sleeve in disdain. As a white-gloved man wheeled in racks on racks of designer clothes like in some TLC makeover show, Wyman, pulling me into an embrace, said, *Your face shows everything. You know that, right?*

Words still ringing in my ears, I ate a dry bowl of Cheerios on my bed. Next to me, Kayla slept. She'd fallen asleep in my bed, burying herself so tightly in my comforter, I was pushed to the edge.

I checked my phone, wondering if Wyman had emailed me. A casual *That was fun last night* or even an *I'll see you later today*, weighted with meaning. But the only email I'd gotten since yesterday was from Michelle, about a charity bake sale. I felt a flutter of disappointment in my stomach, but then I reminded myself that it was Thursday. All I had to do was get through my classes, my late afternoon shift, and I'd see him that night at the Observatory.

For the rest of the morning I felt suspended in that dream, as if in a bubble, stopping by North Grounds Café on my way to class, and treating myself to a latte; chirping hello to every Alpha Rho I saw on campus, including Danielle; donating five dollars to the Habitat for Humanity volunteers who were fundraising for a trip to Honduras in front of Shearman Library.

The bubble burst in Microeconomics. My midterm, handed back to me with a giant D– in red ink. “Come see me after class,” Professor Sullivan said.

In her office, Professor Sullivan listened, poker-faced, as I pleaded for extra credit. “I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “This is college. There’s no extra credit here.”

“I might lose my scholarship,” I said, struggling to keep my voice from rising. “It isn’t because I haven’t been studying, I *have*. I just—”

“I understand perfectly,” Professor Sullivan cut me off. “But the answer is still no. Things tend to work themselves out, you’ll see. Just focus on finals.” She gave me a watery smile, then shuffled some papers on her desk—my cue to go.

When I was in the doorway, she called out: “Fiona?”

I turned. Professor Sullivan stared up at me from her desk and smiled tightly. There was a smudge of berry lipstick on her front tooth. “There’s no shame in switching majors,” she said. “Not everybody is suited for Economics.”



“She said *what*?” Regina put down the saltshaker with a clatter, setting off a miniature earthquake among the other shakers huddled on the tray. A sign that she was truly pissed; Regina was a hard worker, always *go, go, go* on our shifts. A few weeks ago Quan sliced her thumb on the deli slicer, blood spurting everywhere, and I’d watched Regina calmly throw a handful of cheese on an omelet *before* turning the stove off and getting the first aid kit.

“She also called me Fiona,” I said dryly.

“That’s fucked.” Regina adopted a vaguely British voice: “*Not everybody has what it takes*. Like, hello? You’re a freshman. You’re not even done with the class yet and she’s saying this shit.”

“Yeah, well. I’ve got a D and I’m actually trying, so maybe she’s doing me a favor.” I wasn’t sure why, exactly, I was defending Professor Sullivan, but Regina’s indignity on my behalf didn’t sit right. Regina understood what it meant if I lost my scholarship, but her plainspokenness was an antidote, quick and bracing, to the tendency I had to cling to romantic notions in my head. I *knew* that Harkness was not that glossy brochure Mrs. Pierce had given me all those months ago. But with finals around the corner, Professor Sullivan’s indifference—her dismissal of me out of her office, like a piece of gum stuck under her sensible heels—felt like a resounding crack in the foundation.

I was now desperate to see Wyman. He, at least, saw something in me, had told me I had what it takes to be a conservator. (The fact that I’d slept with him, I told myself, was irrelevant.) During my shift, I kept checking the time. *Two hours until I see Wyman . . . One hour . . . Thirty minutes . . .*

Finally, it was a quarter to eight.

Perhaps it says something about me that right after I left Professor Sullivan’s office, I went to the only clothing store on Main Street, where I bought a single pair of lacy black panties for thirty-two dollars. My shift over, I went into the bathroom in the basement of FoCo. In the stall, I wriggled down my jeans, took off my Fruit of the Loom underwear and balled it up in my backpack; then I tore the tags off the panties and slipped them on.

I was washing my hands when I heard the ping on my phone.

Chapter 15

From: Wyman, C.

To:

Subject: Canceled Tonight

All, my apologies for the last-minute notice but an emergency came up at one of the galleries. We'll reconvene next week. Best, Professor Wyman

I was surprised, hurt, but mostly confused. It was possible, of course, that Wyman's abrupt change of plans had nothing to do with me. But he hadn't sent me a separate email either. He could have, but he chose not to. Even then, I knew enough to know *that*.

Sprinting down the steps outside the dining hall, I rummaged in my backpack for that pack of Sonomas—only to run smack-dab into Kayla. “There you are,” she exclaimed, flicking her ponytail over her shoulder. She was dressed to go out, in a burgundy velvet minidress with thick tights and a long plaid double-breasted coat—the tights were mine and the coat, I didn't want to know. Her eyes alighted on the pack in my hand. “Thief!” She swatted my arm playfully. “I've been looking for those.”

I laughed, momentarily startled out of my self-loathing by Kayla's sheer audacity. Here she was in *my* tights—living *my* life at Harkness—and she was giving me a hard time for taking a pack of cigarettes. “What's so funny?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” I replied. “What're you doing here?”

Kayla's eyes gleamed. “We're celebrating, baby.”



We walked across town to a bar just past the train tracks, the kind of bar with no windows and neon signs and Budweiser banners fluttering against the beige siding. Inside, the clinking of pool balls and artificial pings from the video poker machines muffled the lonesome swoosh of long-haulers speeding down the overpass. As soon as we walked in, Kayla wedged herself in the line of flannel shirts at the bar. “How're *you* doing?” She

beamed at the man with the mullet on her left who stared hard at her over the rim of his glass. Then she winked at me over her shoulder. “First round’s on me!”

“Wait,” I said, slowly putting two and two together.

Dazed, I’d simply followed Kayla, who insisted we skip the usual places around campus—the vaguely Asian restaurant where Harkness students could get sake bombs without ID, the fancy “tavern” that served foie gras burgers. I hadn’t even thought to ask until now.

I stared at Kayla. “How’d you know I’d be free tonight?”

“I saw his email come in on your laptop.” Kayla leaned her elbow on the bar. “Hurricanes or Long Islands?”

“You *read* my emails?”

Kayla rolled her eyes. “No, I saw *that* email. I was watching something on your laptop while you were at work. What’s the big deal?”

Earlier, I’d considered replying to Wyman’s email. Something flirty (*Too bad . . .*) or purposefully formal (*Good luck with everything!*) but, as usual, I did nothing. At the thought of Kayla witnessing these abject attempts at connection, my stomach curdled. “Don’t read my emails,” I snapped, but I was cut off by the pink-haired bartender in a Henley shirt and baggy cargo pants. “Baby girl!” she exclaimed, leaning over the bar to give Kayla a high five. Kayla shrieked her name—Lexus, or maybe it was Lexie—and within seconds we had two lemon drops on the house. I turned to Kayla, surprised. “You’re a regular.”

Kayla raised one eyebrow, all snark. “I’m just memorable.” She lifted her shot glass up. “Here’s to going after what you want. *And* to officially hitting one hundred *thousand* followers.”

The post last night got 121,567 likes and 832 comments—the most engagement we’d gotten, ever. Before uploading, I’d taken some precautions: unfollowing Hannah from my account, blocking the Alpha Rhos. Double- and triple-checking, as always, that there were no geotags, no hashtags, no familiar landmarks—nothing to draw my classmates’ attention to the account. My caution amused Kayla. *These trust fund kids are too busy Snapchatting their weekends in the Hamptons. Why would they pay attention to us?* But it didn’t hurt to be careful, I thought, especially as followers, new and old, flocked to the comments:

We need to talk more about age-gap relationships

You're so real for posting about this. I like older men too
Favorite main character, unlocked ✓

We were on the cusp of *something*, we could both feel it.

Still, throwing back the shot, tasting the sweet gasoline of its warmth slide down my throat, why couldn't I feel happy?

"What's wrong?" Kayla asked me, after she got us a round of mai tais, garnished with paper parasols and syrupy cherries. Sipping from her straw, she looked at me closely. "Don't tell me you're actually upset about *him*."

"Of course not." I looked away, studying the broad back of the man with the mullet, the exact shade of his flannel. Verdigris, a touch of Prussian blue.

"Good." Kayla nodded. "Because who cares if Professor X or W or whatever doesn't want to see you again? We at least got a good story out of it. We're getting tons of new followers. And, you know, you got laid. It was never going to be anything but that. Right?"

I took a sip of my drink. "Right," I said.



I spent the weekend in the Stacks at a carrel wedged between a classroom skeleton and a wall of nineteenth-century medical texts. I had five exams and two papers to write. Sometimes Callie joined me. In her father's raggedy Columbia sweatshirt and black leggings she called her *studying pants*, Callie would appear like a disheveled, but briskly efficient, fairy: clutching her Starbucks, dropping off her books with a heavy sigh, pressing into my palm—with an exaggerated wink—a blue pill or two. At night we got dinner with Kayla—salads from the dining hall or Chinese takeout, which we ate in our room watching *Survivor*, Callie's favorite show ("It *literally* created reality TV!"), but Kayla and I both agreed it had all the appeal of a PowerPoint. "The strategy is what makes *Survivor* the longest-running reality show ever," Callie would argue, her high school debate skills out in full force. "*Love Yacht* is just stupid people hooking up with stupid people."

"*Exactly*," Kayla would say, brandishing an egg roll at Callie.

“They’re not *just* stupid people,” I’d add with a straight face. “They’re stupid *attention whores*.”

Kayla added gravely, “The human condition is complex.”

“I give up,” Callie would say, throwing up her hands. Then Kayla and I would exchange sly looks, grinning. It was fun ganging up on Callie, who accepted our ribbing with cheerful resignation, as if we were siblings and she was a distant cousin, accepted into our fold but unfamiliar with our games.

“Kayla, where are all your books?” Callie asked one night in a laughing, skeptical tone of voice as she surveyed the ring light on Kayla’s desk, the highlighters and primers and plastic trays of false eyelashes—not a single book on Freud in sight.

There was a pause—a small one, almost undetectable, seconds ticking away in a kind of exquisite agony—and then Kayla laughed. Doubling down, she shrugged and said: “Buying books is for suckers.” Kayla always knew how to dilute her lies with the truth.



Wyman canceled again on Tuesday—he still wasn’t back from New York, Peggy informed us—and then I skipped Conservation that Thursday, instead spending the night in the library hunkered down among my Econ textbooks. I hadn’t heard from Wyman all week. His silence was resounding, illuminating, almost cleansing—it stripped me down to the core truth: I’d slept with my professor, and that was it. Humped and dumped, as they say. The story was over. *C’est fini*.

Too bad. Hannah’s followers wanted more, more, more. The posts about Hannah’s art history professor were eight days ago—ancient news as far as Instagram was concerned—and still, people were hearting, commenting, tagging; debating Hannah’s choices in the comments, a war erupting over *May–December romances* (as anyone over the age of fifty called them) or *age-gap relationships* (anyone who listened to Lana Del Rey); sending DMs: *Are you okay? Shouldn’t you know better? Watch out—he’s taking advantage of you!*; quoting sentences and repackaging them as memes, retweets; Instagram reels of girls mouthing the words, like they were lyrics to a Taylor Swift song. The most popular line, by far, was this one: *Maybe an older man is like a Marlboro Red—we’re told so often, in so*

many ways, that it's so bad for you that giving in to the craving actually feels pretty good. If it wasn't so goddamn long, Kayla said, we could've put it on T-shirts, sold them as merch.

We'd posted on Monday and Wednesday, returning to our old standby formula—a liberal dose of dark academia, stirred with a sprinkle of snark—but the posts felt throwaway, contrived, a sophomore album falling flat. Followers commented: *What's happening with the professor? When are you seeing him? We want more mess!*

So it was underneath the crushing rejection of that week, the whorl of thoughts spiraling into hurt, then shame, I surprised myself by feeling this too: the twinge of professional disappointment.

I studied for my Microeconomics final until nine that night, then took a break to smoke a cigarette and pick up dinner at North Grounds Café, which had to-go options that were slightly elevated from the trays of days-old sushi and clumps of chicken salad on lettuce in the library's vending machines. The café was crowded for late on a Thursday, a long line stretching out the door. Picking up a pesto chicken on focaccia from the refrigerator, I looked at the price—\$12.99. There were only two of the cheaper ham and cheeses. As I reached to grab one, I brushed somebody's hand.

It was Avery. "Look who skipped too," she said, smiling.

I stared at her. Avery looked even worse than last time, her cheeks sallow and strands falling out of her claw clip and into her face, limp and dull. She wasn't wearing a T-shirt but a long gray hoodie and black sweatpants with hiking boots caked in mud.

I blurted out, "I might quit."

Concern puckered Avery's forehead. "Why?"

Because I slept with our professor, and now he's ignoring me. "I've got a lot going on" was how I phrased it.

"But don't you love it? You shouldn't quit what you love."

Sweet Avery. She was so kind and good and unblemished. She wasn't like me, pissing away all these opportunities at Harkness for sororities and friends and bad men. Avery *hiked* on the weekends and studied her ass off in a major that was practical and had time for extracurriculars. Whereas I had a fake roommate I'd been lying about since October and had not only slept with my professor but posted about it on the internet. Hell, I wasn't even monetizing it yet.

“I think I’m going to lose my scholarship,” I said slowly.

Avery stared at me. “Do you want to eat these overpriced sandwiches together?” she asked after a pause.

We sat at a table in the corner and talked for hours. We had a lot in common, Avery and I; we were both here on a patchwork of scholarships, work study, and what little our families could contribute. We commiserated over the catch-22 of maintaining a 3.0 GPA *and* working twenty hours per week *and* majoring in something practical like Econ or another STEM field, which often had unforgiving curves designed to filter out those who, in Professor Sullivan’s words, *aren’t suited*. When I told Avery about what happened in office hours, she was just as outraged as Regina. “What a cunt,” she said, and I, shocked, found myself liking her even more. Avery told me a story about going to a professor’s office hours and being lightly accused of plagiarism.

“Lightly?” I said. “How do you lightly accuse someone of plagiarism?”

“He told me that when he read my essay, he thought the language was so sophisticated, it couldn’t have possibly been written by a freshman.” Avery rolled her eyes. “He said he *looked into it*”—Avery used air quotations—“and by that he means he fed it to some software—”

“Jesus,” I said.

“And he realized I’d written it. *Then*, he proceeded to stare at me as if I was a robot and told me there was something slippery about the way I wrote. Like I was pulling one over on him but there was an emptiness to my ideas. But, of course, he couldn’t put his finger on why he thought that. Thank God I dropped that class.”

“I’m so sorry that happened.”

Avery shook her head. “I don’t want to think it’s because I’m Asian. But it’s not *not* because I’m Asian, you know?”

Eventually, we got kicked out of the café, which closed at eleven o’clock. Outside, Avery abruptly hugged me. “Let me know if you ever want to vent,” she said warmly. “Us scholarship kids need to stick together.” Then she hoisted her backpack over her slight shoulders and trudged up the stairs toward the Pavilion. As I watched her go, I thought how strange it was that the only person I’d told about potentially losing my scholarship was Avery Chen.

I walked back to Smith. At the entrance to the dorm, I saw the car. Idling, dark inside, one of only a few cars in the lot, parked in the back row under the streetlamp.

A light-green Prius.



My phone lit up in my lap. **R u still in library?** Kayla texted.

We were driving away from Smith, the lights of the dormitory still visible in the rearview mirror. If I craned my neck; I probably could've seen Kayla's silhouette through our large bay window on the fourth floor, but, instead, I leaned back and breathed deeply, feeling my rib cage move up, then down. Buckling my seat belt, I stole a glance at Wyman. He was nervous, fidgeting with the SiriusXM. Classic rock, jazz. Like he couldn't make up his mind what the soundtrack to this—whatever *this* was—should be. It surprised us both, that I'd slipped into his car so easily.

As we took the exit onto the highway, orange shadows sliding across our faces from the light poles ticking by, he finally settled on NPR. We listened to a correspondent report from Iran. Then, too neatly, the host segued to the breaking story that four more women had come forward against an aging TV pundit who *categorically denied the allegations in a statement through his lawyers . . .*

We both laughed a little helplessly. "Why do they always use the word *categorical*?" I said, trying to lighten the mood. "Feels like they're all reading off the same script."

Wyman lowered the volume and looked at me. "Did I ever tell you I was in an off-Broadway play?"

"You? Really?"

"Years ago. My father had passed away, and I'd been in litigation with my siblings for nearly a year. So I said, *Fuck them, fuck the art world, I'm going to tend bar and go to acting classes and try to give this Broadway thing to go*. Plot twist: I was not a very good actor. Hell, I wasn't even a good bartender."

I laughed, a sharp exhale through my nostrils. Pleased by my laughter, Wyman continued: "So, I land a role as an understudy in this big *Lion King*-esque production—masks, costumes. The first night, the lead drops dead of a heart attack. Onstage."

“Onstage?”

“Wearing the mask.” He paused here to let the import of his words sink in. Even in these moments, Wyman was always the teacher: burying the lede, planting clues. Priming your attention. Grimly, with narrative relish, he winked at me. “The show must go on.” He’d gotten the call at the bar the next day. The costume designer had no time to make a new one. That night, he’d stepped onto the stage in the dead man’s mask.

“I could just *feel* it, you know?” Wyman said with a grimace. We were on a dark one-lane road, nothing in the headlights but the stray twitch of a moth. He reached over, letting his fingers graze my left knee. “Being with you can feel that way.” He laughed, his voice darkly wondrous. “Like I’m wearing a dead man’s mask.”



I spent the night at Wyman’s house and ended up staying the weekend. The second time—and then the third, fourth, fifth—I’d expected the same tenderness of that first night, but already the novelty was starting to wear off. Sex, I learned, was as much about mechanics as about anything else: like I was learning how to fold origami. What I liked best was after, lying in Wyman’s arms in a puddle of lamplight, my sweaty forehead rising and falling with his chest. He asked about how I’d grown up, listening attentively as I surprised myself by telling him about my mother, and Randy, and Gator Park. I told him about the crawfish boils during the summertime, the fishermen dabbing bits of Dove soap on their hooks to catch catfish because it was mostly beef fat and cheaper than anything else. I was aware, of course, that I was giving him the colorful, TV version of growing up in a trailer park. Still, it felt good to tell *my* story—whole, anew—to Wyman. I deliberately left out any mention of Kayla.

In the morning I responded to Kayla’s text while Wyman made buckwheat pancakes and I sipped coffee at a stone table on the outdoor veranda overlooking a hilly terrain of Japanese maples, cypress, worn stone sculptures basking in the foggy morning light. I took a photo of the view and sent it to Kayla. I texted: **OMG dude. Guess where I am . . .**

Immediately ellipses appeared, then vanished.

Friday was the beginning of reading period, so neither of us needed to be on campus. We spent most of a lazy gray afternoon by the fireplace in

Wyman's study, Wyman grading papers and me studying. At the sight of my Microeconomics textbook, Wyman clutched his heart, aping mock outrage. "Would Caravaggio be an accountant?"

I bristled. I had my death grip on an entry-level job in finance or tech, on buffeting my life with Excel spreadsheets and moving up the ranks of middle management, therefore becoming the kind of person who *could've* been interesting but chose not to be in debt. I'd heard him making fun of these students before, forgetting I was one of them: "Imagine going to Harkness just to be a marketing associate at a B2B start-up."

Checking my phone again to see if Kayla had texted, I replied: "Caravaggio painted because he had to."



On Saturday, Wyman took me to the Observatory to work on the painting. It was a brilliant November day, chilly and cedar sweet, and as we walked from the car, parked discreetly up the road, our faces were knifed by dazzling figments of light peeking out from the canopy of leaves. I was wearing the same jeans three days in a row and Wyman's crew sweater rolled up at the sleeves. As we walked, Wyman updated me in a grave, brisk manner, like I was a family member rushing into the ER while surgery was underway: "We've taken the varnish off in two treatment windows—one in the lower-left-hand corner, which went well, and then one in the center. The 1984 was easy to take off, but the question is how much to take off of the thick mastic layer . . ."

As soon as I walked into the dark studio, I realized that I'd missed it: the wood-chip smell of turpentine mixing in with the musty old paintings. The sharp, acetone tang of the acrylics. Wyman switched the lights on, and for a second I almost didn't recognize the painting sitting on the easel.

A jewellike precision of detail was already starting to emerge with the removal of varnish: the green silk robe, the intricate lacing of her cuff, the cool gray sheen of the mother-of-pearl embroidery. And then, like a trapdoor, the collar of her robe falling away.

I looked at Wyman questioningly. "It's remarkable, isn't it?"

"Yes," Wyman replied softly. "And if it's painted by a woman, as we think it is, she'd be the only other Renaissance woman painter besides Lavinia Fontana known to have painted female nudes."

I crept closer. Her fingers, in an ambiguous gesture, held her pale, small breast, rendered in sfumato to create a dream landscape.

Wyman snapped on a pair of latex gloves. “Well, shall we?” he said crisply.



Later that night in Wyman’s kitchen, jazz was playing and a stew bubbled in a saucepan on the stove, rich and vegetal. While Wyman cooked, we snacked on a charcuterie board lush with different cheeses, grapes, and prosciutto layered to look like a rose.

Perched on the stool at the kitchen counter, I smiled when Wyman brought over a cocktail—light amber, a wedge of pineapple perched on the rim lined with black sea salt. *I could get used to this*, I thought. “Dead Man’s Mask,” he called it. “From my days tending bar.”

Rolling the coarse flakes of salt over my tongue, I thought it tasted pretty good; like a tiki drink, but less sweet. With each sip, the day washed over me. The bright lights of the studio. The smell of linseed oil. The calluses I’d developed on my fingers from holding the brush. Hour by hour, day by day, I was falling in love with the work—and I was getting better at it.

Today had been a particularly good day.

That afternoon we’d tackled the varnish in the lower-right-hand corner. “Rabbit glue.” Wyman frowned, scraping hard with his scalpel the brown-yellow residue, which fell in thin, ropy strands on our wrists. “What solvent would you use, Ms. Thibodeaux?” He flashed me a grin.

I wanted to hit him on the arm, but then I remembered the knife. “Just warm water at first, to loosen it,” I answered.

“Simple. I love it. As I always say the best solutions are—”

“—the simple ones. Definitely didn’t hear you say that the first thirty-seven times.”

Wyman put the scalpel down and waited as I got up to fill a small bowl with warm water. “Thank you,” he said when I sat back down.

“Now what?” I asked a few minutes later once he’d loosened the rabbit glue with the wet end of a cotton swab. Its tip had turned a reddish brown, like old blood.

“You tell me.”

“Enzyme?”

“Which one?”

I frowned, wishing I’d committed the notes I’d taken last week to memory. The title of the page in my notebook floated into my mind’s eye: *Commercial Enzyme Cleaners*. And then the names that all sounded like prescription painkillers . . .

“Trypsin!” I recalled. “Or amylase.”

Wyman nodded. “Technically correct answers. Those are all enzymes kept in stock in every conservator’s studio. But there’s another enzyme. A much simpler enzyme.” Wyman smiled at the puzzled look on my face. “Think about it. It’s an enzyme that is as cheap as water, and therefore much more readily available.”

Right then, he leaned forward in his chair and kissed me, hungrily, cupping the back of my head in the large palm of his hand. He tasted like the spices in his coffee. For a moment my mind was wiped clean—nothing but the warm, wet friction of our tongues. Then I realized what was going on—that this was a *teaching moment*.

I pulled away. “Saliva?” I said in disbelief.

Wyman grinned.

Spit cleaning, as it turned out, was and is a legitimate enzyme-based method conservators use to clean paintings. “The Sistine Chapel was spit cleaned,” Wyman told me to my utter amazement. “*The Last Supper* was spit cleaned.” He shrugged. “Saliva is gentle, effective. Not to mention one of the oldest solvents known to man. Like I said, the easiest solutions are often the best.”

Armed with fistfuls of cotton swabs, we focused on a two-inch window in the lower right hand of our painting. “Maybe you shouldn’t be kissing me so much, Professor,” I teased, wetting the tip and handing it to Wyman.

“There are lots of reasons why I shouldn’t be kissing you,” Wyman replied, his brow furrowed as he dabbed gently at the brittle, shiny surface of the varnish. “Conserving your spit isn’t exactly one of them.”

A few moments later I heard his sharp inhale. “Faith, can you take a look at this?” Wyman asked, his voice catching with excitement.

There, glinting right underneath the varnish, like an old coin buried in the dirt: initials. In feathery strokes of gold, the painter had signed her initials—*M.C.F.*

I took another sip of my drink, my head still buzzing hours later from the discovery. I knew enough to know, without Wyman having to tell me (though, of course, he did), that paintings signed by Renaissance women painters were exceedingly rare.

Wyman came by and popped a fig in my mouth. “The drink is really good,” I told him, still chewing.

“You like it? It’s the bestseller at the bar.”

“Wow.” I swallowed. “They must’ve really liked you. To name a cocktail after your story.”

Wyman perched on the armrest, lacing his fingers in mine. Lightly, he said: “Yes, well. It helps when you own the place.”

“Wait,” I said, laughing. “You *owned* the bar?”

A crease deepened between Wyman’s brows. “What’s wrong with that?”

“There’s nothing *wrong* with it, per se. It’s just you made your life back then sound so, like, downtrodden working artist. Did you own it back then?”

Wyman crossed his arms. “I don’t think I misrepresented anything.”

“You said *tended bar*. That gives the impression that, you know, you’re just a bartender.”

“Just a bartender.” Wyman stood up abruptly. The expression on his face was the same slight smile, but his tone of voice had darkened, glitched. “Aren’t we being a little classist?” Then, muttering something about putting the chicken in the oven, he walked back to the kitchen, leaving me stunned, cold. I thought back to our afternoon in the studio, the jostling kind of rapport we’d had. What had changed?

The noises Wyman was making in the kitchen—chopping an onion, opening and closing cabinets—seemed staccato, brusque, like a shell had hardened over him. I didn’t know what to do, so I checked Instagram. Tapping Callie’s ringed profile, Kayla’s and Callie’s faces filled my screen. They were dancing, drunkenly singing “. . . Baby One More Time” in the crowded basement of Delta Omega. I recognized it by the insignia—*DO*—on the bar behind them.

What the hell were they doing there?

I frowned, remembering that Kayla hadn’t texted me back. I finished the dregs of my drink, but it tasted bad, like rotting fruit.

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Chapter 16

On Monday, Kayla was maddeningly cryptic. She leaned against the wall on her bed and took a hit of her vape. *Since when did Kayla start vaping?* I wondered, waving away the thick cloud of mango-flavored smoke.

“Delta Omega had the biggest party, everybody was going,” she said in a bored drawl, sounding just like the sorority girls she abhorred. “What’s the big deal? Because of what happened to Callie?”

“Callie told you about that?” I said, surprised.

Kayla’s lips curled in a taunting smirk. “Callie and I are like this now,” she said, wrapping her fingers together. I stared at her. There were three scenarios here: (1) I was being left out of something having to do with Callie for some mysterious reason; (2) I’d disappeared on Kayla, again (in her mind), and Kayla was toying with me, punishing me; or (3) I was just a jealous bitch who couldn’t stand that my friends were hanging out without me. Happy friggin’ Monday.

“Why would Callie even want to go?” I asked.

Kayla shrugged. “Why shouldn’t she? The upside for Callie not reporting that asshole is, you know, her still having a social life. Might as well enjoy it.”

There was a glimmer of logic in what Kayla said even if I had to squint to see it. I thought it was depressing then, and I still think so now.

I kept an eye on Kayla and Callie that week. I couldn’t quite pinpoint why I was worried, but they seemed *closer*. I felt like I was constantly walking in on them, and they reacted like I was a parent at a sleepover—at the dining hall, their heads hunched over untouched cups of coffee; walking across the quad, arms locked; watching *Love Yacht*—Callie converted, apparently—in our room late at night. Callie was even dressing like Kayla, swapping her volleyball whites and Free People knits for pleated wool skirts and oversize sweaters and that stupid blue hair ribbon. She was just like the girls who showed up at Claire’s all those years ago. Latching on to the force of Kayla’s personality, mousy, malleable followers. But there was something else between them too. One afternoon I left my books at my carrel in the Stacks to cover a FoCo shift for Quan; when I came back, I spotted Kayla and Callie whispering furiously behind the bookshelves and

it clicked into place, that age-old expression: *thick as thieves*. They shared a secret.

Later that night, lying in our beds after we'd turned off the lights: "You can tell me, you know," I said. "If you let Callie in on everything."

After moments passed, I thought Kayla had fallen asleep. Her voice floated out of the darkness, low and clear. "I haven't told her anything, Faith."



It was around this time that my doubts about Kayla began to unspool. The first crack appeared, a hairline fracture so tiny I didn't fully understand the significance until many, many years later.

Ever since I'd disappeared that weekend with Wyman, returning Monday to my strange little bubble of campus life, I'd been on high alert, wondering if Kayla was mad at me. I was never quite sure one way or another, and Callie complicated things considerably; I'd never known Kayla to have another female friend, just as Kayla had never known me to have, for lack of a better word, a boyfriend. Was she jealous? Was *I* jealous? I didn't know. Most of the time, Kayla seemed normal—cracking jokes at the "old man sweater" I had wrapped around my waist, asking if I'd used protection this time. (I'd not. I told her Wyman pulled out and that I'd hastily made an appointment with Student Health Services to get Plan B *and* birth control. "Dude," Kayla said, which pretty much summed it up.) But I couldn't shake the feeling that something had curdled between us, as noxious as Kayla's mango vape smoke, and that this was an entirely different creature from our fight last summer—then, at least, I'd known unequivocally where we both stood.

A few days later, I tried to apologize. I should've let her know sooner that I was going over there; I hadn't meant to drop everything for a guy.

"What do I care? Get that content," Kayla said flatly with a wave of her French tips. Her response stung like a slap in the face—it made me feel like I was nothing to her but grist for the mill.

Through the day, dark and darker thoughts swooped in. Kayla was the one who had pushed me to go for it with Wyman, wrapping the whole affair up in a glittery balm of self-empowerment, sexual freedom—I could still hear her voice in my ear that night at the bar: *Here's to going after what you*

want. But were Kayla's motives more coldly self-interested? Out of all the voices—on the news, social media—telling me that, as a young woman, what I wanted was bad, Kayla's voice crowded the others out, struck a secret chord inside me and made my desires seem not just okay, but *possible*. But had Kayla jolted me into action just to get a good story out of me?

I brushed it away as paranoia. I was stressed about finals and seeing Wyman again, and I resented having to share Kayla with Callie. Still, the thought lingered for days, only to limp away like a bad cold. Posting, strangely enough, helped—whatever was happening between us, Kayla and I still had that creative *frisson*, and even if I was just grist for the mill, I was good at it. I was good at picking out the best, most sumptuous details and arranging them just so, like an array of priceless objects in a still life painting. I was good at sprinkling in *just* the right amount of relatability. But above all, I was good at giving our followers that most whispery of things—access. Access to art, to history, to good food and fine wine. We'd come a long way, Kayla and I, from posting Lilly Pulitzer dupes.



As the last weeks of November trickled down the hourglass, Wyman and I settled into a rhythm.

I met him most afternoons at the Observatory, letting myself in with the hidden spare key if he was still in classes. He'd shown me where it was, in a cracked ceramic pot around the grassy knoll to the back, where bags of potting soil slumped against the wall, deeply grooved with rainwater. "You're the only one who knows about this," Wyman told me, and something glowed inside me every time I knelt down and patted the damp soil until I felt cold metal. He trusted me.

But there were moments when I wasn't so sure. By now I was used to his moods with their infinitesimal shades of barely perceptible meaning; I felt like a weather vane, twisting in the wind, always trying to catch up. Online I'd obsessively tracked down every interview, every profile, every one of those *Architectural Digest* features he pretended not to like. In several of them he talked about the pain of his childhood, growing up in the suburbs of Connecticut: a strict, controlling father; a mother who'd been sent for a period of time to an institution when he was eight. It was strange:

He knew about my mother; I'd told him. We had similar experiences. But he never talked about that with me, not once.

There's a voice that grows inside every relationship, almost like a beat, a pulse.

How important can you possibly be to him, it hissed, *if he won't tell you anything about himself?*

Of course, there were things I didn't tell him either.

The day before Thanksgiving, we tackled infilling. "What're you doing for Thanksgiving?" Wyman asked as we looked through photographs of the work done during last night's club meeting, documenting the three losses by the girl's hands and torso that needed to be filled in with a proprietary blend of gesso, chalk, and glue.

"Nothing," I said, shrugging. "My roommate and I will probably just get takeout." And post. Kayla had already planned out a weekend's worth of content. Earlier that day she'd gone to the secondhand bookstore in Franklin and bought *Lolita* and *The Lover*. Hannah, after all, might be sleeping with a professor, but she was self-aware, intellectual, about it. Plus, Kayla said, books in eye-catching colors were perfect for the algorithm—an easy way to drive up engagement.

Wyman looked up at me. "Ah, the mysterious roommate." He smiled. "What's her name again?"

I hesitated for a moment, then said, "Kayla."

"Well, if you and Kayla would like to join, I'll be going to Professor Hopper's for dinner tomorrow. There will be other students there too."

"Professor Hopper, huh?" She'd become an inside joke between us; I was convinced she was secretly in love with him. Wyman said that she was up for tenure.

"Her husband will be there too," Wyman said, laughing. "Seriously. You should come."

"Maybe," I replied, but inside I was thinking, *Absolutely not*. There was no way I was even bringing it up with Kayla, who would've leaped at the chance. Already, I could see her sly, calculated grin, toying with me across an immaculately set table as Wyman and I complimented the turkey. For all of the bad decisions I'd made that fall, I was always very clear on this: that under no circumstances should Wyman and Kayla *ever* be allowed to meet.

I switched the topic back to the fills. “Left hand, right hand, and the torso,” I said, flipping through the photographs. In raking light, two of the fills by the girl’s left and right hand, respectively, were more minor, quarter-size gaps where the paint had flaked off. By contrast, the torso would’ve required days of work. “Shall we do one of the hands today?”

“Seems perfectly reasonable,” Wyman said, after a pause.

I put away the photographs in the file cabinets lining the back wall, then began to prepare the gesso the way Wyman had taught us yesterday, measuring out the precise amounts of chalk, glue, and water that formed the fill recipe that was as unique to every conservator as a fingerprint. For Wyman, he went heavy on the water. He liked to gradually build up, with the layers almost like watercolors. “Everything’s in order,” I called out, returning back to the easel.

I fully expected to simply observe, to watch Wyman work, but instead he held out the scalpel to me.

“You’re ready.”

I shook my head.

“Yes,” Wyman said, smiling. “Yes, you are.”

Guiding my hand, he taught me how to get a feel of the topography, to know when to push and when to stop. With painstaking, slow work, I removed the old fill, scraping away four-hundred-year-old varnish with the sharp blade. Once done, I dipped a small brush in the gesso and applied it carefully to the canvas; then, when it cooled, I brought the fill to the same level of the painting surface by smoothing away any excess.

When it was done, I stood back, elated, admiring my work with flushed pride. “That was—” I was at a loss for words. *Wonderful. Exhilarating. Natural.*

Wyman came around me, folding me into an embrace. Into my hair I felt his proud smile. “You’re the only person I trust to work on this painting,” he said, and my satisfaction was complete.



Kayla and I ordered Thai takeout for Thanksgiving, living off the leftovers over the weekend. On Sunday, Callie came back early, and we went to the library. After a couple of hours of studying, Callie cracked her back, gave a loud sigh, and asked if I wanted to go with her to pick up more Adderall.

“Your dealer is a *student*?” I asked Callie as we left the library—to my surprise, we headed not into town but to one of the dormitories on North Grounds. When I thought of a dealer, I pictured some shady character in a two-tone Acura, or Randy’s coworker, who sold skunk weed from behind the cold cuts deli at Piggly Wiggly. I didn’t think it would be anyone who went here.

“*Dealer* is a strong word,” Callie said. “You know her, she’s an Alpha Rho. Michelle?”

“The *philanthropy chair*?” The pixie-haired blond girl with the Julia Roberts smile was the last person on campus I’d think of. It put *community service* in a whole new perspective.

“It must be a pretty nice side hustle for Michelle,” Callie said as we neared the entrance to McLoughlin. “All she has to do is get a prescription, and then she sells them for ten bucks a pill.”

“It doesn’t seem worth the risk—” I began to say, but then I trailed off, thinking of everything *I* was risking—and I wasn’t even making \$300. I shut up and followed Callie inside the too-bright lobby of the dormitory and up the elevators to the third floor, where I waited outside a door with Halloween decorations still on it—*Michelle* was spelled out in sparkly orange glitter pen inside a spiderweb—while Callie, I presumed, discreetly made the sale. Not wanting to lurk, I walked up the hallway. Two doors down from Michelle a door was cracked halfway. My eyes lit on Avery’s name on the door: *Welcome to Avery and Savannah’s Room!*

Curiosity quickly took hold of me. I peeked inside. I hadn’t spoken to Avery since running into her at North Grounds Café; in fact, I was avoiding her. Over the weekend she’d forwarded me an email from the Harkness Art Museum about an upcoming Georgia O’Keeffe exhibit. *Wanna go together?* she asked. I still hadn’t responded. We were getting closer—friend-ish if not exactly friends—and I was aware that whatever we did next would determine the course of that trajectory. But the thing was I simply didn’t want to get to know Avery more. Harsh, I know. Maybe Avery has something to say about it now, but back then I treated friendship like leveling up in a video game. If it was too easy, I lost interest.

The duplex was empty with the lights still on in the small common room. Looking over my shoulder, I saw that no one was coming and stepped inside. Avery’s room was on the right. A handwritten sign on her door read: *Welcome to Avery’s Room—You Break, You Buy!*

It was a *Gilmore Girls* reference. I smiled.

The door was cracked, and I pushed it open. Stepping inside the kidney-shaped room, my jaw dropped. Because Avery's room was *cool*. Every inch of the walls was covered in movie posters from directors she favored, like Wong Kar-Wai, Alice Rohrwacher, Alejandro Jodorowsky; basketball memorabilia; photos of family and friends. By the window, there was a two-shelf stand overflowing with succulents and other plants. Most of them needed watering, their leaves curled and slightly wilted. On her desk, outlines and problem sets were neatly stacked. Dangling over the pile of books on the shelf of her desk—*Inorganic Chemistry*, *Foundations of Physics*, even the slim volume of Wyman's *Lost Daughters*—were headphones, horribly tangled.

My eyes fell on a silver picture frame lying face down next to her books. I picked it up and found a picture of Avery with her parents. They were on top of a summit, a haze of clouds behind them. Her mother was small and petite like Avery, with the same pale skin and wispy eyebrows. Her father was chubby and bald in a blue polo shirt.

There was something purposeful in the way it was faced down. It occurred to me suddenly that all this time I'd assumed that Kayla and I were the only ones with secrets on this campus when, really, nobody knew anything about anyone. Avery had this quality to her—kind, trustworthy, as transparent as water—but it was clear, standing in her kaleidoscope of a room, I didn't *really* know her. I didn't really know anyone. Just a few doors over, the philanthropy chair of my sorority was selling pills to Callie, who still hadn't spoken about that night, who built a fortress out of those index cards on her wall with all those flimsy feminine energy mantras that popped up on her Instagram feed.

That's the problem with youth: You're so busy thinking your secrets will undo you, you can't see that everybody's got them.



Suddenly it was December. Exam period was a strange, jittery time. Nothing united the Harkness school body more than the finals; the whole campus, it seemed, was in the library, which smelled perpetually that month of wet socks and burned popcorn. Full mental breakdowns were not uncommon. A boy in my Econ class fainted in the Stacks and had to be

taken away in a stretcher. The stalls in the women's bathroom were always mysteriously closed for cleaning. Then, the second week of December, Michelle shocked the house by taking a leave of absence. She didn't tell anyone, just packed up her room and left with her mother early one morning. "*How am I going to get study buddies now?*" Callie moaned.

Prophylactic measures were taken in the name of tradition: Tea was served in the afternoons in Shearman Library. The Programming Board hosted a petting zoo. The bells of the library rang out with classic tunes like "Eye of the Tiger." Alpha Rho threw its annual Milk and Cookie Party, which featured hundreds of cookies baked by the sisters for the finals-weary hordes, with flavors ranging from pumpkin chai to spinach to a cookie named, simply, *Rihanna*.

But of all the finals traditions, Mae Hawkins Day was the most beloved. It fell on the Friday before finals; students took the day off from studying, and buses provided by the school took them to New Orleans, where they took shots on Bourbon Street or brunched in the French Quarter. I was broke; I couldn't go. Even though Hannah Primrose was growing, we were still mostly compensated in swag. In November a Korean snail-mask company had sent a DM, offering five thousand bucks for a post, which we, of course, gleefully did: **Whose idea of self-soothing is putting on a face mask, playing Enya, and looking at paintings of murderous women? #AD**

Two weeks later, we were still waiting on the money. Even though the Korean company seemed legitimate enough—125,000 followers and influencers from Camila Coelho to James Charles hawking their masks and serums—we hadn't signed a contract with them, and their replies to our follow-up DMs were polite but vague: *We will look into this on our end, and circle back with you*. I was getting worried. We needed this money—I needed this money. I had a housing bill and sorority dues and books to pay for in January, which was right around the corner. Meanwhile, Kayla was acting like the money was already in the bank. The morning of Mae Hawkins, Kayla, applying too much eye makeup in the mirror, fizzled over with plans. "We're going to get beignets, of course," she said, fluffing her brows. "Then I made a reservation at some jazz club off Frenchmen."

"How're you going to pay for that?" I asked, my suspicions aroused. If I was broke, Kayla was broke. Kayla didn't even have a credit card.

“Don’t worry about it.” She struck a deliberate, airy tone, picking up long falsies with a tweezer.

Firmly, I said: “You shouldn’t mooch off Callie.”

I’d hit the mark. Kayla wheeled around, her green eyes flashing. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she snapped. “I’m not mooching off anyone.” Then she spun around and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

I stared out the window at the cold, gray streaks of rain racing down. The room was quiet except for the gentle tapping of branches against the pane and my neighbor’s laptop streaming reruns of *Friends*. Slowly, I took a deep breath and counted: *One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three*. I unclenched my jaw.

Study, I told myself. My Microeconomics final was on Monday. If I didn’t get at least an eighty-five, I was going to lose my scholarship. I changed into sweatpants, pulled my hair into a messy bun, and went to the lounge to boil water for instant coffee. Passing by door after door all flung open to reveal empty rooms, I realized that I had the whole dorm to myself—everybody had left for New Orleans. Even Kelly was gone; her door locked, a bin filled with candy hanging off the doorknob. I grabbed a handful of Twizzlers. When I got back to my room, I checked my phone. Wyman had texted:

**Are you dancing on Bourbon?
haha. i didn’t go actually. i happen to be allergic to the French
Quarter and all forms of dancing
Oh no, poor you.
its quite the affliction
Where are you now?
in my room**

I watched as Wyman typed, the ellipsis appearing, then disappearing. A few seconds passed, and then:

**Can I come see you?
come here?
Why not? 😊**

**wow . . . that might be the first emoji I've ever seen you use
Isn't everyone gone?**

I didn't respond; a few minutes later, Wyman called. He was driving to Smith; what was my dorm room number? *403D*, I heard myself saying. After I hung up, my eyes fell on the textbook in front of me. I'd been pressing on the highlighter so hard a pool of neon yellow, as wet as a wound, had bled through the pages.

I propped open the door with my wastebasket, cleared the clutter on my desk, and let my hair down as I kept my ears pricked for the elevator doors, the sound of footsteps. Adrenaline was racing through me, but I couldn't tell if it was dread or excitement. A few days before, I'd told Wyman that I felt we existed only within the four walls of the studio or his house. We'd never gone to a restaurant, had a drink in a dark bar. "Nothing to do with you," Wyman had said. "It's only because of the situation. The *current climate*," he added.

I scraped some deodorant under my armpits. Then I sat on my bed and waited, the sound of the rain lashing against the window.

A soft knock. Then, there Wyman was: his large hand clutching a sturdy navy umbrella that was dripping onto the floor, the bulk of him casting a long shadow into the room. Wryly, I looked up from the bed and said: "When I told you I wanted to go somewhere other than the studio or your house, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

Wyman's eyes roved, taking in the room with a kind of anthropological interest, like it was one of those dioramas in the Museum of Natural History. Pink frilly bra hanging off the bedpost. Receipts tacked on the corkboard. Polaroid of me and Kayla on the wall by my bed.

Wyman turned back to me, smiling. "Always so secretive. Can you blame me for being curious?"

His boots made a wet, squelching sound on the wide planks. Tucking his umbrella under his arm, he took his coat and boots off and tossed them all in a corner. Then he kissed me on the forehead and sat on the bed next to me.

"You're crazy," I said, half shaking my head. "What if somebody sees you?"

"There's nobody here. Why didn't you go to New Orleans today?"

"I had to study."

“That’s very austere of you.”

“Well, I had to make up for other areas in my life.”

Wyman pushed me backward, and then we were kissing. That was all I wanted that afternoon: soft, light, inconsequential touches, the *frisson* of romance. But Wyman groaned, and before I knew it, my ratty sweatpants had been yanked off, and Wyman’s breath, hot and muggy, was on my neck. I looked at his face slack with desire. Part of me wanted to simply allow all of it to happen. To float above the scene, like a ghost.

“Wait.” I broke away. “This is making me nervous, you being here.”

Wyman tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear, his eyes gleaming. “This doesn’t excite you at all?”

“I have to study.” My voice came out sharper than I intended. “I have my Econ final on Monday.”

Wyman flopped back on my bed, his nostrils flaring slightly as he let out a long exhale. “Why do you do this?” he said to the ceiling.

“Do what?”

“Major in something you have absolutely no interest in, to get a job that adds no discernible value to society. Why?” Wyman shot back up. He cupped my face in his hand; I felt the rough ridges of his thumb gripping my cheek. “I can get you an internship at any gallery or museum in New York. I can’t stand the thought of seeing you one day, walking around Midtown in some corporate vest, buying your sad-sack salad that you’ll eat at your desk just so you can fill in one more spreadsheet. Sweetheart, no. That’s not for you.”

Something must’ve softened in my gaze, because his fingers loosened and he kissed me fiercely, his tongue pushing into my mouth. My mind was racing. *Could it really be that simple?* I thought, kissing him back. In an exhilarating rush, I saw the future me through Wyman’s eyes, like he was a painter arranging the composition of me just so. I saw myself standing in a Chelsea gallery, one of those women with artfully tousled hair and understated makeup and some niche tote bag. . .

Wyman placed my hand on the warm bulge of his erection.

I pulled my hand away. Leaning my forehead against his, I whispered: “Sorry. I—you really shouldn’t be here.”

Wyman chuckled softly, bitterly. “You don’t know what it’s like for men,” he told me, pulling away, too, shaking his head.

“What?” I asked.

“Men have needs, Faith.” He sighed, as if we were playing a board game and he had to stop halfway through to explain some forgotten rule to me. Except, of course, it wasn’t a board game. At least not for me.

“We’re *driven* by sex. I don’t say this to take away from your autonomy, but—” He broke off, squinting at the wall behind me. With a frown he tapped on the Polaroid. He straightened it. Then, he turned back to me with a tight smile. “It’s fine. I’ll go.”

I watched while Wyman laced up his boots, shrugged on his coat. “Will I see you this week?” I asked, ashamed of how needy I sounded.

Wyman smiled, one brow raised. “Shouldn’t you be studying?”

“Very funny,” I said, getting off the bed. I pulled up my sweatpants; still, I felt cold.

Following Wyman to the door, I added, “I could come over this weekend. Wasn’t there that thing you wanted to watch—”

Wyman turned. “Faith,” he said in a weary and beleaguered tone. “Don’t worry about it, okay?” He kissed me lightly on the lips. The kiss was chaste, bloodless. “Focus on finals. Focus on your friends.” More to himself than me, Wyman muttered: “God, focus on anything besides me.”



Wyman’s advice—*quelle surprise*—had a less-than-helpful effect; all weekend leading up to Monday morning, nine o’clock sharp, I felt the way soldiers must before a battle: like the enormity of the situation requires Herculean effort—poring over maps, rethinking strategy, formations and jumping jacks—and yet all I could do was play cards, brood, and pass the time.

Despite Callie’s promises, the little blue pills never did much for me; I stopped taking them altogether after a disastrous Microeconomics exam when the stress and nerves, mixed with the Adderall and an ill-advised cup of coffee, caused me to spend most of the first hour running to the bathroom, provoking looks of suspicion from the TA. I did a middling job on my Accounting exam—all those x’s and y’s mocking me with their inscrutability—but I was pleasantly surprised by how useful Alpha Rho’s outline bank proved to be: Professor March’s questions on the International Finance exam and Weinberg’s essay prompts for History of Economic Thought had not changed in twenty years.

On Friday after my exams ended I stopped by the mail room. I'd gotten in the habit of checking my box every day. Hannah was just shy of 150,000 followers, and the last thing I needed was an irate message from Miss Carla—the woman in charge of packages—telling me that there were too many PR boxes cluttering her desk. It was raining hard—the late-season remnants of some tropical storm (Larry, or maybe it was Glen) barreling its way from the coast—and, by the time I got to the mail room in the back of the Arts Center, I was thoroughly soaked. The linoleum in the hallway was a muddy trail of footprints. From inside the small brass mailbox, I pulled out a package slip. Some shady Australian company called PeptideYou. Every time I saw that recipient line—*Hannah Primrose c/o Faith Thibodeaux*—I felt a flutter of worry. I was risking my Harkness education for \$5,000 that never showed and some collagen supplements that would turn my pee neon yellow. Walking to the package desk, I vowed—for the hundredth time—to open a PO box in town as soon as money came in.

I heard a commotion. “Sir, I’m *not* the Student Registrar! If you don’t know a student’s name, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“But I *do* know her name, I must have her last name wrong!”

“Baby, do I look like *Wheel of Fortune* to you? There’s nobody with that name here. If you don’t know the name, I can’t help you.”

Rounding the corner, I saw Miss Carla at the desk, smacking her bubble gum in annoyance at Henry, whose athletic frame loomed over her. Most students would’ve slunk away in embarrassment—Miss Carla was known on campus for her blistering indifference—but Henry was firmly standing his ground in his parka and salmon-pink pants. “That’s just silly, isn’t it?” he pressed. “I just want to leave a note for somebody. Why do I have to go all the way to the Registrar for something that simple?” A small line of students had formed behind him.

Then, Henry said something that chilled me to the bone: “Really, how many Kayla L’s can there be at this school?”



Kayla, when I told her that night, was gleeful, almost triumphant. “Awwww,” she cooed. “He’s obsessed with me. That’s so cute.”

I looked at her, horror-struck. In the sick hierarchy of creeps and abusers, I’d placed Henry as an opportunist, a privileged frat boy who raped

women only when the circumstances presented themselves, e.g., a girl was drunk and he could claim to be too. Whether he was criminally savvy or just morally obtuse was unclear. But nevertheless, I didn't think Henry was the type of guy to actively stalk a girl. That would be too out in the open, too at odds with the golden-boy persona guys like Henry tried so desperately to uphold. Still, how else could I explain Henry trying to slip something into Kayla's mailbox? My imagination began spinning wildly out of control, scenarios pushing themselves out further, tipping into violence. If he *was* stalking Kayla, what recourse did we have?

I realized, with sudden and sickening clarity, that Kayla and I had placed ourselves in a very vulnerable position. Like passengers on a cruise ship seduced by the unlimited buffet and drinks, we'd drifted out into the lawless seas. If something were to happen to Kayla, we couldn't go to the school or the police—not without giving ourselves up.

But when I told Kayla all this, she laughed. "Don't get raped because we'll get in trouble," Kayla said, flashing me a sardonic grin. "Got it, dude. Thanks. Good to know."

"That's *not* what I mean—"

"How is it," she mused, "that you're from Gator Park? *Boo-hoo, we can't go to the school or police.* Bitch, do you see Callie going to the school or police?"

To this, I could say nothing.

Chapter 17

And then, just like that, it was all over. The dorms were closed for winter break, which lasted from the two weeks before Christmas to New Year's Day. This posed a problem for Kayla and me: After months at Harkness, I had no desire to return to Gator Park. Nor did Kayla. Kayla's mother, it seemed, had kicked Kayla's stepfather out of their trailer. *Good for her*, I thought. But this did not endear her mother to Kayla; if anything, what little tenderness she felt toward Brenda had hardened, like a desiccated husk. "Of course she grows a spine *after* I'm gone," Kayla spat out. "Typical."

With what little money I'd saved up from my campus job—we still hadn't gotten paid from the snail-mask company—we rented a little room off Craigslist that was a few blocks from the main street of Franklin, above a laundromat. For \$400 a week, mailed to a PO box in Shreveport, we got a window, bed, desk, and nightstand. The paint peeled off the walls. The Wi-Fi was strong. The bathroom was down the hallway, shared with the only other room on the floor, whose tenants I never saw. Except for the thumping sound of heavy metal in the early afternoon and a stray, dark hair on the bar of soap, it felt like Kayla and I had the place to ourselves.

The first night there, Wyman called me while Kayla and I were watching the new season of *Love Yacht* on the bed. My phone lit up between us, a parallelogram of light.

I stared at the screen, wondering whether to let it ring. He was still an unknown number.

Before I could decide, Kayla snatched up my phone. "Hello?" Her voice was high-pitched and sardonic, shaky with mirth. A thrill of horror shot up and down my spine as I heard on the other end Wyman's voice. "Oh, hello. Is Faith there?"

I leaped off the bed and grabbed her shoulder, but Kayla tumbled back with a muffled shriek, holding my phone just out of reach. "She's here. But *who* are *you*?"

"This isn't funny!" I said through gritted teeth as Kayla batted my hand away. Finally I knelt Kayla hard in the back, and she yelled: "Ow!"

The phone fell to the worn parquet floor with a clatter. I picked it up, breathing hard. My voice catching like there was a razor lodged in my

throat: “Hi.” We’d not talked since Mae Hawkins Day.

There was a dizzying pause. Then, “Your roommate knows about us, doesn’t she?” To my surprise, Wyman didn’t sound upset. In fact, there was an amused, almost excited, tone to his voice I hadn’t heard before.

“Hold on for a minute.”

Ignoring the radiant smirk on Kayla’s face, I shrugged on my jacket and stepped into the hallway, the phone cradled between my chin and my shoulder. “Hi,” I said again. I swallowed and launched into a half-apologetic, half-defiant *mea culpa*. Yes, she knew but only because I was gone all the time. No, I didn’t think she’d tell anyone. My tennis shoes kicked an empty can as I walked down the dusty stairwell. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw a cockroach scuttle away. “You’re not upset?” I finally asked once outside. I was standing in front of the peeling stenciled windows of the laundromat, dark inside.

“No,” Wyman said simply. “I trust your judgment.”

There it was again, that guilt. *If only he knew*. This time it felt thicker, more tangible. Like it had firmly grown roots in some deep, dark place inside me.

“Where are you?” I asked, trying to shake it off.

“New York. I’ll be here through the New Year.” There was a pause, slight and hesitant. “I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to see you before the holidays.”

“What’re you doing in New York?”

“Seeing friends, meeting with clients. An exhibit I’ve been curating on Picasso and Gilot is opening in the spring at the Brooklyn Museum. So I’ve been dropping in on that. It’s a bit of a mess right now, dealing with all the handlers. But I think it’ll all come together beautifully. It’ll be the first time their works will be presented side by side at a major museum.”

“I’d like to see it someday,” I said. “That is, if I’m not too busy wasting my life on spreadsheets.”

I heard Wyman heave a sigh, a crackly echo. “Look,” he said finally. “I’m sorry about last time. I wasn’t a gentleman.” Pause. “And I certainly have no right to tell you what to do with your life. But can you blame me if I think you’re extraordinary? If I want more for you? You’re the only one I’ve trusted to work on the painting, Faith. How many undergrads get to work on a four-hundred-year-old painting?”

I was quiet for a moment. Hearing Wyman praise me was like eating a dense slab of chocolate cake—no matter how much I craved that sugar high, eating too much, too quickly, made my stomach turn. I thought of the painting lying on its easel in the dark studio. The girl with her green brocaded robe falling off one shoulder, holding her right breast in her hand, neither a Madonna nor a whore. “What’re you doing with it now?” I asked Wyman.

“Nothing,” Wyman replied. “It’s back at the Observatory. Not to mention, it doesn’t feel right without you.”

Before we hung up, Wyman told me that he’d left the keys to his Prius in the exhaust pipe and that I’d find the car parked behind Smith. “I’ll just drive the Tesla,” Wyman said. “I don’t want you having to get an Uber every time you come over.” I could hear his smile. “Or, God forbid, the bus.”

“Okay,” I said, and I found myself smiling too.

We hung up, promising to talk again in the next few days. For a while, I stood in the dark, still street, taking deep breaths in and out. Counting my Mississippis. Under the streetlamp, I could see a fine drizzle slanted sideways. The mist was everywhere: curling off the windshields of the parked cars, hanging like rags in the shadows—it was the kind of night where everything was a painterly blur, soft and achingly new.



I floated through the next few days, happy and placated. Wyman’s call had washed away the sharp edges of my anxiety and replaced it with a mellow, grassy optimism. Normally I would’ve been depressed, even alarmed, by how quickly we’d returned *to the gutter*—as Kayla quipped one morning, waking up to the toilet burping a strange mildew smell. On Instagram, Ginny posted a photo in the Maldives with her family; Callie was in New York, drinking hot chocolate by a gigantic ice-skating rink. I liked Callie’s photo. *Who cared if winter break wasn’t a trapdoor for them like it was for us?* I thought as I ate gas station food for dinner or took a just-shy-of-cold shower. Always, my thoughts returned back to Wyman. *Wyman wants to see me again. Wyman gave me the keys to his car.* My own personal Christmas carol except, instead of a partridge in a pear tree, I got a new-model Prius with a backup camera.

To be clear, I thought this was highly romantic. To me, the Prius symbolized a progression in our relationship, an unfolding of stages and the kind of love I always so desperately wanted—love that was synonymous with care: changing the gas, leaving the lights on, breakfast in bed. At night, I'd lie on the hard pallet of the bed, reading Françoise Gilot's *Life with Picasso*, which I'd managed to find in that secondhand bookstore off Main Street. I'd never heard of Gilot before. She wasn't in the Met catalog, which I'd exhaustively combed and knew like the back of my hand. For good reason: It was not that long ago that the Met finally acquired one of Gilot's paintings.

Gilot was twenty-one when she first met Picasso—two years older than I was. Her account of her ten-year relationship with Picasso was warm, candid, filled with contradictions and nuance. *The OG Hannah Primrose*, I thought, feverishly flipping the pages, needing to know how it all ended.

I wondered why Wyman hadn't mentioned the exhibition earlier to me, but I didn't want to read too much into it. Soon enough, I'd be able to ask him. The first night of term I'd walk with purpose toward the Prius in the parking lot and open the doors with a *beep*, then pull into the long driveway up to Wyman's house, aglow with light in the woods . . .

Eventually, I nodded off, and fell into a dreamless sleep.



The Tuesday before Christmas Hannah hit two hundred thousand followers.

"We're big-time, baby!" Kayla screamed, popping a bottle of André with one hand, a spliff dangling out of the side of her mouth. Blowing a perfect ring, Kayla grinned and handed it to me. I took a hit. Brands were beginning to flood Hannah's inbox, *real* brands. PR representatives who'd once left us on read started to DM Hannah, asking for a meeting to discuss *long-term partnerships*. Even the Korean snail-mask company finally paid the invoice we'd been chasing for weeks—just like that, \$5,000 in the bank.

We'd never had so much money. Drunk and high, we terrorized the empty aisles of CVS with our shopping cart, piling on like crazy: six pints of Häagen-Dazs, four boxes of Whitman's samplers, and a gold Ferrero Rocher ball as big as my hand; fistfuls of lipsticks and eye pencils and makeup palettes, including Bella Rose's new holiday contour kit; two electronic toothbrushes. "Girl, we're going to have rich-lady teeth now,"

Kayla cackled, so happy and delighted my heart ached a little. By the checkout, Kayla stopped in front of the display of Christmas trees. Festooned with garlands and cheap bulbs and twinkling lights, the little plastic trees strobed red, green, and gold on top of the stacks of boxes. “This,” Kayla said. “This is happening.”

For the rest of my life, I’ll remember that Christmas. Botching the high notes of “All I Want for Christmas Is You” as we hoisted the box up the dark stairwell, the ornaments tinkling inside plastic shopping bags. Grouping the tree limbs by family and then assembling them limb by limb. Stringing the lights and hanging the ornaments—“Stupid to get the back,” Kayla said with a satisfied little smile. “Who’s going to see back there, anyways?”

When we were done, we switched off the lights and plugged in the green cable box, filling our gray little room with a soft, ethereal glow.

“Merry Christmas, Faith,” Kayla whispered, leaning her head on my shoulder as we stared in wonder at the tree, *our* tree.

Here’s the irony of it all: We forgot to take a photo that night, one just for ourselves. With a fake Christmas tree in a room rented off Craigslist, our circumstances were bleak, but we were happy—the last time we’d be happy together, in fact. *Stay there*, I want to whisper in my ear that night. *Stay a little longer*. Tomorrow everything would change.



The DM came at 2:13 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon: **Hannah, we love the unique brand that you’ve built and think our agency can take your social media presence to the next level.**

On Google, Brian Marquez was the real deal: a social media manager at Infinitive, based in New Orleans. Infinitive worked with all the top influencers in the South—Trisha Peyton, the stripper turned makeup mogul who’d just walked the red carpet at the Met Gala; Sarah Sweeney, the fitness instructor from Raleigh whose #SweatyFridays workouts grew from a mall attraction to an app backed by all the top VCs in Silicon Valley.

I would love to sit down and discuss, we wrote back. Professional, but not too eager. After some back-and-forth, Brian invited Hannah to Infinitive’s New Year’s Eve party in New Orleans. **We’ll talk a little shop and you can meet some of our clients. Plus it’ll be a killer party 😊**

Kayla was nervous. This was it, her big break. *Our* big break, she quickly corrected. Brand deals. Sponsored getaways. Coachella! With a shark of a manager, anything was possible. The day of the party, there was a jittery, razor-fine edge to Kayla's anticipation; she picked at her McDonald's and downed cup after cup of coffee and changed her outfit multiple times, finally settling on a Shein white-and-black cutout dress that showed off her tanned midriff. I wore a simple black turtleneck dress and flats. That night, I was going as her *team*—not even as her creative director, as we'd told David all those months ago. Somehow I'd gotten a title downgrade, but when I pointed this out to Kayla, she insisted that we were partners, fifty-fifty. "Until they sign us, let's just keep it casual, yeah?" Kayla justified, looking at herself in the cracked mirror in the bathroom.

Classic Kayla move: insisting that we were partners when it suited her, but, really, I was a ghost. Tonight Hannah Primrose would walk into Infinitive's party perfect, intact, ready for internet fame. Beauty has a way of evoking effortlessness—and erasing everything else.

They sent a black car for us in the late afternoon. The driver didn't seem fazed that he was pulling up in front of a laundromat. Maybe he was used to picking up bright, young creators in less-than-bright places. Opening the car door, he frowned at me. "They told me I was picking up just one," he said, making a show of consulting his clipboard.

"I'm part of Hannah's team." The words came out so naturally, even as I wondered how many times I'd have to say them that night.



For its annual New Year's Eve party, Infinitive rented out an enormous beaux arts mansion on Saint Charles Avenue, vaguely familiar because it was—as Chelsey, Brian's assistant, told us at the door while checking us in—the house where *The Real World* and a few B-horror flicks were filmed. "Brian thought it would be, like, so meta?" Chelsey tapped away at her iPad. "Because reality TV is basically, like, the granddaddy for social—" She broke off, clocking my presence like a hole in her backless Gucci loafers. "Sorry, but are you on the list?"

"Part of the team," Kayla and I said in unison.

"Gotcha!" Chelsey's eyes sliding away from me already. "Have fun tonight! You're gonna love Brian!"

Once past Chelsey, we followed the velvet ropes toward the back of the dimly lit, cavernous house. Sliding glass doors opened to a large balcony with twin staircases, leading down to the pool and grounds where Infinitive's young and beautiful flocked, their faces cinematic under the flicker of tiki torches. The pool, the largest I'd ever seen, was backlit by the logo of a luxury hotel chain, the shadows of palm trees flitting across the empty bobbing surface. Waiters in white jackets carried trays of hors d'oeuvres. There was an open Bacardí bar and tables festooned with free products, from makeup to CBD water to workout gear. On a stage beyond the pool a DJ was spinning ethereal tunes in front of a black banner for Rockstar Energy that read *Life Is Your Stage!*

It was a chilly night, colder than usual. At the bottom of the staircase, there was a small red carpet that extended out to coat check. Photographers yelled at Kayla: "You look beautiful! Look this way! Take off your coat! Take it off!"

"Do you mind?" she asked me, shrugging it off.

"No," I replied with a reassuring smile. "Go ahead. I'll just wait here."

I watched as the cameras flashed, and Kayla preened expertly toward them—lilting eyes, wide-but-not-too-wide smile, chin tucked just so—as I had watched her practice so many times in the mirror. In the coat check line two women in front of me took the same selfie five times. Satisfied at last, the blond one turned to the brunette and exclaimed, in a vaguely familiar, raspy voice, "*Ohmigod, it's so nice to finally meet IRL!*" and then she clicked into focus: She was a makeup YouTuber I'd followed in high school. *She looked different IRL*, I thought, simultaneously more and less beautiful, with her preternaturally smooth face and brows so upswept they seemed in danger of flying away. Her friend, the brunette, looked like she belonged in the same sorority, but then again they all did, with their poreless skin and snatched waists.

Surrounded by all these women practically engineered for male desire, I felt self-loathing flare up again, like an old injury. Then my phone buzzed in my hand. When I saw Wyman's text, I smiled. It was a photo of the largest pastrami sandwich I'd ever seen, mustard oozing out of thick folds of meat. **Taking you here someday.**

When I got back to Kayla, she was still posing for cameras. Her smile was unwavering, but a slight gumminess was starting to show.

“Who’re *you*?” a light yelled. Kayla was about to reply, but another light headed her off. “Dude, that’s Tana Morgan,” another light replied. “Tana, how’s your night going?”

Kayla’s smile vanished.



After that, her mood soured. Irritably, she waved away my reassurances—apart from the green eyes, she looked nothing like Tana Morgan—and pulled me to a nearby bar. Tattooed girls in Infinitive-branded tank tops handed us frothy chartreuse concoctions made with the celebrity tequila that sponsored the party. “Tastes like an ashtray,” Kayla said, sucking the whole drink down, then promptly ordering a second. She had that cagey, dangerous gleam in her eyes when she felt underestimated. “Let’s find Brian,” Kayla said.

Parting the crowd, Kayla’s warm hand in mine leading the way, I spotted more influencers I recognized: an Instagram yogi in a mostly sheer dress posing by the pool while her Instagram husband snapped away; a gaggle of bleached-blond girls with their queen bee, a self-anointed “life coach” whose dating advice vlogs kept popping up in my feed. If I looked hard enough, there were so many of us here: Instagram husbands, so-called creative directors, ghosts. Shooting content, tending to fickle moods, or “curating vibes,” we trailed after these bright young things—the *real* creators—with no social currency of our own. On the clock, flitting in and out of the frame, just like the waiters carrying trays of mini grilled cheese and shrimp cocktail.

In a white tent behind the stage, videos were projected onto the billowing walls, a humblebrag of Infinitive’s cultural relevance over the past year. There was the canned rosé campaign that had bombarded my Instagram all last summer. The model who went from music video girl to household name, her face beckoning me to buy a cheap watch I didn’t need. “Look,” Kayla said, pointing upward, the images racing across her face in a delicate blue haze. “Someday Hannah will be up there,” she said softly.

A man came up to us, grinning broadly. “*Hannah?*” he said excitedly, hands spread apart.

Brian Marquez was shockingly young: late twenties, floppy hair that matched the brown in his eyes, supernaturally white teeth that told me he

went to college. Attractive, in a generic way. He wore a blazer over a fitted T-shirt with red Yeezys and introduced himself in a muted, offhand way that signaled *I'm a big deal*. But I had to give him some credit; he acknowledged me, at least. "Team Hannah," he exclaimed, pumping his fist when I mumbled my name. If *Da-veed* was the sketchy older guy whose idea of "business" was snorting lines in the club bathroom, Brian was reassuringly blue chip, as smoothly professional as an investment banker. "Long form is making a comeback these days," he said. "Hannah feels like a throwback to old-school, 2014 Tumblr, confessional style, but the voice is real, authentic. *Gritty*." His eyes gleamed. "As proof of concept, it's impressive."

Kayla said a little breathlessly, "We're so excited to hear that. Infinitive represents all of my favorite creators, and I'm really looking forward to sitting down—"

"Wait," I said, staring at Brian. "What do you mean by 'proof of concept'?"

Brian grabbed a canapé and popped it into his mouth. "Listen," he said, chewing. "I love this character you've made, of the Ivy League girl restoring old paintings, sleeping with her professor. It has its finger on this cultural moment we're in. *Love* that vibe. But . . . there's an expiration date." He shrugged. "People get bored. Also, brands want to see less risqué content. What're you bringing in each month?" he asked Kayla shrewdly. "Five K, maybe? For a creator with 200K followers in something more traditional, like beauty or lifestyle, they'd be bringing in triple that."

"Okay," Kayla said slowly. "So what do we—"

"Answer me this." Brian folded his arms. "What do Emma Chamberlain, Taylor Swift, and Bella Rose have in common?"

"They're white?" Kayla said, flummoxed.

"They're *storytellers*." Brian paused to let it sink in. "Everyone wants to be an influencer. But not everybody can tell a story. That's what I like about you guys." Cutting his eyes away, Brian waved his hands. "Megan! Soo-yi!"

I looked over my shoulder at two girls who'd just walked into the tent. The girls squealed. "*Oh my God, Brian!*" Both in thigh-high boots and Gucci belts, they swanned over, air-kissing Brian and carrying with them a thick cloud of competing fragrances. "We're talking about diversifying

content,” Brian told them. “*Oooh*,” the vaguely familiar blonde cooed. Brian nodded toward her. “She’s a good case study.”

On YouTube, @MeganInsanity posted videos of her applying makeup while dishing out *real talk* about bigger influencers in the beauty industry—who was feuding with who, who was hooking up with who, who was polluting our oceans with their shitty branded lip gloss kits and lying about it. She was cartoonishly blond, with exaggerated petals for lips and anime-big eyes. In appearance and content, she reminded me of some bottom-dwelling fish—eerie, strangely beautiful—gliding on the ocean floor, placidly surviving off the dead skin cells of other, larger organisms. “You didn’t start off doing makeup, right?” Brian was saying. “You did, like, ‘Day in My Life as a—’”

“Broke-Ass Toronto Student,” Megan said with a raspy cackle. “I had to pivot after I quit school. Nobody wants to watch a ‘Day in My Life as a Content Creator,’ you know?”

“It’s easy to rack up eyeballs.” Brian nodded. “It’s hard to maintain them, and it’s even harder to monetize. What’re you on now?”

“YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter.” Megan ticked them off on her long talon-like fingers. “Snapchat. Vine, RIP.”

“So, are you only on Instagram?” Soo-yi asked Kayla with a polite smile.

Kayla, I noticed, had gotten pale. She was gripping her glass so tightly her knuckles whitened. “Platform doesn’t really matter,” Brian said with a shrug. “There’ll always be some hot new app on the horizon. Part of being a creator is constant reinvention, over and over and over. What matters is the world the creator builds with their audience. The way they communicate, the way they express themselves. Their *voice*. That’s the value add.”

He raised his glass. “To storytellers.”

I drank the dregs of my smoky drink and rattled the ice around in my glass. Even the ice was branded, the interloping *LV* logo chiseled into the cubes.



What’re you doing now? I texted Wyman as soon as Kayla and I stepped into the bathroom and locked the door. It was well appointed and dimly lit, with a small vase of flowers and a Diptyque candle flickering on the sink.

Kayla's shining green eyes caught my gaze in the mirror. Just a few minutes ago, as the DJ segued into EDM pop remixes and partygoers jumped into the pool, Brian had leaned into Kayla's ear. They wanted to offer representation.

"Shit," she said shakily. "Shit, shit, shit."

Brands want storytellers. I should've been happy—no, ecstatic. Finally, I had proof that something I created—from *my* words, *my* experiences—was worthy of attention, valuable. And yet I felt empty, listless.

In my pocket my phone vibrated against my thigh.

"Well?" Kayla demanded. "Say something! This is, like, amazing, right?"

I feigned excitement. "I can't believe we actually did it! Crazy. I'm so proud of us."

This apparently seemed to satisfy Kayla. From her knockoff Louis clutch Kayla excavated an eyelash curler and a Bic lighter. The clutch fell over, spilling its contents on the tessellated floor.

I knelt down and helped pick up the wadded-up tissues, tampon, and forgotten ChapStick. Crouched on the floor, I fished out my phone. Wyman had texted back: **Drinking leftover eggnog to get through grading. Happy New Year's, by the way.**

Professors procrastinate too? I responded.

Ellipses, then: **Yes, and Santa Claus isn't real either.**

"Are you texting him now? Seriously?"

I straightened up, looked away from her glare. "So what if I am?"

"You heard Brian," she said with a touch of impatience. "We won't need him anymore." There was a simplicity in Kayla's words, childish and almost eerie. I stared at her face in the mirror. Not too long ago we were in a very different bathroom, having the exact same conversation. *You're just going to EMCC.* I had changed, but certain things had stayed the same: I was still just a doll to Kayla, something to be picked up and put down at her whim, to be dragged along.

"Kayla," I said softly, and our eyes met. "I love him."

At first, I didn't think she heard me. Kayla flicked the lighter with her thumb, ran her eyelash curler over the flame. An old trick she'd picked up from her favorite influencers. Pain foisted upon pain. Tipping forward until

her nose was almost pressed to the glass, she pumped and held it clamped tight.

“Kayla, are you listening to me? You do see that this is a dead end for us, right?” Hysteria crept into my voice. “We sign with Infinitive, then what? I drop out and follow you to LA? Be your ghostwriter for the rest of my life?”

With a clatter, the eyelash curler fell into the sink. Kayla spun around to face me, glaring. “I should ask you the same thing,” she hissed. “You love him? You’re fucking a professor twice your age. He’s using you, dude. Soon as he’s tired of you, he’ll move on to the next eighteen-year-old.”

Somebody was pounding on the door.

“If he’s using me,” I said quietly, after a long pause, “he’s not the only one.”

She gave me a strange, chilly look, eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

We were standing so close I could feel the heat of Kayla’s breath on my cheek.

I knew her face better than I knew my own. That vein in the inner corner of her left eye that got red when she drank. The Milky Way of yellow flecks swirling in her pale-green irises.

The pounding got louder. I looked down and took a deep breath. “Let’s just go,” I said. “They’re waiting for you.”

Chapter 18

A couple of weeks into the term, Wyman had taught us the principles of composition. Linear composition, the rule of thirds. The common shapes in nature—spirals and zigzags, circles and triangles and diagonals—that created dynamism, the illusion of movement. Cézanne’s famous painting, *The Three Skulls*, that old chestnut of art school: three toothless skulls lined up on a table. *Ah, the rule of odds*, Wyman had said in a somewhat bored drawl. *Three is always better than two. Something draws the eye to odds. It begs the question: Who is the odd one out?*

Picasso taught Gilot about composition too. He taught her that if all the elements of a composition are too perfect, the solution is to cut out the skull and move it around. In that way, the truth of the painting reveals itself. But only if you take a knife to it.



As soon as we slipped out of the bathroom, Kayla brushed by me roughly without a word. *Kayla, wait!* I wanted to scream, but the words rusted in my throat. Instead, I walked out onto the balcony into the night air, watching from the top of the staircase as Kayla rejoined the party on the lawn, her head held high, regal. As if nothing had happened. By the pool Brian waved. Two blond heads with Brian turned to face Kayla’s direction. Even this far away I recognized the Anderson Brothers, two of the most popular content creators in the world. Pranks, mostly—*Jamaican Story Time*, *Watch Us Ask Women for Their Numbers!*—that racked up hundreds of millions of views.

Kayla took a selfie with the Anderson Brothers like they were old friends. As the Rockstar logo was replaced by a clock—00:23:01, counting the seconds down to a new year—I watched Kayla, followed by Brian, disappear into the crowd.

Part of being a creator is constant reinvention, Brian had said. Women in the public eye had to reinvent themselves—over and over. They had to have a blond era and a brunette one, a good-girl origin story and a slutty

phase and a redemption arc, all before they hit the age of thirty. I thought of Megan, who went from a Toronto college student vlogging from her dining hall to a beauty influencer with 1M+ followers, manufacturing drama for the sake of likes. I thought of our favorite influencer, Bella Rose, who got skinnier and skinnier the more she was photographed on the red carpet, a pale, gaunt version of the Hooters waitress who got her start in a rap video. And I thought, of course, of Hannah, who'd gone from early Taylor Swift, in our high school years, to internet slut in the dizzying span of a few weeks, and then the girl studying art history at an elite school who'd become an internet *provocateur*.

How many more pivots did Hannah have in her? How many did I?

Minutes to the New Year. I looked down at the restless, glittering crowd. Beams of gauzy light bounced up and down the stage and rippled across the crowd as a beach ball sailed down the middle. I strained my eyes to see if I could spot Kayla, but I'd lost sight of her in the crowd. I often felt a panicked neediness whenever I was apart from Kayla. But that knot was loosening inside me; there was a slack that hadn't been there before. Or maybe it had been, and I just didn't want to see it. Like that summer afternoon when I'd jumped down the well. Tugging the rope, only to find that there was no one on the other end.

Ten, the crowd was shouting. *Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five . . .*

If Wyman was here, I'd turn to him and press my lips against his, wrapping my fingers around the nape of his neck, the hairs there soft and rough at the same time. We'd whisper *Happy New Year* and there, reflected in our eyes, would be the promise of many more New Years to come. There it was, another life—just within my fingertips. A life where I'd be free from the shackles of Hannah's voice. Free to find my voice.

It had always been us, Kayla and me, against the world, but suddenly, with a riptide of fierce joy, I thought: *Our friendship can take a different shape*. Our fates were no longer entwined.

Just like that, the composition could change.



I left right after midnight, taking a cab to the Troubadour, an airy, bohemian hotel tucked away in a quiet corner of the French Quarter I never knew existed. Kayla had booked the room off Tripadvisor. “We’re signing with

Infinitive,” she said, waving away my sticker shock at the \$350-per-night price. “They’re gonna get us the bag.” Bouncing up and down, she took me by the shoulders, shaking me hard. “Fifteen karaoke machines, right? Right?” And I’d laughed, letting myself get swept away by the intoxicating pull of Kayla’s excitement. Her certainty that it would all work out. All the way to New Orleans, we plotted like thieves. We’d get back from the party and raid the mini fridge. We’d jump on the big bed like in the movies. We’d order room service chocolate cake.

I switched the lights on to a room with two double beds and a flat-screen TV above a buffet table. The windows during the day overlooked a row of colorful town houses, with their famous wrought iron balconies, but it was now dark, a plane of black reflecting my distorted image in the empty room. From my backpack I took out my toothbrush and my sleeping shirt. Then I washed up quickly and went to bed.

I woke up in the middle of the night, parched and thirsty. A dull headache throbbed behind my eyes. Rolling over, I found myself nose to nose with Kayla, who was asleep next to me with her mouth slightly open. She must’ve slipped into the room, drunk and exhausted, and crawled into my bed. In the dim light, it looked like she’d taken a quick pass of her makeup with those Neutrogena wipes that never quite got it all off. I felt a surge of affection, quick and bracing, like the sudden drop in pressure right before a storm.

When Kayla woke up, I’d tell her I wanted out.

Restless, unable to go back to sleep, I reached for my phone charging on the nightstand. As Hannah—for perhaps the very last time—I logged in to Instagram.

Four thousand two hundred and seventy-six likes on the photo posted a day ago. Hannah in a blue oxford shirt and socks, reading *Life with Picasso*. The caption, jotted down after a spliff and too much cheap prosecco, had a manic, slightly breathless quality that matched the story: of Professor X teaching Hannah how to spit-clean a painting. *What happened next, I can assure you, would make even It Girl Françoise Gilot blush.*

Comments had rolled in at a steady clip. The usual internet reactions:

this is my super bowl

Ok then what???

Here for the plot

sei tosta all'ennesima potenza.

And then I saw the comment. Posted three hours ago, by
@Harkness356798: **YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE.**

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 19

@Harkness356798. The comment knifed me between the ribs, plunging my insides into ice. In the dark of the room, I must've clicked on that account a million times. No profile photo, just Instagram's gray default: 0 followers, 1 following.

The Harkness connection alone would've raised every single hair on the nape of my neck. Ever since Kayla showed up at Harkness, I'd held my breath, always looking over my shoulder and wondering when we'd get caught. All it would take, after all, was one friend of a friend. One person to stumble across Hannah Primrose's account on the Discovery page. Online, we'd been so careful, dusting away footprints, blocking the Alpha Rhos. But offline, Kayla had to make just one mistake. Flubbing up the name of the social science building. Asking somebody to swipe her into the dorms one too many times. Weeks passed, then months—and still, nothing happened. It was, I realized, an extraordinary run of luck—like walking out of the blaze of a car crash, unscathed, or hitting triple 7's at the slot machine so many times in a row that time itself became elastic, fluid, one second unfolding into another in this alternate universe, until we'd forgotten all about what it meant for the luck to end—until, of course, it did.

Somebody had put two and two together—a Harkness student following the account and commenting on our posts. They'd linked Hannah Primrose to Harkness, and therefore it was possible—even likely—that they'd linked Kayla to Harkness and had at least spotted her around campus. But I took small comfort in the unsaid. It didn't seem like they knew who Kayla *really* was. Or who she wasn't.

In fact, @Harkness356798 couldn't have made their meaning more clear.

YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE. All caps, each letter like an arrow quivering on the bull's-eye. Who was @Harkness356798, and what did they want?

And what did they know that I didn't?

Kayla shifted her weight beside me and sighed softly in her sleep. Looking at her tousled head on the pillow, I thought back to our fight: *He's*

using you, dude. Soon as he's tired of you, he'll move on to the next eighteen-year-old.

Please, I thought, and suddenly nausea overwhelmed me. Please, please let Kayla be wrong.

I kicked off the covers. Stumbling in the dark, I groped around for my laptop buried in the rumpled sheets. I opened it, flooding the room with cool white light. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, my back against the bed, I Googled *Wyman and Harkness sexual misconduct* and *Wyman professor reddit*. Nothing came up, only articles from 2012 about the headmaster of a California private school, *William Wyman*, who was accused of molesting a thirteen-year-old girl. I searched the Goodreads page for Wyman's book, photos from a gallery opening in New York last fall that I'd already gone through a month ago. In the fifth photo, Wyman's arm was wrapped around the waist of a tall, elegant blond woman in her well-preserved thirties. Her throat glistened with understated jewelry. When I first saw the photos, I'd felt threatened enough that I asked him about it.

"Patricia?" he'd said, clearing his throat. "She was that PhD student I told you about. Now she runs her own auction house in New York. And is happily married with two kids," he added hastily.

And Wyman had told me, *again*, just like the first time when I'd spent the night, that he hadn't been involved with a student since. It hadn't been worth the risk—until me. "All this MeToo stuff," he said, blowing air through his lips, and I laughed, hadn't I, amused by his irreverence?

Certain in the knowledge that this was different, that *I* was different, special, I believed him. Just like that, I let him off the hook.



"What's up with you?" Kayla asked when I was quiet on the Greyhound back to Franklin the next day. My shrimp po'boy languished in its paper on the rattling tray in front of me, untouched. "You're not still mad, are you?"

I wished it was that simple: stay in school or drop out of Harkness and follow Kayla to New Orleans or LA or wherever influencers moved to these days. As the bus bumped up and down the potholes of Central, I felt Kayla's eyes on me—scanning, looking for cracks—and I stared out the window, saying nothing. All morning, she'd tried to extend the olive branch: picking up the sandwiches, booking tickets on the bus. Acting like she was sorry

without ever saying sorry. This irritated me, compounding my bleak mood, my tunneling isolation. But mostly, and unfairly, I was shutting Kayla out because I didn't want to tell her. I didn't want to give Kayla the grim satisfaction that all along, she might've been right.

I turned to Kayla, fixing her with a passably neutral look. "Grades are getting posted later," I told her. "Believe it or not, not everything's about you." My jab hit its mark; I watched with savage pleasure as Kayla's face crumpled a little, pretty and wounded. I felt only a teensy bit bad.



A few days later, we moved back into the dorms. The first day of spring semester, it snowed, thick and wet and white as bone—the largest snowstorm since 2008, according to the *Harkness Daily*. "Can you *believe* it snowed?" the girls in Smith exclaimed to each other, their faces freshly tanned from holidays in the Maldives or Singapore. For a whole day, Harkness was a winter wonderland: snow piled high in the windowsill, the fat, furry buds of Japanese magnolia encased in a tomb of ice. The next day, there was bright sun. The streets flooded, four inches of dark, slurry water rolling down the cobblestone on Main Street, a whirlpool of debris and sodden leaves. My tennis shoes soaked, I met my adviser, Bugz, on a late Tuesday afternoon at the café in the bookstore. Yesterday, grades had posted and I'd gotten an A in History of Economic Thought, a string of B's and B+'s, and a C in Microeconomics. This eked out to a 3.1 GPA, barely enough to hang on to my scholarship. But the C meant that I needed the Economics Department's special permission to continue with the major.

The whole meeting had a brisk, perfunctory air. Bugz, frowning a little as she stirred honey into her Earl Grey, listened to my replies—vague, rambling—to her questions: I very much hoped to do better, I was going to take advantage of the Student Center resources. The new, shiny Academic Resources Center. Go to office hours more. The irony.

"Harkness is all about growth and accountability," Bugz said in a starchy tone after I petered out. "What mistakes did you make last term that you can learn from?"

Sleeping with my professor and not even having the grades to show for it, I thought. Instead, I said: "Um. Time management?" Tomato, tomahto.

“We *could* press your case to Professor Edmundson—see if he can waive the grade requirement, just once—but let me be clear. Regardless of whether you can continue in the major, it will be extremely difficult for you to be competitive for internships with these grades. Recruiting begins in a few weeks.” She looked at me sharply. “Now, is this even something you feel strongly about?”

“No.” Already I was thinking about my bed, sleeping the rest of the day. “I’ll figure something else out.”



During Chapter that first week of term, I got drunk. Stupidly, gloriously, dangerously drunk on a handle of that celebrity tequila at the Infinitive party—it was everywhere, truly—smuggled from the house liquor cabinet and poured discreetly into a Sprite bottle. Slumped down in the back row, I took tiny pulls and watched, silently, in a bottomless fog, as the social machinations of Greek life unfolded like the bad reality TV I only watched during times of clinical depression. That week had crystallized certain truths, the least important being: I couldn’t give two shits about Alpha Rho. When I’d rushed back in September, I was rudderless, still reeling from Kayla ghosting me. But then Kayla showed up at Harkness. Then Wyman happened. They were like two gravitational fields, pulling me in different directions. Two secret worlds. How could Alpha Rho possibly compete? As I stared out at the rows and rows of girls in front of me, with their shiny hair and easy devotion, I wondered how many of them were here just because they’d never had that bright streaking comet in their lives, burning up everything, leaving a trail of chaos and destruction. I wasn’t sure who I was sorry for more: them or me.

I played a drinking game with myself. “Delta Omega is cohosting Heaven and Hell with us.” Sip. “Should the juniors dress up as angels?” Sip. “This Friday, anybody who shows up late needs to have a good reason.” Sip. I was hazy with my own rules.

I hadn’t heard from Wyman since New Year’s Eve. This wasn’t abnormal; we often went days, even weeks, without talking. But *I* wanted to ignore him. To make him wonder for once. I wanted to weaponize my silence, filling the space between us with a noxious gas, designed to elicit the truth. With each day that passed, and still no word from Wyman, my

rage acquired a razor-fine edge. *Fucker*, I thought, tequila searing down my throat.

It was dark outside when I stumbled out of the house. I walked quickly, head down. Somebody touched me on the shoulder—Callie. “Are you okay?” she asked in a low voice. I broke free and started running.

It was a bad idea; even then, I knew that. But one foot stumbling in front of the other, all of a sudden I was running up the steps to McClellan, opening the heavy clanging doors, sprinting down that long hallway and up the stairs. Pausing at the top of the fourth floor, I took a deep breath and tried to compose myself. I closed my eyes. I saw @Harkness356798’s comment against the back of my eyelids, vivid against the electric blackness.

YOU’RE NOT THE ONLY ONE.

Wyman’s office was dark. Peggy, the Department admin, looked up from an *US Weekly*. “He’s not in,” she barked. Then Peggy took me in: red-rimmed eyes, flushed from my collarbone up to my cheeks, unsteady on my feet.

The sharp, wet-dog smell of booze.

“Go home,” Peggy said, not unkindly, after a pause. “Go on home. Right now.”

“I need to talk to him,” I said wildly, louder.

But Peggy was already back to her magazine, flipping the page from one glossy tragedy to the next. “Believe it or not,” she muttered, “I’m not the man’s keeper.”



Finally, it was the first Thursday night of term.

I was purposefully late to Conservation Club. “Hey!” Avery said to me, looking up from the wheel of hard-rind cheese that she was cutting into, the paring knife a flash of silver in her hand. Like in the fall, Wyman had set out Spanish and French wines, nuts, olives, and cheeses to snack on. *I’m the kind of professor who can drink with his students* it had signaled, and back in October, I thought it was so enriching, so tantalizingly grown-up.

That night I saw it for what it was: a fifty-year-old man drinking with undergrads.

There was fresh blood. Across the room I spotted Wyman, chatting with a trio of girls—girls, most likely, from his fall Intro to Art History course. A brunette with blue eyes and freckles—the prettiest out of the three—tilted her head back, laughing loudly, revealing a row of pretty white teeth. Wyman rested his hand, briefly, on her shoulder, before folding his arms again.

Avery was still talking to me. “Earth to Faith. Paging Faith.”

“Sorry,” I said, breaking my gaze. “What did you say?”

Avery was watching me, her eyes like cool, still waters. For a second something flickered behind them, but if she noticed I was acting strangely, she pressed her lips together and chose to say nothing. “How was your break?” she tried again.

“Shitty,” I replied truthfully. The brunette, trailed by her friends, had wandered toward the back of the studio. Wyman drifted in our direction, his eyes finding mine. Looking away, I reached for the half-filled merlot and uncorked it, sloshing a good part of it in a paper cup. “I just stayed in town.”

“Huh,” Avery said. “How come?”

I caught Avery’s gaze and something in it made me wary. “Going home wasn’t an option,” I replied bluntly, hoping she’d let it go.

Avery nodded. “I wasn’t home much either.” She smiled. “Maybe we could’ve hung out over break. But we always seem to be missing each other, huh?”

Over her shoulder, Wyman tried to catch my eye then. He mouthed what seemed to be “Later” and flashed me a grin.

“Anyways,” Avery said after the long, awkward pause that followed, “can I ask you a question?”

With all the blood rushing to my skin, I forced myself to nod. To focus on the words coming out of Avery’s mouth instead of the number of seconds Wyman had his hand on the brunette’s shoulder.

“Is there a reason why you’ve been avoiding me?”

For a moment I thought I hadn’t heard her. “Excuse me?” I said.

“You’re avoiding me,” Avery repeated as calmly as if she were giving me the time. “At first I thought you were just like that with everyone. Well,

everyone except your roommate. But now I'm wondering if it has something to do with *me*. Something I did. Because if it is—"

"I'm not avoiding you," I snapped, cutting her off. "Don't be weird. If this is about that exhibition, I was just busy that week."

Hurt and disappointment bloomed on Avery's face. "Sorry," I said, realizing I'd drawn blood. *Don't be weird*. It was something Kayla would've said.

Without another word, Avery dumped her plate in the nearby trash can and walked toward the door. Wyman saw her and stopped her with a questioning look, asked if she was okay, but she brushed him aside.

As I watched her disappear up the stairs, I felt a strange glimmer of loss. For a moment I wanted to run after her, apologize. But what would that do? She'd finally lost patience with me. I couldn't blame her.

Rather than just stand there, I went to the bathroom upstairs. In the mirror a stranger stared back at me: dark purplish shadows sank under my eyes. And I'd lost weight over break; there was a hollow in my cheeks that hadn't been there before. I sat on the toilet and chugged my paper cup of wine, then I slipped out of the bathroom and lingered in the small living room; I'd never spent much time in here. Wyman told me that he slept on the checkered couch some nights after working late, and I thought I could see faint traces of his presence: an indentation in the cushion, the ghostly water ring on the side table. The fight with Avery had unnerved me, and all of a sudden I felt I couldn't trust my anger. It was draining out of me, slowly. *How much was I seeing with my own eyes?* I wondered as I traced the water ring.

From behind me I heard Wyman's voice, low and urgent in my ear. "I just got back today. I've missed you so much."

Instantly his hands were everywhere. Inching up every vertebrae of my spine as he spun me around to kiss me hungrily on the lips. My body reacted. I kissed him back, pushing him against the mantel, even as my mind was frantically trying to process. Just a few days ago, I'd shown up angry and drunk at his office, ready to confront him. But my doubts were flip-flopping like slippery eels wriggling out of my grip. How sure was I, really?

Wyman broke away. He took my hands and brought them to his lips, kissing them solemnly. "I have a surprise for you later," he said.



A little after ten Wyman and I drove to an Italian restaurant in the small town near his house. White linen tablecloths, candles flickering in hurricane jars. “Oh!” the hostess murmured as I pulled my own chair out, legs scraping the floor. Then, to add insult to injury, she insisted on pushing the chair *in* for me, making me feel like a toddler strapped into a high chair. Or just an idiot who didn’t know any better. It was only after I opened the leather brick of a menu, blushing furiously into the list of appetizers, that I realized this was the first time Wyman and I had ever been out in public.

Wyman placed his hand over mine on the table. “I’ve been wanting to take you here for a while.”

“You’ve been busy,” I said, digging my nails into the linen.

“I was scared of somebody seeing us,” Wyman said simply. “But, you know, I’ve been realizing lately that life’s short.” He smiled. “Cliché, I know.” He traced his fingers on my palm. “But lately I’m okay with cliché.”

“Maybe,” I replied, snatching my hand away, “you’ve just gotten more reckless.” I pretended to read the wine list. Over the menu, I met his eyes. For a second, I registered fear, possibly guilt in the expression on Wyman’s face. Then, like a finger ticking shut a slat in the blinds, it was gone, replaced by a blank inscrutability.

“We should get the branzino,” he said.

During dinner Wyman was in a strange, jubilant mood; something had shaken loose in him. He told me a funny anecdote about his childhood pet turtle; he persisted in the little touches—his fingers entwined in mine, his foot grazing my bare ankle under the table. When the fish came out on a large platter, steam wafting gently out of its silver crackling skin and its single quivering eye, I could tell he was working up to it, the surprise he’d alluded to earlier. But I didn’t try to coax it out of him. For once, I wanted us to break out of our roles, to set aside our masks—to be just two adults having dinner instead of the teacher that Wyman essentially was, with one hand behind his back as I, the wide-eyed student, clung to the brilliant smoke of his reveal.

As I ate my dessert and Wyman drank espresso, he asked about my plans for the summer. “Are you applying for internships?”

I shook my head.

He smiled. “Wall Street isn’t pounding down your door?” he said lightly, putting his cup on the table.

“Not for C students who don’t play lacrosse.”

Wyman speared his fork in my barely touched olive oil cake. “You know, I ran into Patricia Mackey in the city,” he said, taking a bite. “Still married, by the way,” Wyman added hastily. “She owns that auction house in Chelsea. The first woman-owned auction house in the world, in fact. I mentioned you to her and . . .” He coughed. “Well, an internship there is yours if you want it.”

He said this last part so sheepishly and boyishly—like a kid coming clean about slipping a note to your crush—that I softened a little. “What would I do there? I’m not even an art history major.”

“I told her about the painting. *Our* painting, as far as I’m concerned. I told her you’ve been working alongside me for months, that you’ve been doing graduate-level work, and you’re not even done with freshman year. One of only two female artists to paint the female nude, and our girl might even *predate* Lavinia Fontana by ten years?” He snapped his finger. “That’s a story the market will gobble up. Who knows, with a summer at Weatherspoon’s, you could do more research on the painter’s identity. Write a few articles. Get an academic citation. Careers have been launched off lesser paintings.”

“How much does it pay?” I asked.

“As a gallerist? Or a curator?”

“No, the internship.”

Wyman smiled.

Chapter 20

From across the lawn, I saw the commotion outside Delta Omega setting up for the party: movers hefting smoke machines and red-and-white balloon arches into the darkened house, pledges unloading kegs. Nobody noticed me as I walked by, taking the narrow path that cut between the houses and was tunneled with winterberry—startling gashes of red, like blood from a nick. I was done with classes for the afternoon, on my way to the Observatory. Wyman’s words ringing in my ears as I picked up the pace, leaves rasping under my feet: *Careers have been launched off lesser paintings.*

Last night, Wyman asked if I wanted to move in with him for the summer. He had a brownstone in Brooklyn that was only a three-minute walk from the subway that would drop me off a stone’s throw away from Weatherspoon’s offices in Chelsea. The internship was unpaid. As Wyman told me this, his eyes had a pure gleam. “Leave it to me,” he said. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. All you have to do is focus on our half-robed lady. Get taken out to lunch every day by Patricia’s people.” He laughed.

“What else did you tell Patricia?” I asked later, naked in Wyman’s bed. “Did you tell her about us?”

Even in the dark illuminated by the blue of the TV—a late-night showing of *Antiques Roadshow*, of all things—I could see Wyman’s frown etched in the lines of his face. “No, that didn’t exactly come up,” he said. “Why do you do this?” he said plaintively, after a pause. “Why do you always have to interrogate every good intention of mine? Is it so hard to believe that I recommended you not because you’re some piece of ass, but because you’re good and talented and deserve it?”

Neither of us said anything for a moment.

“You’re right,” I said finally.

“I haven’t given you any reason to doubt me, have I?” He was breathing heavily, his dark-haired chest rising up and down, lifting slightly, like a sail, the sheet thrown around our sweat-cooled bodies. And it was then and there, in that trembling space between breaths, that I decided: @Harkness356798 was just some anonymous account. A stranger, a troll

who, like all trolls on the internet, knew exactly where to twist the knife. But that didn't make it real. *This* was real.

That nagging voice. *But they still know more than you think, don't they?* I pushed it away.

Outside the Observatory, I knelt down by the pot and pulled out the key, palming it in my hand.

The whole afternoon stretched out ahead of me. I hadn't so much as picked up a paintbrush since before winter break, nor, I assumed, had Wyman, given that he had been in New York and just gotten back only yesterday. I found that I'd missed it; my fingers ached for the hard pressure of the metal-tipped brush, and my mind buzzed with anticipation of that day's tasks.

There were only two fills left that needed smoothing. One, quite memorably, in the lower half of the girl's nude torso, a grime-streaked passage that barely hinted, in glancing light, at the blushing alabaster of her soft cresting belly, trailing down into shadow. The other was more minor, a small area of crumbly gesso about the size of a quarter by the girl's hand. I'd never worked in the studio alone, but I wanted to surprise Wyman tonight with the fills completed, buffed away of all imperfections. Symbolic, really. With the structural work done, we were ending one stage and entering into another; the painting prepped and ready to undergo yet another transformation.

Maybe I was ready too.

I haven't given you any reason to doubt me, have I? Like yellowing varnish exposed to light, my insecurities, my fear of the unknown were—I could see so clearly—distortions, ripples in the plane of my reality that prevented me from seeing the brilliant colors underneath. It seemed so obvious, so gobsmacked and mundane. Like grocery shopping on an empty stomach, or calling an ex while drunk. Of course it was right at the moment I'd decided standing on that balcony—that I wanted a different life, a life that wasn't just a pale echo of Kayla's, that I'd succumbed to the wolves, that pack of swirling voices on Instagram that told me, over and over, that this wouldn't end well. It was like what Kayla had told me all those summers ago: *You would've risked nothing while I risked everything.* It was easy to believe in Wyman's love when I risked nothing, when I could hide my desires behind Instagram captions. It was much harder to believe in Wyman's love when it offered me a way out, lighting up pathways that once

seemed impossible. And it was hardest to believe that I could be loved. Loved not in the way Kayla loved me, entwined in a sinewy dark knot. But love as a choice. As more than a means to survive.

In the dark vestibule down the stairs, I slipped the key into the lock and pushed the door open.

Paper plates still littered the large drafting table—remnants from last night. Some conservators might've balked at the mess, but Wyman liked paintings that were lived in, paintings that hung not in museums, roped off and encased behind glass, but in hotel bars and restaurants and living rooms, with tobacco stains and splashes of alcohol and the stains that came from the accumulation of years and years of people getting so close with the painting that their breath mingled with the pigment. I wondered what the studios up in New York were like.

The painting stood on an easel in the back like an old friend greeting me. I took my time getting my bearings, just letting my eyes rove. That day, the girl's gaze felt warmer, more playful. The silk in her green brocaded robe gleamed like water, and the gold stitching was fine, precise. The pink-and-beige flesh tones around the areola were beginning to peek through the stripped-away varnish, and I noticed that the crumbly gesso fill in the torso had dried beautifully. A few inches above, the ruby in the girl's ring shone, a gimlet-eyed wink.

I frowned. Something snagged at me; I couldn't put my finger on it.

I went to work, unpacking the wooden box of brushes and palettes and little bottles that I'd come to think of as mine, unrolling the bundle of scalpels, each in their own fabric compartment, and washing my hands in the sink. On my way back, I grabbed the folders from the file cabinet, which contained all of the photographs, the documentation.

I sat down in front of the easel. When I was ready to begin, I took a deep breath. Directly in front of me, at eye level, the fill had dried in crumbly, plaster-like streaks that needed to be smoothed away by scalpel, then carefully sculpted and molded to mimic the exact texture of the canvas. If done well, the painting's cohesion, its sense of a flowing symmetry, would be restored.

But as I raised my scalpel close to the canvas, that strange, disorienting feeling came back. Like walking into a room in your house and finding all the furniture slightly askew.

Then, it clicked.

It was the fill by the girl's hand. Leaning in so close my nose nearly touched the canvas, I saw that what had once been, before break, a quarter-size section of fill in the space between her index and ring finger was smooth, nearly indistinguishable from the rough linen canvas. If I hadn't known it was there before, I never would've noticed with my naked eye.

I tapped the blade of my scalpel to the gesso. It was dry. *Fully* dry, twenty-four-hour dry. Not to mention that it was molded to perfection; work that no undergraduate could've done on their own.

If I'd remembered correctly—if there *had* been a second fill—then it had to have been smoothed away sometime over break. But hadn't Wyman just gotten back from New York yesterday?

And hadn't Wyman told me, over and over, that he trusted me, and only me, to work on the painting?

There was a ringing in my ears, loud and shrill and persistent. It got louder and louder as I pulled the photographs, tossing them on the ground, so many in quick succession that they formed a cruel radius around me, blanketing the floor. We'd taken photos. Before break, I *knew* we'd taken photos. Photos of the work we'd done, photos of the fills—fills, *plural*; fills, two of them—visible in raking light. Photos that would tell me with chilling, cruel simplicity whether I was right—or wrong.

But the photograph in raking light we took last time wasn't there. It was missing.

He hadn't been in New York, I knew then. The realization sank in, bloomed. Over break Wyman had been here, working on the painting with this other girl.



In the dark, the house was pulsing with light, music. The white columns glowed red, nearly in sync with the EDM that thudded inside, the cacophony of kids pretending they were clubbing in Berlin. By the door, a Delta Omega in white boy band pants with glow sticks around his wrists was checking IDs but mostly hitting on the girls, who shivered in the cold in their lacy corsets. “Where’s *your* costume?” he said, sneering at my sweatshirt and paint-flecked jeans.

I pushed past him roughly. “Hey!” he yelled, indignant, as I slipped into the dark, throbbing house without even a single glance back. “Bitch,”

he muttered.

The first floor—Heaven—was unrecognizable: white string lights twinkled over white sheets billowing off the walls, expanding and contracting, like the belly of something alive. Everywhere I turned something glinted, catching the strobe lights: the glittery sheen of a girl's flushed cheek, the bubbles in a plastic flute. Drifting from the foyer to the living room, I assumed, like always, that I was just a ghost—alone and not drinking at a party on a Friday night. But when classmates glanced my way, their eyes stayed on me. The strange looks I got confirmed: I didn't look like a ghost, necessarily.

I looked like I'd stumbled out of the burning ruins of a car crash.

A couple was making out sloppily in the red hallway leading to the basement, and as I maneuvered around them, I felt a firm, familiar grip on my arm. Turning around, I bumped into Andy, a tinselled white halo quivering in the air as her pale-blue eyes pointedly looked me up and down. Callie, who was behind her, bit her lip. "You're *supposed* to dress up," Andy hissed, her face splotched in anger. "Why bother even showing up? Are you trying to make us look bad?"

I ignored Andy. "Callie," I said, addressing her directly. "I need to find Kayla. Where is she?"

Andy snapped her fingers in front of my face. "*Hello?* Are you not hearing me? Either you go back and change or I'll—"

"Write me up then," I snapped. Watching Andy's mouth flap open gave me a twinge of satisfaction, and spurred me on. "You know what?" A laugh escaped my throat, hysterical and helpless. "I quit." Then I turned back to Callie. "Where's Kayla?" I repeated.

Callie's eyes were wide and uncomprehending and, for a long moment, I thought she hadn't heard me. Then she flicked her head, nearly imperceptibly, down the hallway toward the basement.

The stairs tunneled down into deep red. I placed my hand on the wall, which was slippery with humidity; my fingertips absorbed the deep vibrations of the bass. At the bottom of the stairs, the heat hit me. The basement was a dark, gloomy jungle of a dance floor: faces, laughing and screaming and sweating—all grasping toward the light. A sharp elbow caught me in my back and I lurched forward, slamming against a wall of bodies that then closed in around me, like I was a bubble that had burst.

It didn't seem worth the risk—until you, Wyman had said.

Feeling the heat swirl against my cheek, I lifted my head up and screamed.

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Chapter 21

One summer when Kayla and I were still kids, we came across a fallen nest of caterpillars in the woods. It had rained hard earlier that day, and I remembered standing under the dripping canopy of leaves, watching sunlight converge on a writhing mass of furry bodies in the damp dirt. It turned my stomach, but I couldn't look away, entranced as I was by how many of them there were, the way they crept millimeter by millimeter in a single clump, all thrashing to the same soundless song. "Look at them," Kayla said, repulsed, and I heard the excitement in her voice, too, hitching it up an octave. "Look at the one on the end that's falling behind. The others are like, *Damn it, Billy! Get back up here and walk!*"

I remembered bursting out in a grin, surprise slashing at me, as it did back in those early days of our friendship, that somebody as pretty as Kayla could be funny as hell too. I remembered racking my brains, thinking about all the facts I knew about caterpillars, facts I still remembered from my dog-eared *National Geographic* field guide—if I couldn't be pretty or funny like Kayla, at least I could be knowledgeable. Caterpillars traveled in an army. Caterpillars moved faster together than they could individually. Caterpillars had twelve eyes . . .

Soundlessly, Kayla raised a rock and brought it crashing down.

It hit the caterpillars with a gentle thud, and when she lifted it up again, the underside was dark; on the ground green and yellow oozed out of the smoking ruins of bodies, their little pincers still scrabbling furiously. I think they *knew*, because in my memory they writhed as a mass faster, more desperately—like deer sprinting from the crack of a gunshot. Soundlessly, too, I followed Kayla's lead and there was a rock in my hand and, when I brought it down—a soft thud, twigs snapping under my bent knees in the dirt—little white spots bloomed in my vision as I watched two halves wriggle helplessly, the smear of entrails an iridescent sheen in the sun. We brought our rocks down over and over, playing God, and what I remember most of all was the deep silence of the woods, rustling leaves and birdsong and our labored, ragged breathing; the way we didn't speak at all—not a peep—as we went about our work so methodically, as if our lives depended on killing every single one of those caterpillars, one by one.

Kayla. Bodies shifted in front of me and then—there she was. The back of her head, the particular shape of it, backlit in red. As if sensing my gaze, Kayla looked over her shoulder. Our eyes met. She appraised me; the long, simmering look of a friend who *just knew* your land mines, all of your weaknesses, how you looked at yourself in the mirror. The soft dark places hidden inside you.



“Here.” Kayla shoved her drink in my hand—vodka. I drank so quickly shards of ice tipped back on my nose. Kayla looked at me and something in my face confirmed it. “So you know,” she said crisply.

I lowered the red Solo cup, staring at her. “How do *you* know?”

“That he was a creep?” Kayla’s laugh was harsh but not unkind. “Dude, for somebody as smart as you, you can be so naive sometimes.” Then, she sighed. “I saw the comment.” After a pause when I said nothing, she asked, “You have no clue who she is, huh?”

I shook my head. Dizzy, nauseated, I looked down at my hands. My fingers were still caked in smears of half-dried gesso; I hadn’t cleaned them off since leaving the Observatory. Under the red strobe lights they glowed brilliantly, slick and crimson. Like bloodstains.

“And you believe them?”

Slowly, I nodded.

“Good,” Kayla said. “At least you weren’t, like, a senator’s wife. Tweeting #BelieveWomen up until the day it’s her man getting accused. Then, all of a sudden, they’re like, *I know him, he wouldn’t do that.*”

I said nothing about all the excuses I’d made, all the lies and justifications I’d scaffolded so carefully, one on top of the other, a house of cards. Just last night I’d stared deeply into Wyman’s eyes and whispered to myself, *What’s one anonymous comment?*

“I’ve got a plan,” Kayla said. “This is an opportunity if we look at it that way.”

“We’re not posting about this,” I snapped. “Just this once, can you not try to monetize—”

“*If*,” Kayla continued as if in a trance, “we pull this off, we won’t have to make content. We wouldn’t have to work or take out loans. We could have a fresh start. Do anything we want.”

“What do you mean?” The bass continued to thump—louder and louder, like it was inside me. Kayla’s eyes gleamed. For the first time I noticed her angel wings: the fine wire meshing, the sequins. Some of the feathers were already missing. She smiled.

“You’ve got him, Faith. You could file a complaint against him tomorrow. You’ve got the emails, the texts—you’ve got his *car*, for fuck’s sake.”

A long, confused pause ensued. “But I don’t want to go to the school,” I said.

“You won’t have to.”

Kayla waited. “Why not?” she demanded at the same time I exhaled sharply. “Jesus, Kayla.”

“This isn’t a movie,” I hissed. “Blackmail isn’t just something you casually do.” And yet, even as I said the word—*blackmail*—it felt more real, slipping by way of osmosis—a glint in Kayla’s eyes, the corresponding twitch of my eyelid—into the realm of possibility, of action.

“Why not?” Kayla asked. Her voice was soft, deadly. “We’ve been clawing and scratching our whole lives. For what? Student loans you’ll spend the rest of your life paying off? A couple of brand deals while I’m still young and pretty? That’s all we can hope for if we follow the rules. Meanwhile, there’s guys like Wyman, with his millions and his art and his fake feminist credentials.” She laughed. “Sleeping with his students and not even being particularly subtle about it. Or careful,” she added, meaningfully. She shot me a dark, knowing look. “You weren’t using protection, right?”

Fuck. I hadn’t even thought about that. “Just the pill,” I replied, shaky, numb.

“And you’re telling me,” Kayla said slowly, with that strange, glittering look I knew so well, “that you don’t want to put the screws on the guy?”



Kayla made it sound so easy. All we had to do was go over there, confront him about the others (“Keep it vague,” Kayla said. “Make him think there’s more we know about”), then make our demand—\$100,000 or I’d go to the Title IX officer on Monday. When Kayla said the number for the first time,

I thought I'd cracked up; where we were from, there were only two ways to make \$100,000: drugs or scratch-offs. I thought of Randy, all those midnight shifts at McDonald's, over a lifetime, that wouldn't even add up to a fraction of that number. I thought of my mother. And as life-changing of an amount as it was for people like us, I also knew that \$100,000 was *nothing*, nothing at all to a man like Wyman. A Rothko hung in his dining room. A Cindy Sherman and a de Kooning in his living room. A Frankenthaler in the library, and he'd dismissed it, saying it "wasn't her best."

This was the moment, before all the other moments: featherlight and gauzy, fluttering *just* within my fingertips. Even then, I was dimly aware of the turn around the bend my mind was already taking, connections snapping and neurons firing away. Ticking off all those priceless artworks in Wyman's house, like rosary beads absolving us of guilt.

"Isn't blackmail wrong?" I protested, weakly. We'd found more vodka upstairs in one of the rooms and were taking turns drinking straight from the bottle in a room off the hallway, empty and piled up with jackets. I took a long swallow. It seemed like just yesterday we were nicking sweaters from the lost and found.

"What if he goes to the police?" I asked.

"And says what, exactly?" Kayla retorted. "He'd have to admit to sleeping with you." She gave me a reproaching look. "That's, like, the whole point of blackmail. If he could go to the police, it wouldn't be blackmail." She laughed, shaking her head. "That would be extortion?"

"Well, excuse me if I don't know the finer distinctions between blackmail and extortion." My words were sticking together now. "They don't exactly teach that in Economics."

Kayla snorted, grabbed the bottle from me. "They don't teach you a lot of things at your school."

"But it's still wrong," I pressed. "And illegal."

Kayla turned to me, her eyes hard and blazing. "Think of all the shitty men in the world who make women sign NDAs just to keep them quiet. *They're* legal, aren't they? But when it's the woman asking for money in exchange for their silence, all of a sudden it's blackmail. How's that fair?"

Up until that night, I'd always scoffed at Kayla's grand, sweeping statements: *Men fall for hard to get, college is a scam*. They'd always seemed to be, if not conspiracy theories, then occupying the same liminal

space as them, a strange alchemy of youth, intuition, and corrosive confidence.

And yet, as I turned over Kayla's reasoning, it was there: the thin, flashing blade of truth.

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Chapter 22

We left Delta Omega around midnight, slipping out the back door of the basement. It was a clear, chilly night with a bright moon. As soon as the door slammed behind us with a resounding crack, the music and voices fell away, and all I could hear were the cries of the crickets. Ahead of me, Kayla was walking with long, purposeful strides, her angel wings lopsided and bits of confetti clinging to her shoulders. Something about the way she walked reminded me of when we'd gone to the well all those summers ago. Now that I was once again following Kayla into a dark wood, doubts began to creep in. What if Wyman wasn't home alone? What if he *did* call the police? What if—the thought chilled me—he got violent?

The driveway in front of the house was lined with cars, including one asshole who'd parked his red BMW practically in the middle of the street. My eye snagged on the license plate: *FRTDADY*.

When we walked by, the car suddenly turned on, headlights hitting us. In the blinding brightness I heard the window rolling down, the smash of glass against the pavement. A man's voice mumbled something indistinct. "What the—" I started to say; then I felt Kayla's fingers tighten around my wrist.

The door opened and Henry stumbled out, his eyes glassy and wild as he staggered toward Kayla. A sneer twisted his face. "Hey, *Kayla*," he said in singsong, the veneer of civility only making his intentions more terrifying. "You're a hard one to track down, aren't you?"

Kayla stepped up to him, so close she could've smelled the SoCo on his breath. "You shouldn't stalk girls," she said sweetly, baring her teeth. "No means no."

Henry's face turned a mottled red. "You know what you are?" Alarming, he was looming over Kayla, inching even closer to her and his hands were balled into fists at his sides. "You're just white trash," he spat out. "You know how *obvious* it is to everyone—"

Swiftly, Kayla kicked him hard in the groin.

"You bitch," Henry yelled, collapsing to the ground.

"Run, *Faith*, run!" Kayla screamed, and we were running down sorority row, our arms windmilling in the air, not daring to look behind us,

Kayla's laugh echoing in the darkness.

Looking back on that night, Henry should've been an omen, a sign. It should've shaken us up a little, made us think twice, like a fender bender on the way to the airport might plant a seed of apprehension, that whisper of fate telling you to not get on the plane. But skirting by Henry—inelegant as it was with a stiletto-heel kick to the balls—had the exact opposite effect. It emboldened us, made us feel invincible. It made me feel that we had set into motion something that couldn't be stopped, and so we had no choice but to keep going, keep running, across the empty quad and past dark campus buildings, down the familiar sidewalk going toward Smith; and then, just like that, we were in the parking lot, our fingers feeling inside the exhaust pipe, that strange mixture of relief mixed with terror when we pulled out the keys, when we were getting into the Prius ("Some getaway car," Kayla snorted from the passenger seat), and when I started the engine, hands shaking on the steering wheel, and then when we were on our way, the roads dark and empty on a Friday night after midnight, nothing but the radio crackling in and out of range as we got onto the highway, and then all I could hear was Kayla's voice, a ringing bell in the hush stillness, saying over and over "*He's going to pay. He's going to pay. He's going to pay*" as we drove up that long driveway and the house floated into view.



The house was dark, the woods around it even darker. When I cut the engine, there was nothing but the whispery stir of leaves. Under the moonlight the glass and metal edges of the house looked softer, more diffuse, like in a dream. For a few moments Kayla and I sat in the car, parked down the driveway. *He went to bed early*, I thought, relieved.

But then, somewhere deep in the back of the house, a light flickered on.

"You do the talking," Kayla said. She took a long, hard look at me. "Practice. Right now. What're you going to say?"

None of this felt real. "Give us the money," I said automatically, almost dully. "Or I'll go to the school."

Kayla pursed her lips. "Okay. Let's workshop that."

She leaned over and turned the engine off. "Speak slowly and deliberately. And be specific. Like this." Kayla modulated her voice,

deepening it, but it was more than her voice, really; it was the fire of her conviction. “Give us one hundred thousand dollars in cash, or we’ll file a complaint on Monday.

“Better yet,” she added, “make it sound like you’ve got the complaint typed up already. All you have to do is hit send.”

“Be confident,” I said. “Got it.” Hysteria skirted the edges of my voice, the irony not lost on me: For the first time in our lives, I was the face of *this*, whatever this was—and Kayla was the ghostwriter.

“I’m your roommate, right? So tell him I’ll corroborate you. If that doesn’t make him shit his pants, I don’t know what will.”

Blood was thrumming in my ears, loud and persistent. I clamped my hands over my ears, slumped my forehead against the steering wheel. “I feel sick,” I moaned. “Let’s just forget—”

Abruptly, Kayla opened the door and shot out, the door catching the metallic wiring in Kayla’s angel wings before it slammed shut, sealing me in the car. Flinging my door open, I called out after her. “Kayla,” I hissed, my voice low and urgent. “Kayla, *wait*.”

Kayla looked back toward me. For a moment I thought she was going to say, *Forget it. Let’s just go*. Already, I pictured driving back, sharing hits of Kayla’s vape to take the edge off, maybe stopping at a Waffle House along the way, the realization hitting by the time the pancakes arrived—*holy shit, we were this close*—and we’d look at each other, let out shaky laughs.

But that didn’t happen.

Kayla turned around, the heels in her fake Jimmy Choos digging into the gravel, and walked back to my side of the car. She shrugged off her angel wings and plucked the halo from her head, tossing them in the passenger seat.

“Okay,” she said, too brightly. “Let’s go.”



Wyman opened the door. Surprise flashed across his face when he saw us, but it was like a stone dropping in water: a few ripples and then not a trace. “Faith.” He smiled widely. “I wasn’t expecting you tonight.” His eyes darted back and forth between Kayla and me. It occurred to me then how strange we must’ve looked: Kayla in a white sparkly dress, me in the jeans I

wore in the studio with a sweatshirt tied around my waist. “You must be Faith’s roommate,” Wyman said, without a hitch. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Can we come in?” I asked. I winced. Already, my voice was betraying me, too tentative. Leave it to me to ask permission to blackmail somebody.

“Of course,” Wyman said easily. As he opened the door wider, I noticed that he was barefoot, wearing jeans so faded they were almost gray and a slouchy navy sweater rolled up at the sleeves. We stepped inside, and I heard Kayla’s sharp intake of breath. She was seeing this up close for the first time, in person—the museum that was Wyman’s home. The vaulted ceiling, the sculpture of a reclining female nude on the teak entry table. Wyman followed Kayla’s gaze. “That’s one of my favorites,” he prompted. “Faith thinks it’s too—” He laughed. “What did you say it was, again?” When I said nothing immediately, he snapped his fingers. “You said it was *giving bachelor pad*.” He chuckled as we followed him through the living room and into the kitchen. On the table by the window there was a notepad lying open and a mug with the strings of a tea bag dangling out of it.

“Can I get you two anything?”

“No,” I said, at the same time Kayla said, “Wine.”

Wyman laughed. “I’m having a nightcap, myself.” He nodded toward his mug on the table. “I’m kind of famous for them, actually. Whiskey, orange bitters. Fernet to make it interesting. What do you say?”

Kayla and I exchanged a look. “Sure,” I said after a long, uncomfortable pause.

While Wyman opened and closed cabinets, pulling out a crystal decanter of whiskey, a tea tin, various tinctures in little stopper bottles, and an orange, Kayla and I took a seat at the table, across from Wyman’s notepad, which had some scribbles I could make out: *problem of female nude, terracotta—priestess of Isis?* Ideas for a new book, maybe. Finally I looked up and Kayla caught my eye. She jerked her head to say, *Now*.

“You took the Prius here?” Wyman called out. He was filling a copper teakettle with water. Suddenly I thought of the first time he’d made me *cacio e pepe* in the studio—I’d watched him fill a kettle with water then, too, while my heart was beating wildly. Under the table, I felt Kayla’s fingers digging into my knee. *Now*. But I couldn’t. I was frozen.

Wyman came over, wiping his hands on a dish towel. “It run okay? I was a little worried with all of the snow we’ve been getting.” He shook his head. “It snowed more here than in New York, can you believe that?” Picking up the kettle, he put it on the stovetop and I heard two little clicks, a flame sputtering to life. “Of course”—he opened a drawer—“nobody down here knows what to do when it sticks.” He pulled out a small paring knife and began slicing off the ends of the orange. The smell of citrus wafted over, sharp and cloying.

Wyman set down the knife. “By the way, Faith, what’s your—”

“We know about the others.”

It was Kayla who spoke. Clear eyes with her chin thrust up and her voice ringing out like a gong.

For a long, still moment, all I could hear was the hum of the refrigerator, the water starting to heat up in the kettle. “The others?” Wyman echoed, a furrow appearing between his brows. He turned then and opened a cabinet; my eyes fell on the knife lying on the cutting board. I thought of how vulnerable we were in this moment—the inherent trust we were still placing in Wyman just by going to his house.

Wyman took something out of the cabinet with both hands, his back toward us. My heart was beating faster and faster. Then he turned, and I saw that he was holding three mugs.

If Kayla had the same concerns as me, she didn’t show. “The other girls you’ve been sleeping with,” she said unflaggingly. “*Professor*.”

Wyman looked straight at me. “Faith, what’s going on here? What’s she talking about?”

Kayla leaned in, placing both palms down on the table. Her eyes were two brilliant cracks of light. “We can go to the Title IX officer on Monday. The complaint practically writes itself, doesn’t it? ‘Harassment.’ ‘Multiple victims.’ ‘Abuse of power.’”

Gently—I was struck by just how gentle he endeavored to be—Wyman eased the mugs down on the black marble counter with a cool *plink*. Three ceramic mugs lined up in a row. *Just like Cézanne’s Three Skulls*, I thought dully. He folded his arms, laughed incredulously. “Sweetheart, those are some big words.”

Finally, I said: “The girl’s right hand.” I wavered, but then I thought of that quarter-size fill, smoothed away as if by the hand of a ghost. That cool whisper of certainty, of knowingness that I’d heard in the studio. My voice

found its anchor. “You did it over break. With her. Then you took out the documentation. The raking light photograph. You didn’t think I’d notice.”

Wyman sat down at the table, pushing aside the notepad with the sweep of his arm, never taking his eyes off me. “Let me get this straight. You come to my house in the middle of the night, accusing me—of what, exactly? Some imagined fill you think you’re seeing? A missing photo? And even if—*if*—what you’re saying is true”—always, he had to play the professor—“can you really say you’re angry over some perverse notion of justice?” He laughed, a terrible laugh. “Or are you just jealous?”

Out of everything, it was *that*—that green-eyed word, so reductive and diminishing—that stung me most of all.

“Nothing matters except for the emotional truth of a painting, right?” I said quietly. A cold film of sweat slicked my palms. I forced myself to look Wyman straight in the eye, to not flinch. “We want one hundred thousand dollars in cash. Or we’ll file the complaint.”

The kettle whistled.

He got up and turned the kettle off. “I never knew you at all, did I?” he asked mildly, with a perverse sort of wonder, as if the Madonna in his favorite Caravaggio had gotten up and walked out of the frame.

Dazedly, confusion raking his face, he looked at the orange slices on the cutting board. “Fuck the drinks,” Wyman muttered to no one in particular. Then he grabbed the bottle of whiskey, poured it into one of the mugs, and drank it all at once. “Let me lay it out for you,” he said, refilling. “Nobody, and I mean nobody, has one hundred thousand dollars just lying around.” He snorted. “Christ, that’s not how you do it. There’s paperwork you’ve got to sign, NDAs . . .”

“What about this?” Kayla said. She pointed at a stormy little seascape hanging on the wall by the window; a Turner, by the looks of it. To my surprise, there was soft admiration in her eyes. A hunger. As if she wanted, just once, to own something that beautiful.

“Flipping *that* on the black market? Impossible.” Wyman laughed bitterly, shaking his head. “Look at me. Giving you advice on how to blackmail me.”

He finished his whiskey. “Don’t do this, Faith.” There was a shattered-glass quality to his voice. “Please.” Under the lamplight, the lines of his face were harsh, terrible. He glared at me, biting his lip, as if he was fighting back tears—or the overwhelming desire to hurt me, he didn’t know

which. "Please," he said again. My cheeks were wet. But all I could think about was this: He had never denied it. Not once.

"You have until Monday," I whispered.

Wyman's whole body crumpled. "End of the week," he said flatly. "Now get the fuck out of my house."

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Part III

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Chapter 23

For the rest of the week, Kayla and I waited.

In the split second on Monday before I opened my eyes, I felt calm, a brief respite. Then the dizzy vertiginous reality set in: We really did it. All the incandescent anger, the rage, I felt that night was replaced by a bone-deep exhaustion. Burying my head under the covers, lulled by the peaty warmth of my breath, I tried to fall back asleep. *One more hour*, I told myself. *Just one more hour and I'll be able to face it . . .*

Kayla yanked my blanket away. "Get up," she said firmly. "Go to class. You've got to act normal."

"What if I see him?" I said as I dressed quickly, mindlessly, under Kayla's watchful gaze. At the thought of running into Wyman on campus, my stomach lurched. I pictured Bugz interrupting Professor Sullivan mid-lecture, the both of them furiously whispering and pointing at me in the auditorium; a police officer escorting me off campus in handcuffs.

"If you run into him," Kayla said with more certainty than I felt, "that's good. It means he wants everything to go back to normal."

I stumbled through my classes in a daze. Classes, useless to me now, that I'd signed up for still believing I was interning at Weatherspoon's for the summer. Still believing in Wyman. One of them, Power and Gender in Art, was with Professor Hopper. It was a class where everybody seemed to know each other. We sat around a mahogany table on the fourth floor of McClellan, and even though I liked to think that I knew a little about art, I still felt like an impostor. I *was* an impostor now that Wyman was no longer my benefactor. In blackmailing Wyman, I'd switched out one type of currency for another.

That week reminded me of those early, painful weeks at Harkness. My world shrinking to a tight circumference: class, dining hall, dorm. On Tuesday, I got an email from Andy informing me that the Standards Committee would "like to convene a meeting to discuss erratic behavior at Alpha Rho events and suspected drug use." I couldn't help but laugh. Drug use, good lord. I deleted the email immediately.

Quickly, 403D began to resemble a war room: take-out containers piled high on my desk, our phones perpetually open and hot on our thighs

as we sat on our beds and refreshed Twitter, Google News. Since that night, Wyman had been silent on Twitter. NOMA had its annual gala for donors, but flipping through the Getty images on Google—millionaires in burgundy suits and wire-framed glasses, waifish artist-types in long African print dresses—there was no indication Wyman had gone. What this meant, I wasn't entirely sure. Whenever a phone buzzed, we jumped.

It was never my phone; it was always Kayla's. All week, Kayla's phone pinged nonstop. "Aren't you going to get that?" I asked Wednesday night after the fourth call went to voicemail.

"It's just Chelsey," Kayla shrugged. "They're freaking out that I haven't posted in, like, five days."

"Oh," I said a little guiltily. "Right." I hadn't thought about Hannah Primrose in days.

We were watching *Love Yacht* on my bed. Kayla hit pause. "Okay, we need to talk about this," she said. "What're we going to do with this money, dude?"

"Move to Bora Bora," I joked weakly. "Live in tiki huts on the beach."

"Why *can't* we do that?"

I stared at Kayla. A slow smile spread across her face. She straightened up and tucked her feet under her. "So I've been reading about Powerball winners, right? Everybody knows lottery winners go broke sooner or later. Know why?"

I was startled by how vividly Kayla reminded me of Wyman then. As different as they were—in education, in age, in the way they ordered their coffee or pronounced *school*—they both viewed showmanship as a form of survival. I shook my head.

"Because they just go back to their same old lives after they win."

I bit my lip, stared down at the still image on my laptop: the NFL cheerleader caught mid-laugh in that terrible, garish light of reality TV confessionals, her lipsticked mouth gaping wide open. I couldn't say I was too surprised. Maybe I'd known from the moment I locked eyes with Kayla across the basement that night. "What would we do if I dropped out?" I asked after a long pause.

"Why," Kayla said, "anything we wanted."

I smiled, raised a questioning eyebrow. "You're going to quit Instagram?"

“Nah,” Kayla said serenely with not an ounce of shame. “I like attention too much for that. But we’d post only when we feel like it, not because we needed to. Be one of those rich girls with morals.” She laughed. “Shop local. Buy organic.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “To keep doing Instagram . . .” I trailed off. “I don’t know if I have it in me anymore.”

Kayla squeezed my hand, then hit the space bar again on the laptop. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”



By Thursday, still nothing from Wyman.

Kayla was getting restless. “He hasn’t even asked for your wire info,” she pointed out, pacing our room back and forth. She bit her lip and stared at the wall above my desk as if it held answers. “Can he even send a wire over the weekend if the bank’s closed? Or do rich dudes bank differently?”

Lightly, I said, “Maybe he’ll give us a briefcase of cash like in the movies.”

Kayla stopped. She fixed me with an exacting look; I stared down at the floor. “How can you be so *chill*? You know what message this sends? This—”

“I know,” I said, cutting her off. My cheeks burned. “You don’t need to tell me. I know.”

With each passing day that we didn’t hear from Wyman, I felt more and more diminished. This was no Hollywood feminist revenge thriller, and we were not the vigilantes we had thought ourselves to be just a few days ago, drunkenly scheming in a dark basement. No, we were just two clever girls waving our toy swords. Hoping for—someone, *anyone*—to take our pain seriously.

Wyman’s silence felt like a sharp rebuke.

As if sensing my stinging disappointment, Kayla rallied. “Isn’t that club thing tonight?” she asked, looking out the darkening window.

“Yeah. So?”

“One of us should scope it out. See if he’s even on campus. I’ll go. I can just wait outside, see if I see him walking in or out.”

This seemed like a bad idea. But I had nothing better in mind, and I suddenly wanted to be left alone: This—if nothing else—would give Kayla

something to do. “Fine,” I said slowly. “But just be . . . stealthy.”

“Oh, so stealthy.”

I cast a bemused look at Kayla, who was wearing crochet leggings and a matching crochet top that showed the faint outline of her nipples. “I guess it’s better than showing up in angel wings.”

“I’ll put a jacket on,” Kayla muttered, digging in the pile of clothes on her bed.

Then she was gone, the door slamming behind her.

Alone now, I climbed into bed and mindlessly scrolled down Hannah’s profile, reading the new comments. Our posts now seemed silly, childish, filled with false bravado. I wanted to wipe away my fingerprints from them.

As I scrolled, something snagged at me then—as light as a cobweb, as quick as a shadow.

It was the numbers. The numbers were off.

At 250,000+ followers, Hannah’s engagement rate for the last few posts was oddly mixed. Plenty of likes, averaging out to roughly 13,000 per post; this was normal, pretty good even. But each post netted only a couple dozen comments, all overwhelmingly and blandly positive. I’d been less than engaged since New Year’s, and Kayla had been surprisingly tolerant, recycling back-up photos and posts. But even so.

Where were the Lana Del Rey girlies? The e-girls sharing their stories about how they just find older guys attractive? The gray profiles telling Hannah to get help for her daddy issues?

Maybe Infinitive was deleting the comments. But why?

On a whim, I Googled *Hannah Primrose*, and it popped up: a Reddit thread on r/InfluencerTea, a snark forum. The thread was titled *What’s going on with Hannah Primrose?*

There were 102 comments.

Anyone else think that snail-mask ad was super tacky? read a comment posted three weeks ago by [deleted]. **Like, Hannah tries *so* hard to be countercultural then she turns around and monetizes the shit out of her so-called super personal diary. Feels so fake tbh.** This was upvoted twelve times.

Yea I used to be a fan and I’m sorry to say that I have to agree with you, replied bunnybun0123. **She kinda put herself in a corner. She got followers because she was willing to talk about the mess but there’s**

something icky about trying to monetize off that. I think she knows and that's why she's been deleting so many comments lately.

Hannah's just attention-seeking wh0re, wrote mmyqz.

The door slammed. Snapping my laptop shut, I looked up and saw Kayla come back into the room, her green eyes flashing with excitement and a bloom of color on her cheeks. "Oh my God." Kayla stomped her boots on the mat, bringing in the smell of cold air and smoke. "There was a substitute there," Kayla announced. "Some woman with frizzy hair."

Professor Hopper. "Oh, wow," I managed to say. For a wild second I just stared at Kayla. If she knew about the growing backlash against Hannah Primrose, she was playing it cool—*too* cool. Up until we signed with Infinitive, Kayla was never detail oriented—that was my job—but still, she cared deeply. She talked late into the night about ideas for new content. She responded to every DM, every comment. But something had shifted these past few weeks. Kayla barely talked about Hannah these days. She had calls with Brian and Chelsey, but I never quite understood what they talked about, and I was never asked to join. I had been so caught up with Wyman—with @Harkness356798—the strangeness of Kayla's behavior had skirted by without notice.

What wasn't Kayla telling me?

Kayla tossed her jacket on the bed. "I'm starving," she said, fanning a paper in front of me; I blinked and saw it was a Chinese take-out menu. "Want to try this place?"

"Want me to call?" Trying to act normal, I took the menu and flipped through its pages with a deliberate look: *Lo Mein, Veggie Delite*. My fingers shook slightly.

"Get egg rolls. I'm going to shower."



As soon as the *click-clack* sound of Kayla's flip-flops disappeared down the hallway, I rummaged through the pockets of her jacket and pulled out her phone. The screen lit up with notifications. I quickly navigated to Kayla's email inbox. She had ninety-nine unopened emails, most of them junk—25 percent off from Urban Outfitters, Quora-suggested stories (*How do you*

blackmail someone?)—but there was an email last Tuesday from Brian Marquez with the subject titled **Re: Re: Re: New Sign HP STRAT.**

It was part of a longer thread dating back to January 3, a few days after we got back from New Orleans. The earlier emails from Brian to Kayla, and Kayla to Brian, were unabashedly enthusiastic, buzzy with slick jargon like *affiliate conversion* and *brand guidelines*; you'd think that Hannah Primrose was a Series A tech start-up that had just raised its initial round of funding. But over the last few weeks, Brian's emails became more pointed, impatient. **We've plateaued in growth, Brian wrote, and as previously discussed I think HP's current perspective is hard-sell for brands who need to maintain a squeaky-clean image.** All Kayla wrote back was: **I'm working on it.** A few days later, Chelsey confirmed: **We scrubbed ~85 comments off HP. Slightly up from last post.** Brian replied: **Great, thanks C. Kayla, we absolutely need a new strat here.**

After more than a week passed, Kayla wrote back last Friday: **Just give me until the end of next week. I'm thinking a change of scene. What about Hannah Primrose drops out of the Ivy League and moves to LA?**

I stared at Kayla's email, reading and rereading it until the words became meaningless, syllables that echoed somewhere far, far away.

I checked the time stamp: 02:11 p.m. Six hours before the Heaven and Hell party. Giving Kayla the benefit of the doubt, she could've just floated the idea of "Hannah" dropping out of the Ivy League and moving to LA to get Infinitive off her back. Was it just a coincidence that yesterday we'd decided to do the very thing that Kayla wrote in this email?

We'd post only when we feel like it, not because we needed to. But the Kayla in this email sounded focused, determined. She didn't sound like she wanted to retire to a beach hut in Bora Bora.

Her phone buzzed again. Somebody named *Do not answer* in Kayla's phone book was calling; when the call went to voicemail, *Do not answer* called again. After a few seconds, a text: **Don't fuck with me, Kayla. Meet me tonight. I know you're not a student.**

Chapter 24

“Honey, you want anything?” the pink-haired bartender asked with no trace of recognition on her face. Not long ago I was here with Kayla, taking shots on the house. This happened all the time; people seeing me only when I was with Kayla, like I was a sketch, a bunch of stray lines drawn in charcoal, and Kayla’s dazzling brilliance filled the rest in.

But ghost that I was, it did make some things easier.

“Purple Haze,” I said. When she placed the foaming pint down in front of me, I left two fives and carried my drink to a table steeped in the neon shadows of the video poker machines, where I could keep my eye on the door.

I didn’t have to wait long. A few sips in, the door creaked open. Then it slowly closed behind Henry.

Henry was hunched over in a black windbreaker and his backward John Deere hat, his fists balled up in his pockets. For a second he just stood there, scanning the half-empty bar. When our eyes locked, a strange, incredulous look passed over his face.

“Un-*fucking*-believable,” he said, taking the seat across from me. “She sent you?” He picked up my napkin, shredding the edges of it. “Nobody does their own dirty work,” he muttered enigmatically under his breath. He narrowed his eyes at me. “So you’ve been in on this too—” But I raised my hands to cut him off.

“Kayla doesn’t know I’m here.” I kept my voice as low and calm as possible. “And you should order something.”

Henry stared at me. He took off his baseball cap, ran his fingers through his sandy hair, and looked around. “This place is a dump.”

“Beer’s beer, isn’t it?” I said with a touch of impatience. “Order something. Otherwise you look like the frat boy who shows up at the townie bar and doesn’t even drink.”

Henry scratched his lightly stubbled jaw, riddled here and there with acne. Up close, he looked even worse than when we clashed last Friday. His eyes were red, making him look perpetually stoned. His cheekbones were gaunt, like he’d lost weight. Even his tanned skin had a brittle, fragile quality to it, like dry leaves tumbling on a sidewalk. He sighed loudly.

Pulling away from the table, his chair legs scraped the floor. A few minutes later, he came back with a whiskey and Coke.

“So that was you who texted me to meet here?” Henry demanded as soon as he sat back down. “I could’ve sworn it was Kayla. You sounded just like her.”

“Yeah. I saw your text and this was the first thing I thought of.” Affecting Kayla’s manic, slightly breathless texting style—like she was always just getting to your text—I had replied to Henry as soon as he texted: **skeeters by train tracks tnite@11**. Then I deleted the texts and waited until Kayla passed out—lo mein always made her sleepy—before I slipped out of Smith.

“What’s this to you anyways?” Henry asked suspiciously.

“You said she was messing with you,” I replied. Leaning forward, I said quietly: “Let’s just say you might not be the only one.”

For the first time, Henry seemed to truly see me, like I was a windup toy that had suddenly come alive.

“She’s a psychopath.” Henry spat out the word with venom. He tried to take a sip of his drink, but his fingers were trembling so violently ice tipped out of the glass. “I gave her my number, right?” I nodded. “In the beginning, she’s texting me all the time, saying she wants to meet up. But every time I try to hang out with her, she strings me along. Basically, for weeks, we make plans and she ghosts me the day of, then sends me, like, a multiple-paragraph text with all these elaborate excuses. It didn’t make any sense. Like, why go to *this* much trouble stringing a guy along?”

He took another shaky sip. “Finally, she tells me one night that she’s ‘heard things about me.’” Henry used air quotes.

I played dumb. “What things?” I asked.

Henry’s face was impassive. “Do you want to hear this story or not?” When I didn’t say anything, he continued. “I should’ve just blocked her then.” He shook his head, slight amazement in his voice. “Mae Hawkins, she called me saying she wanted to hang in New Orleans. So I met up with her.”

I made a reservation at this jazz club off Frenchmen. That was what Kayla told me in our room that morning. Somewhere noisy and dark and anonymous; where they couldn’t be overheard. When Henry got there, Kayla was sitting, alone, at a small round table by the wall, hidden in the shadows. *This is a tourist trap*, he said, sitting down, but the band had

begun playing; it was too loud for him to hear her. It was dark, too, but after a watery cocktail Henry began to make out something strange, familiar, about Kayla's outfit, the shiny fabric catching the light every time she crossed her legs.

Let's go back to Delta Omega, he said between sets. *Sounds good*. Kayla giggled; she'd been flirting with him all night. Now her fingers were tiptoeing across his arm, down his hand. Looking, in that dark, smoky club, like they were just any other young couple on a Friday night. *Can't believe you still haven't noticed*, she murmured in Henry's ear, dipping her face down. *Notice what?* Henry asked.

I wore this just for you.

Yanking Henry's hand up the length of her thigh, Kayla grinned. *Callie let me borrow it*. His fingers recoiled at the shiny slick fabric, the familiar slide. He leaped back in horror. And then, all of a sudden, a dark figure got up from the table in front of them, walking toward them. Callie sat down at their table, her eyes glittering, hard. *Remember how hard it was to take off when I was unconscious?*

Of course, I never knew, exactly, how it all went down; if Kayla and Callie got points for style, Henry glossed over the details. "Cunts," he spat out, his face turning mottled red, "trying to shake me down. Kayla told me that if I didn't give them twenty-five thousand dollars by the end of the week, they'd go to the Title IX officer."

Something crumpled inside Henry. Abruptly, he raked his trembling hands over his face. "Fucked up, you know?" he said, muffled. His fingers left white crescents. He brushed away tears with the back of his hand—impatiently, angrily. Then he regained his composure. "You know what that bitch wrote on my Instagram? *Rapist*, that's what she wrote. Didn't even have the balls to put her real name."

"Why not call their bluff then?" I said. "Sounds like they didn't have much on you, except Callie's word against yours. If it was me, I'd take my chances with the Title IX investigation."

Henry shot me a disgusted look. "Are you kidding? You're screwed once the school gets involved. Regardless of whether the accusation is bullshit or not." Strangely, the look Henry gave me reminded me of Kayla that night I told her to stay away from him. *Bitch, do you see Callie going to the school or the police?*

“I almost rolled,” Henry continued. “I just wanted Kayla to leave me alone, so I got a cashier’s check at CVS. Tried to drop it off in her mailbox, but I couldn’t find it. That’s when I knew something was up. I mean, I always thought there was something off about her. I could never put my finger on it.”

He smirked. “So last week I called the Student Registrar, pretending to be a recruiter doing a background check. And guess what? There’s no record of a Kayla Lightfoot ever enrolling at Harkness.”

“Are you going to tell anyone?” Too late I realized my mistake.

Henry flushed, pleased and triumphant. “So, you knew. You know this could get you kicked out, right? But no, I don’t plan to tell anyone as long as she leaves me the fuck alone. Mutually assured destruction.”

Before I left, I asked Henry to show me everything: the texts, the threatening messages on his Instagram. He obliged, almost cheerfully, and already I sensed that, one day soon, this would be nothing but a blip in the rearview mirror, a *crazy story* about *this crazy psycho* that he’d trot out in the locker room, at the fraternity house, at drinks closing a deal. The texts were exactly as Henry had described: Kayla stringing him along all November only to ghost him as soon as Henry tried in earnest to meet; suddenly I remembered that day in the library, Callie and Kayla whispering, thick as thieves, in the Stacks. After Mae Hawkins Day, Kayla kept the pressure on Henry; every couple of days, a scattershot of texts threatening to go to the school. On December 18, Henry sent a screenshot of the comments on his Instagram and texted: **FUCK U U FKIN PSYCHO CUNT BITCH IF U DON’T FUCK OFF I WILL DESTROY YOU.** To which Kayla—I had to give her credit—said: **Looks like you got my msg. Pay up bitch.**

But then, after the New Year, it was like Kayla had forgotten all about Henry. She stopped texting him; he tried to meet up with her at Heaven and Hell—**you’re gonna wanna hear what I know about you**—but she didn’t even bother to respond.

Why, Kayla? I thought, reading the texts with sudden, chilling dread. *Why drop it now?*

Unless.

Unless Kayla found something brighter, more shiny. Bigger payout. Better leverage.

Unless this—whatever this was—with Henry was just a test run—stray, tentative marks, the pentimento of a bold, new style.

I clicked on Henry's screenshot. I reread that ugly word—all caps, a tidy row of them, one after the other—then I saw that gray profile with 0 followers and 1 following. Finally, I understood.

RAPIST, commented @Harkness356798.

Kayla was @Harkness356798.

With sickening clarity, the past few weeks took on a different shape. The mark wasn't Henry anymore, or even Wyman—the mark was *me*.



In the dead of night, Smith was dark, gently stirring. Floorboards creaked and radiators hissed; the bones of the old building settling in for the night. Only the light in 403D was on, the crack of a thin horizon under the door.

Inside our room, Kayla was still passed out with the lights on. For a few minutes I just stood there, watching Kayla toss and turn. “Faith?” she mumbled half asleep, followed by something inaudible. Shock and horror ate away at me as I stared down at Kayla, a curl of red hair falling angelically across her face. *What did you do, Kayla?*

I turned off the lights and went to bed. But there was no possibility of sleep. For hours I stared at the ceiling and listened to Kayla's long, deep breaths.

The inklings of a plan began to take shape, slowly.

Chapter 25

Wyman picked up on my fifth call. At first, I heard the echoing clink of glasses—he was in a café, maybe, or a bar—followed by just the sound of Wyman’s ragged, labored breathing.

“Hi,” I said after a long, excruciating pause.

I thought Wyman was going to hang up on me—the silence got stranger, more piercing—but after a beat or two he exhaled, chuckled darkly almost to himself. “My Gen Z blackmailer,” he said heavily. “Hello.”

“Are you at a bar?” I asked. It was two o’clock in the afternoon on a Friday. Wyman was supposed to be in a class. Technically, I was supposed to be working at FoCo, but I’d skipped so many shifts by now, I doubted I still had a job.

“The disgraced department chair drowning his sorrows in some dive.” He was slurring his words slightly. “Didn’t I tell you I was okay with clichés?”

“Listen,” I said, “I need to talk to you. Alone.”

“I called your goddamn bluff,” Wyman said wildly. “It’s Friday, isn’t it?”

He had no reason to trust me, to even hear me out. And yet he hadn’t hung up.

Grasping at the last straws of hope, I said: “Pull yourself together, Professor. Remember what Picasso taught Gilot? If all the elements of a composition are too perfect, then one solution is to cut out the skull and move it around until the truth of the painting reveals itself. Well, I’ve been moving around the skull.”

“Enough of the art talk. What’re you saying?”

A lump formed in my throat. “I’m saying that I love you, Chuck.”



Horse & Hound was the “grown-up” bar in the main stretch of Franklin, sedate and vaguely Irish, tucked away in an annex of The Inn, a two-story white colonial that filled up with parents in May for graduation and was

empty for the rest of the year. Wood wainscoting gleamed in the dark cavernous space; tables were nestled in book-lined alcoves under framed historic photos of Harkness: the Green on a summer day in 1932; the president of Harkness shaking hands with JFK.

We had fumbling, desperate, aching sex in the bathroom; the little gold chain rattling in the latch as Wyman pushed me against the door, his kiss hot and greedy under my earlobe. “I’m sorry,” I kept on whispering over and over, *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry*, our breaths raggedy, rising and falling together; “God, I love you so much,” Wyman groaned, and his tenderness repulsed me, even as our bodies tipped from violence into something slower, more intentional, Wyman getting down on his knees and yanking down my tights and burying his face between my thighs; but when I closed my eyes, when I was on the brink, I saw the bright flash of Kayla’s face: her pretty features, her careless cruel smirk.

“Fuck,” Wyman said, slumped and panting over the sink after. “Fuck.” Dressing quickly, we laughed a little sheepishly to ourselves: *Did we really just do that?*

Then a bulky envelope fell out of the inner pocket of Wyman’s jacket and onto the tile floor. Banded stacks of \$100 bills peeked out, so crisp and green they looked like Monopoly money. I stared. I’d never seen so much cash in my life.

I looked back at Wyman. “What happened to calling our bluff?”

“Calling your bluff was *my* bluff,” Wyman replied. He’d sobered up a little, his eyes bright and glassy. “Besides, it isn’t the full one hundred thousand dollars. It’s only fifty grand.” He shrugged. “My lawyer told me to negotiate.”

I thought quickly. A cool fifty grand, just lying on the bathroom floor, moved up my timeline. *Kayla can be gone by tonight*. Fifty grand, after all, was still a lot of money. Not Bora Bora money but still life-changing. First, last, and security in a city, a couple of years of buffer if she was careful. *But when has Kayla been careful?* I pushed away that voice. She wasn’t my problem anymore.

I wanted Kayla gone.

If Kayla wanted a payout—if she was willing to lie and manipulate—to throw away our friendship—then I’d give it to her. But only if she left Harkness tonight.

I spoke slowly, carefully: “Would you be willing to give up that money for me?”

Wyman kissed me on the forehead. “I’d give up all the Picassos in the world for you.”



At his house, Wyman made spaghetti alle vongole. While he cooked, I sat at the counter, drinking a glass of red wine from a bottle I’d asked him to open; just a few months ago, I would’ve died of embarrassment at that trademark lift of Wyman’s brows. Red *with seafood*? Now I didn’t care.

As Wyman cooked—soaking the little clams, shaking loose grainy bits of sand clouding the bowl of water; swirling the pan with garlic the color of toast—he spoke expansively, gesturing with a pair of tongs: summer in New York, a quick research trip to Ghent. Our future bubbling over with possibility, like those clams opening up, one by one, in the pan. I pictured myself in a few years, graduating from Harkness, the rest of my life stretching ahead of me: Wyman’s brownstone in New York, a job at a gallery or the curatorial department of the Met, reading *The New Yorker* in bed on Sunday mornings. My accent carefully ironed out, like a starched shirt. Kayla blocked on my phone.

Around seven—the time when I usually got back to the dorm from my shift—Kayla started texting me.

07:12: **when are you coming back??**

07:43: **did smthg happen??? did you go see him?????**

07:45: **don’t get dick-hypnotized u dumb bitch**

07:45: **jk 😊**

08:01: **seriously where the fuck are you**

Finally, after we ate our pasta at the counter and I had polished off another glass of wine, I texted Kayla back—typing, deleting, then retyping again. The tone had to be *just* right: buoyant, a little incredulous, like I was gobsmacked by the brilliance of Kayla’s plan. A certain quaver in my voice.

Omg dude . . . I had to go to his house to get it. Can you pick me up?



From the driveway, I watched the pair of headlights bounce up and down in the dark, winding their way up the hill.

Scraps of music floated out of the rolled-down window, electronic music sounding and trappy. Rihanna’s “Bitch Better Have My Money,” if I had to guess, or City Girls—the perfect soundtrack to the story of two best friends blackmailing a man for money. I caught a glimpse of her through the windshield. Heart-shaped sunglasses perched on her head like a headband, her Shania Twain T-shirt. Always I had to admire Kayla for the neat pivot: With the snap of her fingers, gone were the sweaters, the plaid skirts, the vape pen and art books. Who she would be next was anyone’s best guess.

It would be so easy to just get in the car, slam the door, and tell Kayla to keep driving—to leave Wyman and Harkness and the life I’d built behind. To jump down in the well after her and simply disappear.

In my pocket was the envelope with \$50,000 inside.

It was cold, my breath white and foggy in front of me. With a screech of the brakes, Kayla pulled up, her face half in shadow and half in light. I remembered graduation just like it was yesterday, standing outside the gymnasium in my cap and gown, Kayla pulling up with that devilish grin on her face, and I *knew*, just knew, that whatever she wanted me to do—skip graduation, rob a bank—I’d go along with it. All those times, Kayla laying on the horn and sticking her head out—as she did now—and yelling: “Well, don’t just stand there! Aren’t you going to get in?”

I froze in the headlights.

Then—for *the last time ever*, a part of me whispered—I got in the car.



“He make you sign anything?” Kayla demanded as soon as I slid into the passenger seat. I’d been wrong; she was playing Dixie Chicks’s “Goodbye Earl” on the country station. Black-eyed peas laced with poison. Best

friends riding off into the sunset, buying a roadside stand selling Tennessee ham. In the console there was a small pink bottle of André, the kind they sold at Winn-Dixie for Mardi Gras and bachelorette parties. Kayla twisted off the foil wrapper. We took turns, passing the bottle back and forth.

“No,” I said, taking a long swallow. The cheap bubbles tasted cloying. “I didn’t sign anything.”

“Really?” Kayla said. “Huh.”

My heart was hammering wildly, and I wondered if Kayla could hear the frantic thumps. Arching one brow, Kayla took another swig and jabbed the mouth of the bottle at me. “You’re holding out on me.”

I felt faint. “What?”

Kayla broke out in a grin. “The money. Let’s see it.”

I pulled the envelope out of my jacket, gave Kayla a peek inside. At the glittering hunger in her eyes, I looked away, nauseated. *This is what our friendship is worth to her*, I thought. She couldn’t even tell that I only had half of it.

Kayla dropped the bottle back in the console, foam pooling in the cup holder. “Let’s get away from here.” She yanked on the gear stick to reverse, and I had to marvel at the cold calculation, the total commitment to her lie—the lie that Wyman was a predator, and therefore dangerous.

Who are you? I thought dizzily, staring at Kayla. *Were you going to keep up this lie for the rest of our lives? Pretend that you “saved” me from him?*

Kayla drove down the long driveway, the night hazy in the sweep of the headlights. At the flashing red light at the end of the road, I buckled my seat belt. We’d reached the main road, Waffle House, Texaco. Their bright interiors lit up in the dark and superimposed by my reflection in the glass. Watching the streetlights slide away, I broke my silence. Keeping my voice neutral, I said, “Why didn’t you tell me about the deleted comments?”

Kayla slammed on the brakes at the next red. She glanced over at me, her face masked by the deep shadows of the car. “You didn’t care the first time around. Why care now?” Her voice was low and barbed. “You’ve been checked out for a long time. You said so yourself.”

“C’mon, Kayla.” I hated the old, pleading tone in my voice; even then, I couldn’t shake off entirely who I’d been all these years. “Can you blame me? You get all the credit, while I just do the work.”

Green. Gripping the steering wheel, Kayla stepped on the gas—the speedometer jumped from forty-five, to fifty, then sixty. “You do *all* the work, huh? And I do nothing?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“That’s what you’ve always thought.” Kayla laughed. “Smart, bookish Faith, hunched over her laptop. The *real* brains behind Hannah Primrose. Well, guess what. It’s *my face*. Ever think about that? It’s my face out there for people to look at, and judge, and call me ugly names, and you get to waltz in and out with your little captions whenever—”

“It’s your life, too, right?” I retorted.

Sixty-five, seventy. My seat belt bit into my shoulder. The road narrowed to a dark ribbon. On our right, just beyond the tupelo and cypress stands was the water, black and swollen from the melted snow. As we barreled down the road, turning wide on the curves, I kept my gaze trained on Kayla and fought back the urge to laugh. *This is your power play? Go ahead.* Since the night Kayla showed up at Harkness, we’d been two trains speeding in the dark of night, racing against time, always destined to collide, twin headlights getting larger and larger . . .

For once, I wasn’t going to tell her to slow down.

When Kayla broke the silence, her voice had a ragged, dangerous edge. “Tell me. When you finally lost your virginity, did you pretend to be me? Was that the only way you could get turned on?”

“You pushed me to go after Wyman.” I blinked back tears. “You were the one—”

“I told you to get on with it because I couldn’t stand you always lurking.” Kayla laughed harshly. “Poor, pathetic Faith. I wanted you, for once, to stop being such a creep.”

“*Creep?*” I asked, unbelieving. It felt like a slap to the face, raw and stinging. “*You’re calling me the creep?*”

We were going faster and faster. Dark treetops loomed large, then receded just as quickly, like pinballs in a machine. “If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be a virgin writing fanfic about Wyman in her dorm,” Kayla sneered. “Except, you know, fanfic is fantasy. You have to pretend just to live your real life.”

“Who won’t leave?” I shouted. “Who’s been pretending to be my roommate all these months? Who made an anonymous account just to ruin my life?” Blood roaring in my ears, I grabbed the envelope and shook hard.

Two, three, four stacks fell, then slid onto the passenger seat floor. Around the bend the tires squealed, but I didn't care. "Maybe you should stick with @Harkness356798." I laughed hysterically. "This is more money than you can pull as Hannah on your own. Take it. It's all yours. We're paying you to go away."

"We?"

I said, unabashed: "We, as in me and Chuck."

A tight, strangled noise came out of Kayla, a strange convulsing upheaval of the body. I'd never seen Kayla cry, not once. But then Kayla leaned back, exposing her long white throat—

Kayla wasn't crying. She was laughing silently.

"God," she said, her shoulders shaking violently, "for somebody so smart, you can be so fucking dumb."

The car was weaving back and forth on the solid line. I glanced at the speedometer, it had crept up to 100, 105 mph. Something cold trickled down my ankle. I looked down and saw the bottle of André rolling around with the cash at my feet.

"You think what you have with that creepy old man is *love*?" Kayla spat out; she was barely looking at the road. "I was curious, you know. What you'd do without me in college. Whether you'd finally grow a pair. But without me, you just found others to latch on to. First the sorority, then him. You always need somebody to tell you what to do."

I widened my eyes, looked straight ahead; on that lonely stretch of two-lane highway—the mirror-black swamp whizzing by on both sides—the road was more rutted; under the carriage of the car, dirt and rocks and twigs sprayed in wide arcs by our wheels, with the *pppppft* sound of gunshots. Up ahead, I saw the pale glint of a sign—**ICE IN COLD WEATHER**—then I saw the bridge: one of those little bayou bridges, old and rickety and splotted with rust. Just wide enough for a single car. A low shoulder.

"Slow down," I gasped, "Kayla, you've got to—"

But Kayla's rage had swallowed her whole, transformed her into something wild and beautiful and terrible at the same time; and then—too late—I finally felt it: the cold slippery grip of fear.

The bridge jutted closer.

What was even happening? I felt dizzy and lightheaded and watched in horror as I begged and pleaded—*slowdownpleaseslowdownslowdownplease*—and finally screamed *For God's sake, slow the fuck down, Kayla*, while

the other part of me looked on and thought, *See, even now you won't grab the steering wheel . . .*

That feathery moment, bursting with clarity, right before: Kayla turning to me, her eyes glittering, triumphant: “Just face it, Faith—you’re a *follower*,” she whispered. “You need me—”

The car hit black ice.

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Chapter 26

When I came to, the night was pitch-black. For a brief wondrous moment, I felt lulled by the womb of darkness, by the rustling reeds, by the strange lapping sound in my ears.

Then the cold seeped in. I opened my eyes.

The windshield was shattered. Tiny shards of glass glinted on a deflating airbag.

Next to me, Kayla was unconscious, slumped over the steering wheel. A thin rivulet of blood trickled down her forehead.

Water was everywhere. Half tilted forward, the Prius was positioned like a toy car capsizing in a bathtub; black bayou water—brackish, smelling faintly of rotten eggs—was rushing in through every opening: the windshield, under the doors, even through the AC vents. My legs—I wiggled back and forth cautiously, testing them—were already submerged. Outside my window, the water level was up to my ears and rising. An eerie, preternatural calm settled over me; I moved quickly but everything was happening as if in slow motion.

I unbuckled my seat belt, rolled down the windows—surprisingly, the button still worked. As black water came crashing in, I took a deep breath and kicked hard and dove headlong into the murky depths.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi.

I swam through the frigid water to Kayla's side, which was tilted slightly higher than mine, still out of the water. Panting, heaving, I forced her window down halfway. "Kayla," I yelled, shaking her; her eyelids fluttered, she let out a low moan. The water was rising rapidly. I clawed at the door, but it was stuck. I tried to reach down to her seat belt, but the window wouldn't budge, and the buckle was just beyond my numb fingertips. I tried the locks, the wheel, but the buttons I touched did nothing.

I stared in horror at Kayla. Her words still echoed. *Pathetic. Creep. Follower.* For as long as I live, her voice will haunt the back of my mind, reminding me of who I was—who I'd always be—deep down inside.

Then I heard the whisper of another voice, a different one, in those cool rushing waters. It could have been me, or Kayla; but then again, it was

always impossible to determine where my voice ended and hers began. *What if?*

Kayla once said that friendship was about risk. Over the years I've come back to this question over and over: Who was risking more here? Was it Kayla, stuck in that sinking car with no one else to help her? Or was it me, because I had the chance to save myself, to kick and fight and claw toward safety, and with every second longer I stayed there, that chance was slipping away?

Then there are the nights I can't sleep, when I think of it differently. Maybe when we talk about risk, what we really are talking about is fairness. That summer I fell down the well, Kayla saved my life. When it came time to save her, what did I owe her?

Kayla's face was half submerged, sinking into the black swamp water, her features disappearing, one by one, replaced by little, frothy bubbles.

My fingers stilled. "I'm sorry," I whispered to her, and then I chose myself.



Through the rolled-down window, the woman in the passenger seat was tan and leathery, wearing a boat-necked striped shirt that showed her chest, splotchy from the sun. On her lap was an open bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos. For some reason, I remember the Cheetos. "Holy smokes, Bill," she exclaimed to her husband as she took me in: standing on the side of the road in the middle of the night, clothes dripping wet, a two-inch gash on my forehead. "Pull over," she commanded, wide eyed. "Honey, are you okay?"

"There's been an accident," I said through chattering teeth, and already I knew that *this* would be the story, so simple it told itself. "My friend's still in the car. Please. Call 911."

We were two miles away from the bridge; I'd been walking down the dark road for some time, and whether it had been twenty minutes, or three hours, until I waved down the first oncoming car, I couldn't say. All I know is I was grateful for somebody, anybody, to take over. While the husband fumbled to take out his cell phone and call 911 ("There's been an accident!" he relayed word for word to the operator, some twisted version of Telephone), the woman told me to get in, tell them where the car was, and then asked, *What was your name again, honey?* By then the damp cold had

seeped into my bones and I was shivering so violently it was hard to string two words together. In the back seat there were laundry hangers and empty take-out containers, the heat on high swirling around my ankles. “Th-thank you,” I stammered as warmth started to trickle in, like stepping into a hot bath. I caught my gaze in the rearview mirror and in a blink I saw Kayla’s face, pale and flickering, her pretty mouth twisted into a sneer: *You always need somebody to tell you what to do.*

Driving back toward the bridge, the woman kept twisting in her seat to pat my hand reassuringly. “It’ll be okay, honey. Don’t you worry, it’ll be okay. Help is on the way.”

As we got closer, the husband craned his neck, his eyes scanning the shoulder for the ruins of a car, twisted metal. “I don’t see it,” he said, almost accusatory. Then I saw his eyes widen as we approached the bridge, triaging from the skid marks black like calligraphy under the headlights to the shattered glass on the road and the ruined guardrail—to, finally, the black depths of the bayou below. The Prius had disappeared entirely, leaving not a trace or a ripple.

“*How* long ago did you say it was?” he asked, barely concealing the amazement, the dark wonder, in his voice.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “A while.”

After that, the woman stopped telling me that everything was going to be okay.

Then there was nothing to do but wait. By the time I heard the distant wail of sirens, I had a plan. Already, of course, in the choice I’d made to call for help, I’d foreclosed certain options, opened up other ones. When I was still in the water, kicking and thrashing wildly as the black swamp gurgled up my ears, my mouth, my nose, I told myself—no, *willed* myself—to keep going on the glimmer of the wild hope that as soon as I reached the bayou bank, I’d just walk away. Hitchhike my way back to Harkness in the wee hours of morning. Go back to my life pretending that I’d never blackmailed Wyman, never gotten into the car with Kayla. There was no proof, after all, tying me to the Prius. Just a dead girl in a professor’s car—with \$50,000 in cash in the front seat.

But walking down that dark road, alone, the whole world got still. Everything fell away, and all I could hear was the labored sound of my breathing, the ringing in my ears, the squelch of my muddy tennis shoes.

I didn't know it then, but that was the beginning, I think: For once, I had a story of my own to tell, and to tell well.

Dilute the lies with the truth: I'd tell the police that Kayla was having an affair with Wyman, and that *she*—and she alone—blackmailed him. I was the concerned roommate, going with her that night to his house but not knowing what she planned to do until she showed me the envelope of money. I confronted her, we fought, she lost control of the car. All of this fit neatly, like the composition of a painting restored by the excavation of a final, shining detail. The \$50,000 in cash in the front seat. Kayla in the driver's seat, speeding away from a Harkness professor's home late at night in his car. Kayla posting about an affair on Instagram for months.

Sooner or later, of course, it would get out that Kayla wasn't a student. But I'd have to deal with *that* later. The most pressing problem, for now, was Wyman. Wyman's story needed to line up with mine. He'd have to admit to sleeping with a student—or someone he thought was a student. But what choice did he have? He needed *some* explanation, and it seemed to me that, as far as the police were concerned, it was a lot tidier if he told them he'd been having an affair with Kayla, that *she* was the one who blackmailed him—and I had nothing to do with it.

It came down to this: Would Wyman lie to protect me?

The sirens were getting louder and louder. In the rearview mirror I saw the red-and-blue lights of the ambulance whirling in the dark. I blinked and there was Kayla: Kayla staring coolly at me as the blue-and-red lights swept over her face, Kayla who I still couldn't believe was gone. She felt as real to me as if she'd been sitting next to me in the back seat. Flashing her eyebrows up in that trademark smirk. *You think what you have with that creepy old man is love?*

I needed to talk with Wyman before the police did. By impulse, I reached in my damp jeans pocket for my phone. Then I remembered—it was at the bottom of the bayou.



“Miss? Real sorry to make you go through this now. But I need you to tell me what happened.”

The policeman was young with watery blue eyes and eyebrows so blond they were practically invisible against his ruddy skin. He was

standing at a respectable distance while a female paramedic fitted me into a neck brace, wrapping it awkwardly around the blanket I was huddled under while I was sitting in the back of the EMS truck. *Just a precaution*, she'd reassured me. I was grateful for her intrusion. It bought me a little bit of time. The brace made me look vulnerable, helpless. A victim.

I drew a deep breath. Then I looked the policeman in the eye and told him the story I'd rehearsed in my head. My roommate. Her affair with a professor. Going to his house tonight—

He interrupted me. "Y'all been drinking tonight?"

In my mind's eye I saw the little pink bottle of André rolling around at my feet. "Yeah. There was an open container in the car."

Already I could tell he was making judgments, forming conclusions. Two college girls driving way too fast on a cold January night. But when I started telling him about the blackmail, I watched with a twinge of satisfaction as comprehension dawned slowly on his ruddy face, followed by disbelief, shock. The realization that this was no ordinary dead girl. "Hang on," he said sharply. "You're telling me there's *fifty grand* in that car?"

From across the swarm of ambulances and fire trucks and police cars on the bridge, I spotted the couple, talking with another officer. Funny how it is, after a tragedy. Like a child's hand had impetuously wiped the board clean, scuttling me and them off to the side to make way for all these strobing lights. "It's not like I counted," I replied, turning back to him. "That's just what Kayla told me."

Right before they took me to the hospital, I caught a final glimpse of the bridge: the trunk of the Prius rising up in the murky black waters, stringy, hairlike algae dangling off the license plate. Divers in black suits bobbing in the water.

The ambulance doors slammed shut, leaving me lying on the stretcher, shaking from not just the cold. "It's a miracle you're alive," the paramedic told me for the second time in my life. Leaning in so close, I could smell it: the whiff of Bubblicious, sweet and haunting, on her breath.



At the hospital, I got six stitches in my forehead—tiny, nearly invisible sutures that puckered up when I frowned and itched terribly the rest of the

time. I asked the doctor, a man, if I was going to have a scar, and he gave me a thin-lipped smile, the way doctors do when they think vanity is your only concern. “Won’t be that noticeable,” he told me, his eyes already darting away, his thoughts on the next patient. “Trust me, it could’ve been a lot worse.” Weeks later, when the stitches dissolved, I’d be left with a thin hairline scar for the rest of my life, visible only in raking light.

Saturday morning, the cab dropped me off by the entrance gates of campus with me waving off the cabdriver’s offers to drop me closer to my dorm. “I’ll walk,” I insisted, already out the door. Really, I was procrastinating, putting off going back to that dorm room where, the moment I walked inside, I’d be confronted. Kayla’s hairbrush on my desk, red-and-blond strands still shining in the bristles. Her lacy black bra dangling off the top of the mini fridge. Our toothbrushes lined up in the shower caddy.

On the quad, a couple of girls were playing Frisbee, their cheeks ruddy with cold and their ponytails flying high in the dappled light. Students in puffy jackets, bent over their phones, walked to and from the library, the dining hall. I stood perfectly still in the blur of bodies, marveling in the continuity of time, the unceasing, never-ending motion of a world that didn’t have Kayla in it. For the first time, I allowed myself to feel it: grief.

I wanted to cry, but I didn’t have much time; I pulled myself together. I needed to find a phone. I *needed* to talk with Wyman.

On a Saturday, Wyman was most likely at home, but I couldn’t risk going there—not now when the police would eventually show up at his doorstep, start asking questions about the Prius. I couldn’t email him, obviously. I needed to make a discreet call on somebody’s phone. Tell him to meet me ASAP.

“Faith?” Callie stared, opening the door ajar. “What the hell happened to you?”

Self-consciously, I touched my forehead. I’d ripped off the gauze in the cab, unable to stop myself from scratching at my stitches. So much for not that noticeable. Behind Callie I saw Andy, who was sitting in a chair in an Alpha Rho sweatshirt and fitted black trousers, legs crossed. There was a notepad balanced on her knee, which she flipped closed, scowling at the sight of me. Suddenly I got the feeling that I’d interrupted something.

I lowered my voice. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Callie bit her lip and nodded. She stepped into the hallway, letting the door close behind her.

“Can I use your phone?” I asked once we were alone.

“Where’s Kayla?” Callie asked at the same time.

The panicked edge in Callie’s voice startled me; for a moment, I just stared at her. It was like all of the color had drained from her face. Her long dark hair, normally blown out to a shine, hung in a limp curtain around her hunched shoulders as if she hadn’t showered for days. *She knows*, I thought wildly. *She knows what I did*. But it was impossible. There was nothing online yet, I’d checked. I doubted even Brenda had been notified.

“Where’s Kayla?” Callie repeated, louder this time. Frantically, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “I haven’t heard from her in days.”

This was a bad idea. I took a step away from Callie, the horror of reality pressing down on me.

Sooner or later, Callie would know. *Everybody* would know. I knew I should tell Callie, do her the kindness of telling her myself instead of letting her find out on the news, social media.

But when I opened my mouth, the words died in my throat.

Callie let out a choked sob. “You don’t understand. It’s all my fault. I’m worried something happened to her.”

It took a moment for her meaning to click into place, and suddenly the composition shifted, yet again, skulls rotating from one place to another. Callie. The Heaven and Hell party. Henry.

I understood, then, what I’d walked in on. Andy was on the Honor Committee. Callie’s worry for Kayla was eating away at her. She was coming clean.

“Listen to me,” I said urgently. “You won’t be able to understand this right now, but this isn’t on you. Don’t tell Andy anything.”

Then I turned away from Callie’s tear-streaked face, her eyes wide with anguish and confusion. “Faith!” she called out after me. “Tell me what’s going on!” But I was gone, sprinting down the hallway, trying to outrun the long tail of the question I didn’t answer and still couldn’t face.



In the elevator I stopped, panting, and hit the button. White spots bloomed in my vision. Suddenly the lack of sleep, the fatigue, hit me. The memory of

being in that dark water, fingers clawing, legs kicking, as the root-choked cliff of the bank loomed ahead, always just out of reach, came crashing down on me, so real my limbs felt cold, exhausted like they'd been treading water.

The elevator doors opened to Kelly's pale and strained face. "*Faith*," she breathed out, visibly relieved. "Where the heck have you been? Student Affairs has been trying to call you all morning." Kelly was talking too fast, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to another. People have a reptilian sense for tragedy. "You need to go see Bugz," she said, biting her lip. "Like, now."

I nodded, too weary to argue. Kelly leaned inside the elevator and pressed the button—her job done—with an officious jab. Right before the doors closed, I stuck my foot out. "Hey, Kelly?" I asked. "Could I use your phone?"



"Faith," Bugz said, her enormous eyes full of sympathy as I walked into her office. "I'm so sorry to hear what happened." She stood up and came around her large mahogany desk. For a moment I thought she was going to hug me, but she must've thought better of it; instead, she patted me on the arm and gestured for me to sit on the sofa by the window. Perched on the leather armchair across from me, Bugz tucked her gold-buckled loafers in and flipped the pages of a black Moleskine to a blank page. "Thank you for coming in to speak with me," she continued. I was jarred by how quickly she'd shifted from concern to something more brisk, businesslike. "Whenever an incident like this happens involving our students, the College needs to understand the facts to appropriately respond."

"Of course," I murmured, noting her use of the word *incident*. So safe, so sanitized. So easy to spin.

"Tell me about the first time you met Kayla Lightfoot."

Bugz's opening salvo startled me. *She knew*. She would've asked straightaway about Wyman, about Kayla's relationship with him, if she thought that Kayla was my roommate.

I took a deep breath and gave her the truth—or some version of it.

I told her that Kayla and I had grown up together, known each other since we were little girls. I told her that we both dreamed of going to

Harkness, of being freshman-year roommates. I told her that when I'd gotten admitted, Kayla told me she'd gotten wait-listed. "She was heartbroken," I said. "We were heartbroken. Then, in September, she called me, saying she'd gotten off the wait list, but she'd come down with a bad bout of mono."

Bugz's pen was moving rapidly across the page. "How'd she know that your dorm had a vacancy?"

"I must've mentioned it to her at some point. That my roommate had gotten off the wait list at Harvard."

"And you didn't think it was a strange coincidence. She gets off the wait list in September, *and* she gets assigned to your room."

"No. We'd always talked a—about going to Harkness together. I thought it was fate."

At the obvious pain in my voice—pain I didn't need to fake—Bugz looked up. "But you were beginning to suspect something," she prompted.

I hesitated. *Dilute your lies with the truth.* The Instagram was the last piece of the puzzle, the reason Kayla was here—a reason Bugz could latch on to. And yet, that newfound voice told me to hold back, at least for now. That account had *my* words, *my* shadow darkening the frame. And this much was obvious: Kayla couldn't have taken those photos on her own.

Instead, I told Bugz about Kayla never being in class; her ruse with the ID cards. It struck the right balance: teary and incredulous, fearful and shamed. Bugz gave me a tissue, and I blew into it noisily, while she told me that *this sort of thing happened from time to time*. At Harvard and Duke, at Princeton and Yale and all those ivy-wrapped towers meant to keep certain people in and certain people out. Apparently, at some New England boarding school in the 1980s, a boy went by the alias Towny Davis—as solid of a Mayflower name as any—playing goalie on the lacrosse team, running for homecoming court—"He was the son of a mechanic in town," Bugz said with almost relish. "Got into law school, even made partner. But then he tried to get himself elected as state judge and, well, they do background checks for that sort of thing. That's what happens with all of these grifters, you know. Sooner or later, they always fly too close to the sun."

That was Kayla, in Bugz's estimation: a grifter who'd infiltrated my life at Harkness in exchange for housing, free food; a grifter who'd vanished as quickly as she appeared; a grifter who wouldn't be missed.

“The school is going to release a statement,” Bugz said, wrapping up the meeting. “Until then, I’d appreciate it if you kept this to yourself.” She eyed me. “We have policies designed to prevent this sort of thing. Of course, every now and then . . .” She trailed off, then cleared her throat. “I’m happy to speak with your parents, if they’d like.”

“Uncle,” I said quietly, and, for the first time, Bugz seemed discomfited. *Let me make this easy for you*, I thought. I told her I just wanted to put this all behind me.

Bugz nodded. “Perfectly understandable.” Then we stared at each other for a beat too long. Bugz cleared her throat again. “Two detectives are here,” she said. “There are other details about last night they’d like to discuss with you. You’re eighteen, of course, but I’m happy to sit in.”

I stared at her. “Shouldn’t I have a lawyer?”

Bugz laughed. “A lawyer? Good lord, no. *You’ve* done nothing wrong here.” She reached over and patted me on the hand. “Just tell them the truth.”



Bugz escorted me down the hallway lined with photographs: past deans shaking hands with CEOs and grinning ear to ear with various luminaries. Rounding the corner, I saw them through the glass: two detectives in blue polos and black dress pants, their badges dangling off their burly necks. The younger one—hair and eyes the shade of day-old coffee, goatee—was slouched over the conference table, sitting with his ankles crossed. The older one with the buzz cut was at the window, hands clasped behind his back. When Bugz knocked on the glass, he looked over his shoulder and grinned jocularly. “Tell me you don’t get sick of this view.”

“Thirty years at this school, and the answer’s still no,” Bugz said warmly, then she turned to me. “You’re *sure* you’re okay?” I nodded, looking at the small room: round table, three chairs. Bugz gave me a heartening smile. “I’ll be just down the hall, dear.”

As soon as she was gone, the detectives began with condolences. The older one took the lead. “We’re sorry for meeting under these circumstances,” he said, taking a seat across from me. I caught the name on the badge: John Richard. Judging by the accent, it was pronounced *Ree-*

shard. Following my gaze, he smiled. “I’m Detective Richard.” He jabbed a thumb at himself. I was right. “And this is Detective DeWitt.

“You gave one hell of a statement to the scene officer,” Richard said gravely, leaning toward me. He drummed his fingers on the table. “Obviously, we have to follow up on some of the details. It’s not every day you find a stolen car with two eighteen-year-olds.” He paused to let that sink in. Bait.

It was a gamble, talking about the car, but I had to sow some uncertainty, see if I could shake loose what they knew about the Prius. If they’d already talked with Wyman.

“We didn’t steal any car,” I said. “Kayla had the keys.”

Jiggling his knee, DeWitt: “How’d she get the keys?”

“She’d been seeing him,” I said. “Is he saying she stole the car? Because I’ve seen her driving around in that Prius before last night. He gave her the keys.”

The detectives exchanged a look, brief but pointed. So they *hadn’t* gotten Wyman’s story yet.

“Let’s back up,” Richard said finally. He released a wry, low chuckle. “I feel like we’re watching a show from season five when I need you to go back to, like, season one. Can you do that for me?”

I saw the way they looked at me: I was the dead girl’s best friend, and this was the part of the TV show, the movie, the podcast, where, burdened by the weight of her death, I spilled the whole sordid truth: bad debts, an abusive ex, a spiraling addiction to painkillers—the darkness behind the dazzling face. So I gave it to them. Fed it to them, bit by bit, while I tried to forget what Wyman always told me: *Your face shows everything. You know that, right?*

“Do you think she targeted Charles Wyman?” Richard asked when I was done.

“What do you mean?” I asked back.

Richard shrugged. “Some girls go to college just to get their MRS degrees. Maybe Kayla took that to the extreme. Maybe she pretended to be a student in order to get close to him.” He frowned, as if something nagged at him. “Do you have any idea how they’d met? She ever tell you?”

“She didn’t say.”

DeWitt, more to Richard than me: “That’s my problem with it, boss. It doesn’t add up. They just randomly bump into each other on campus?”

There's no calls between them, no texts—"

Richard shot him a *shut up* look. He turned back to me. "You seem like a smart girl, a good girl. Right now, I need you to be one hundred percent honest with me. Don't leave anything out, don't assume anything you don't know. Did you ever actually see Kayla with Professor—"

"She was posting about it online," I blurted out.

I felt something whip across the room, a rubber band snap: Richard's eyebrows shot up, and DeWitt's knee stilled. "She was posting about it?" DeWitt laughed, incredulous.

"Why would she do that?" Richard wondered out loud. "Wasn't she worried that somebody would report it to the school?"

"Nah, boss," DeWitt replied. He took out his phone and handed it to me so I could pull up Hannah's Instagram. My fingers shook as I typed. "Kids these days, they'll post anything. Remember that case out in New York? The murder-suicide."

"And Wyman?" Richard asked. "Did he know about the Instagram?"

"I don't know—" I began to say.

DeWitt interrupted me, letting out a low whistle. He held up his phone. "Two hundred thousand followers? Not too shabby."

Richard looked at me sternly. "You told the scene officer that Kayla blackmailed Charles Wyman on Friday and that you saw her leave his house with fifty thousand dollars in cash. Is that accurate?"

"Yes," I said.

Richard and DeWitt looked at each other. "Blackmailed for fifty grand." DeWitt was shaking his head.

"And these posts are still up for the world to see." Richard snorted, shaking his head too. "You almost feel bad for the schmuck."



Pacing back and forth in the dark outside the Observatory, Wyman looked terrible. Bloodshot eyes and his clothes were rumpled in that distinctive way when he slept on the plaid couch; he'd been here, waiting for me, for hours. "God, Faith, what happened?"

I stopped short. Five hours had passed since I'd left him a voicemail. "You know?" I asked, startled. "Did they talk to you already—"

Wyman gripped my arm hard. “It was on the *news*,” he hissed. With his other hand, he shoved his phone toward me. “Google ‘dead Harkness student,’” he barked. “That’ll do it.”

The top link was a Fox 8 article posted three hours ago. **Harkness Student Killed in Bayou Car Crash, Officials Say.** Sandwiched between clickbait ads for gift certificates and IRS tax debt relief, the article was only a couple of short paragraphs, skeletal on the details:

Officials say a Harkness College student was killed and one other student was injured in an early-morning wreck on Saturday, January 11 on Highway 41 in Kentwood County.

Kentwood police are investigating the crash on an I-41 bridge that caused the green 2018 Prius to go over the rail and sink into the bayou.

Officials did not provide the names of the students or further details about the accident. A police report could not be immediately obtained.

“It doesn’t exactly look good, does it?” Wyman’s voice was gargled, hysterical. “A student dead at the bottom of the bayou in *my* car. Jesus Christ. Is the cash still in there?”

Slowly, I nodded. Then I told him that Kayla wasn’t a student.

Wyman stared at me. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” He shook his head in stunned disbelief. “Wasn’t she your roommate? She had to be. I was in your room. I saw her stuff. The makeup, the clothes. The Polaroid on your wall.”

“Look,” I said. “This actually helps you, if you’d just let—”

“Why was she here then? What exactly were you two—” He broke off and buried his face in his hands, breathing heavily. “You know what? Don’t tell me. God, what a mess.”

“You do know what you’ve got to tell them, right? There’s only one real option.”

“And, pray tell, what’s that?”

“Tell them you were having an affair with Kayla. Tell them she threatened to blackmail you, and you gave her fifty thousand dollars and the car to make her go away. I spoke with the detectives, and they’ve got

nothing so far to suggest any foul play. They just want an explanation. So give them one.”

There were white marks still on Wyman’s face, which was red, rushing with blood. His hands fell to his side, and he straightened up a little, looking at me in a new way. I was reminded of that night, the way he looked at me—shocked, a little awed—when I’d blurted out our demand for \$100,000. “Let me get this straight,” he said slowly, “you want me to take the fall for you?”

“This way, you won’t lose your job. You’re in trouble either way. They know it’s your car. They know it’s your cash.”

“How convenient for you,” Wyman said coldly.

I didn’t say anything.

Shakily, he passed his hand over his mouth. “I’ll look like a *fool*, Faith. Maybe I’ll keep my job, but the journalists will have a field day with me. The over-the-hill Harkness professor who gets taken for a ride.” A plaintive, morose tone had crept into his voice.

“Well,” I said, after a long pause. “Consider it reparations.”

For a second, Wyman just stared at me. Then he laughed; a cruel, hysterical crackle. “You’ve got to be kidding me, right? Reparations. Reparations for what?”

“For patriarchal oppression.”

Wyman snorted. “You were never the victim, Faith. Not by a long shot. And anyways, I thought that was what the fifty thousand dollars was for. Not my fault you and your psychotic friend blew it all up.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

His body stiffened, his breath caught, and something like heat seemed to shimmer, then radiate, off him, like oil on hot asphalt. He raised his hand. For a strange, thrilling second, I thought he was going to slap me. *Do it*, I willed. As I looked up into those dark windowless eyes, I saw reflected my own small, alien-like face. Two eyes, a knob of a nose, like I was some crude doll.

His fingers tensed. Lightly, he touched the scar, red and shiny, on my forehead. Then he let his hand drop. “Remember when I said your face shows everything?” His voice had a rough, sandpaper edge. “I was wrong.”



A few days later, a second article appeared on NOLA.com: **Mysterious Crash Claims Life of Harkness Student.** Whoever reported it at *The Times-Picayune* had clearly made a few calls, because the cash was front and center: **Sources say that \$50,000 in cash was found in the 2018 green Prius alongside the body of a woman identified by investigators as Kayla Lightfoot, but no charges have been filed in connection with the cash seizure, further adding to the mystery surrounding the case.** I raced to the bottom of the article, looking for Harkness's statement, but there was nothing. **Despite multiple requests, Harkness College did not identify the student by name but described her death as "heartbreaking." School counselors and Student Affairs staff have met with "those most closely affected by this tragic loss," the university said.**

So Harkness was sitting tight, hoping the story would die down in a week or so and they could avoid the whole embarrassing, tawdry scandal—that for months an impostor had been eating in their dining halls and sleeping in their dorms, skirting by virtually unnoticed. There were no community-wide emails, no "Message from the President." Not like two years ago, when two members of the swim team had died in a boating accident. Then, the school had responded quickly, setting up helplines and hosting a candlelight vigil. But if they did that here, they'd have to endorse the lie that Kayla was a student.

The administration's tight-lipped silence meant, of course, that news of Kayla's death traveled fast on campus. With the scar on my forehead, I found myself suddenly the object of intense, mortifying fascination. By this time I'd gotten a new phone, and it pinged nonstop. Randy kept calling me over and over, but I couldn't answer any of his questions. Professors offered extensions. Ginny texted with a string of heart emojis, **Thoughts and prayers to lift you UP in these difficult times.** Avery called me twice, leaving me a voicemail: *Hey, I know you're recovering right now, but if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here . . .*

One morning I bumped into Danielle coming out of the bathroom. "Faith," she exclaimed; for a strange, passing moment, she looked delighted to see me. Then her features rearranged themselves into a grotesque mask of sympathy. "Girl, I can't believe you were in the car with her. That must be so terrifying."

"Yeah, it was," I said curtly.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Do you think it might’ve been a drug thing? I heard Kayla was selling coke to the Delta Omegas.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I snapped. Then I went into my room and slammed the door.

Not a half hour later, there was a knock, loud and insistent. I opened the door, scowling, to two Alpha Rhos, a sophomore and a junior I’d met maybe once before, their arms laden with a large wicker basket filled with an assortment of magazines and chocolate and even vitamin E oil. They insisted they come in—“This is what sisterhood is all about”—then they asked me pointed questions under the guise of *emotional support*; the sophomore outright asked if I wanted to be interviewed for the school newspaper. “The lack of transparency from the school is, like, so problematic. No matter what Kayla did—I mean, I don’t know if she did anything, but if she did—the school still needs to acknowledge it instead of, like, worrying they look bad.”

I let them talk for a little while, during which various sordid theories—Kayla was a drug dealer and/or had a sugar daddy and/or stripped in a seedy club in New Orleans—were hurriedly brought up, only to wilt under my icy silence. Their hushed, rapacious tones, the bright gleam in their eyes, unnerved me. *This isn’t The Bachelor*, I wanted to scream at them. *This isn’t some stupid reality TV show you watch with your girlfriends. She’s a real person, not some character for you to pick apart.* I opened my mouth, then closed it, feeling the anger drain out of my body, replaced by something more nebulous, more haunting. Who was *I* to tell them anything? This all started because we wanted so badly to be the protagonist, to turn our lives into stories.



Eventually, I managed to whisk them out the door, citing a headache. As soon as their footsteps disappeared down the hallway, I stepped into my slippers and pulled on a tattered old sweater, shivering; I had suddenly gotten very cold. Then I took the stairs down to the third floor, where I knocked on Callie’s door—once, hesitantly, then three quick raps in a row until, finally, I heard a muffled voice inside. “Go away.”

“It’s me,” I called out.

When, after a moment or two, she didn't say anything, I pressed my ear against the door. I could hear her TV playing inside. "Callie," I said, louder this time. "It's Faith. I'm going to check on you, okay?"

I turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. Inside the room was dark, illuminated only by the TV, which was tilted on her desk to face Callie, curled in bed, her quilt up to her chin. The bluish glow of the TV made the bags under her eyes more pronounced, such that she looked simultaneously older and younger than her age. Her dorm smelled ripe, airless. "How are you?" I asked as gently as I could muster. Taking a step toward her, I knocked over something on the floor. A pink Stanley tumbler half filled with protein shake, dark liquid pooling on the rug. Mold skimmed the surface in delicate blotches of green and black.

"Shhh," Callie said sharply, and I could hear her breath catch. Her eyes were focused on the screen.

Investigative Hour appeared in large gradient blue letters next to a news anchor, professionally grim: "Questions surround a mysterious car crash in the early-morning hours Saturday that claimed the life of Kayla Lightfoot, an eighteen-year-old from Paradise, Mississippi, who was a freshman at Harkness College. Wendy Landry for NBC4, reporting live."

Then the shock of recognition: a shot of the inside of Kayla's trailer, relentlessly, almost aggressively bleak with fast-food wrappers on the coffee table, the dresser with the broken drawer that doubled as the TV stand. "A community is in mourning four days after the death of Paradise native Kayla Lightfoot," said the voice-over, "whose death has sparked questions that remain unanswered." Wendy Landry appeared on the screen in a red windbreaker, standing in the lane outside. Next to her was Brenda. "What're you hoping gets answered with this investigation?" Wendy asked as they zoomed in close on Brenda's face. TV aged Brenda; it faded her out. The rings around her neck were made all the more pronounced by her heavy silver cross necklace, which I'd never seen her wear before. "We deserve to know what happened," she said plainly.

"Do you have any idea why your daughter was driving a car with that amount of cash in it?"

Brenda looked shiftily at the camera. "It wasn't hers, I'll tell you that much. Kayla didn't have that kind of money. I *know* my daughter. She wasn't that type of girl."

With a click, the TV went black.

“Liar.” Callie’s voice was flat, pitiless. Startled, I glanced at her, and, for a brief moment, she met my gaze with almost fierce determination before dropping her eyes again, plucking at a loose stitch in the corner of the quilt. “She didn’t know Kayla at all. Kayla told me that if it was between her or whatever shitty guy was blowing up their lives, her mother would choose the guy, every single time. Now *Brenda*”—she spat out the name, like it was dirty—“is on TV pretending to be mother of the year.” She bit her lip. Softer, she said, “It’s amazing Kayla got into Harkness, given all that.”

I was astonished. Callie had glimpsed Kayla’s real self, the unvarnished and ugly truth of her life. More astonishing, still, that Kayla had let her. It occurred to me then that there was a depth to their friendship I’d overlooked, and I felt jarred by this, like wading out into shallow waters only to feel the rocks drop off under my feet. And yet this much was still true: Callie thought Kayla had been a student. She’d been duped, just like everybody else.

“I’m going to bed,” Callie whispered, her voice sapped. My cue to go. Staring down at Callie—her dry, chapped lips, her pallid skin and grief-dulled eyes—I felt racked with guilt. It was a different kind of guilt: guilt not over the way it all ended that night, but guilt over how it began. With the lie I—we—always assumed was victimless. Kayla pitting us against the rest of them with a laconic shrug: *What does it matter if I pretend to be one of them?* She’d always justify. *Who’s it going to hurt, really?*

It mattered. “I’m sorry, Callie,” I said hoarsely. “I’m so sorry.”

Chapter 27

The funeral was Friday.

I wish I could say that the day had the blurry, too-sharp quality of a dream, that I remembered the cornflakes I had for breakfast but not the sermon or the drive to the cemetery, but the truth is I remember it all in almost punishing detail. Friday morning, I pulled down my suitcase from the top shelf of the closet where I kept a black dress with a high ruffle neck I never wore—it was the only black thing I owned. But when I pulled the dress out, I noticed the holes right away. Along the ruffles and down the hem. It had been eaten by moths.

Shit, I thought, glancing at the clock on my desk. None of the stores would be open now. The service started at one, in Paradise.

The idea came quickly, too quickly. Like it had always been there, submerged in the muck of my consciousness. Just yesterday I'd found three more package slips in my mailbox all addressed to Hannah Primrose in my care, and I'd brought them back to my room, threw them in the growing pile by the door. Vaguely, I understood that this was my own damn fault. All I had to do was get a PO box in town, email Infinitive to see if they could deal with the PR reps. Instead, I went to the liquor store off the highway and got five airplane bottles of vodka, three of which I downed in the parking lot, trying to chase away the fear, the disquiet, that threatened to engulf me. It's always the small things that unravel you. For me, it was those packages, those goddamned packages that still came every week, with their bright pastel colors, their crisp branding, the tops and skirts and lip tints and lingerie and false lashes I knew were inside—the flimsy weapons women had at their disposal. With each day, the pile got bigger and bigger, a makeshift shrine, a reminder that even if Kayla was gone, Hannah was still out there—immaculate, whole, taunting me to make the next move. On Instagram, her followers speculated about the reason for her absence. **We need to respect Hannah's right to take a social media break, @matchagirl456 commented yesterday. But at the same time @HannahPrimrose we'd love to know you're okay!**

I eyed the packages. Suddenly, with a ferocious lunge, I began ripping boxes apart, yanking tape off and tearing tissue paper and tossing aside the occasional handwritten note from the PR person. All sorts of useless junk accumulated around me—natural toothpaste, yoga leggings, Pixi’s whole line of spring makeup—until, finally, I felt my fingers grip a long rectangular box, something swishing softly inside. When I pulled the sticker off the tissue paper, there it was, folded gently: a long black velvet dress, fitted at the bodice with relaxed sleeves. I touched it, my fingers brushing up against the soft velvet.

I didn’t think it would fit. But surprisingly the fabric had some give, the elastic in the ribbing stretching to accommodate when I pulled the dress over my shoulders.

I caught my reflection in the mirror right before I left. The dress fit me perfectly.



The funeral was at Oak Hills Cemetery, right by the highway, but it was lovely—a tranquil place with old twisting oaks I didn’t know existed in Paradise. My own mother had been cremated. Young as I was when she died, I can still remember the bustling funeral parlor, a chain with four Mississippi locations that had vaguely Victorian viewing rooms, all identical, down a long hallway. Even then I had thought, *This isn’t what it looks like in the movies*. There was no church overflowing with mourners, no grave procession of pallbearers, all clad in black. No wind rustling the treetops as dirt hit the coffin. The irony—even in death, what I wanted, what I knew Kayla wanted, was for her funeral to be *aesthetic*.

Callie’s mother insisted on ordering a black town car to drive us from Harkness to Paradise. Elegant in a black sheath dress with her hair twisted in a sleek bun, Callie was on the phone with her for most of the two-hour drive: “No, Mom.” “I don’t know what Mrs. Lightfoot’s address is. I can’t really ask her today, can I?” “Yes, it’s in my purse in case I need it.” When we passed by the Cracker Barrel on Old Spring Road and turned on the billboard-choked highway going into Paradise, Callie abruptly told her mother she’d call her later and hung up. I stole a glance at her. Maybe she’d popped a pill already. She was more put together than I’d seen her in days,

but there was something glassy, remote, about her affect, as if she was seeing the world from under a veil.

Minutes passed in silence. *Now*, I thought, *was as good of a time as any*. I owed it to her, I'd realized. I didn't want Callie to think that Kayla died because of her or—worse, maybe—that she was a footnote in all this.

“Callie, I know about the plan to blackmail Henry.”

For a moment Callie just stared out the window. I thought she hadn't heard me. Then Callie tilted her chin toward me and smiled. A strange, sad glimmer of a smile. “Kayla told you.”

“Henry, actually. But she never got the money.” I hesitated, then decided that Callie deserved the truth, as painful as it may be. “Kayla dropped it. Bigger fish to fry and all that.” I was surprised by how harsh, how bitter, I sounded, still; a wound that would never scab over.

To my surprise, Callie closed her eyes and murmured: “Thank God.” When she opened them, they were wet, shining. “I would've never forgiven myself if that money they found was his.”

“You're not upset that Kayla . . . ?” I trailed off.

“It was never about the money.” Callie shook her head hard. “It was about—I don't know.” She got quiet and contemplative. Finally she said with a kind of tender resignation: “I just wanted him to feel as afraid, as helpless, as I felt that night.” She shrugged.

We'd reached the wrought iron gates of the cemetery. Beyond, the gravel road led up a gently sloping hill, pockmarked with mossy tombstones, white markers with fluttering American flags, old family crypts that were little more than crumbling piles of stone. I thought of Henry. The way he must've staked out for hours at the Heaven and Hell party, waiting to confront Kayla. The tremble in his fingers at the bar.

“He didn't want a Title IX investigation,” I said finally. “I don't think it ever occurred to him that *you* didn't want one either. In his mind, you were just the slut out to ruin his life. Holding a gun pointed at him. But, really, it was a bomb that was going to blow up the both of you.”

I hesitated, then said it all the same: “He was scared. He wasn't sleeping.”

The car stopped. Callie looked at me, her eyes glittering in her pale, wan face. “Good,” she said simply; then she opened the door and stepped out.



The memorial service was brief. *Is this what a life as dazzling as Kayla's comes down to?* I thought, standing in the corner of a lot where the patchy rutted grass underneath our shoes was soft from melted snow. The chaplain, a narrow-faced fellow with sideburns and a high, garrulous voice, spoke for about twenty minutes. It was a peculiar blend of religious and secular: beloved daughter, God's angel, a vibrant, beautiful soul departed too soon who dreamed of moving to Los Angeles. Just behind him, where the old oaks dipped low to the ground, there was a pine box. Closed, simply hewn. Then that freshly dug grave, that terrible, too-tidy hole with gnarled roots sticking out of it, descending down into a fathomless dark.

I don't know how I got through it. I tried to count—*One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three*—but the cadence mingled with that of the chaplain, who was now reciting Genesis 3:19: *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .* I tried to clear my head, focus on the birdsong echoing in the ancient trees, the Spanish moss stirring gently in the chilly breeze. But all I could see was that hole. I closed my eyes, my breath knifing up and down my chest. *I'm sorry, Kayla, I'm so sorry.* But even in my head, my words rang hollow. I didn't trust myself anymore. To this day, if I could go back to that night and take it all back, I don't know if I would. This was who I was, and I'd have to live with it.

And if I'd ever been anybody else, I killed her that night, just as surely as I'd killed Kayla.

At the end of the sermon, the chaplain invited us to go around, say a few words. There were just seven of us, including the two gravediggers who leaned their chins on shovels at a respectful distance, under a line of pecan trees by the driveway. All strangers, in the ways that mattered: Callie and me; Brenda, a drab, solitary figure cut against the cloudless January sky, the hem of her cheap black lace dress shivering in the wind; Randy, in a dress shirt and tie, and a woman, with a stripe of purple in her black hair, who held his hand. I thought of the hundreds of thousands of followers Kayla had online, some who'd been there for every birthday, every kiss, every heartbreak, every diet and makeup trend since we began posting as teenagers, and yet, looking around at who showed up today, none of that mattered. We must've looked so small, so inconsequential, in that vast old cemetery, like drips of paint on a canvas—here today, gone tomorrow.

Brenda turned to me tearfully. “Faith, would you say a few words?”

I felt all eyes on me. I was dimly aware of my mouth opening, but nothing came out. I couldn’t find the words.

Then, from behind me, Callie spoke. “Kayla was a good friend. She was there for me when nobody else was.” Brushing by me, she placed her hand on the pine box, which was dappled with sunlight.

After, we lingered somewhat awkwardly, as no one wanted to be the first to turn heel, walk back to the line of cars parked on the driveway. Brenda kept hugging me, giving me pats on the back. I had to fight to not look away. Her green eyes were so remarkably a rough sketch of Kayla’s. “I know she’s smiling down now, listening to the words in *your heart*.” I coughed. It was true what Callie said; Brenda didn’t know Kayla at all. If anything, Kayla was laughing at me, snapping her Bubblicious gum as the corner of her lips curved into an ironic sneer. *For once, this bitch ran out of words.*

Randy came up to me, shyly introduced Denise, his girlfriend. They met on a dating app when he was working up in Jackson at the Amazon fulfillment center there, and they were planning to move to Jackson, where she was from, in April. “I was planning to tell you when you went home for winter break. But then you ended up not coming back . . .” The tips of his ears reddened slightly.

“I’m happy for you,” I said. I was.

And then it was all over—one more round of hugs and tearful goodbyes, Brenda inviting everybody to join her at Michael Patrick’s, a dark Irish pub up the road that had po’boys and five-dollar pints. I didn’t think I could bear sitting through a whole afternoon at the bar, washing down our memories of Kayla with cold pitchers of PBR and platters of crawfish po’boys, red-checkered paper stained with grease. *But what would I do instead?* I thought as I watched the rest of them straggle down to the driveway, taking out keys and unlocking doors. The wind had picked up, and a page from the chaplain’s sermon had slipped out of his book and was now flapping in the air while he gave chase. The alternative was grim, blank. The alternative was facing the rest of my life.



It was all over. Dirt thudding gently on a coffin, the post-funeral haze of Jameson and casseroles; a tiny cross at the foot of the bridge with wilted roses, memorializing just another Mississippi girl going too fast on a dark winter night. The investigation closed, a tidy write-up in the local papers.

I thought that was how this story ended.

I was wrong.

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Chapter 28

It started on YouTube overnight: @MsCreepyPasta, with fifty-nine thousand subscribers, uploaded a video titled *The Strange Death of Kayla Lightfoot*. Low-fi, low-budget. Some teenager in their bedroom with their Canon and tripod overlaying the NBC4 interview with their running commentary on iMovie. @MsCreepyPasta never showed her face, starting every video by lighting a different candle; for *TSDKL*—its moniker on Reddit—the candle of choice was apple pie.

I watched the video twenty-three hours after it was posted. @MsCreepyPasta had done her research. She knew some facts about Kayla, facts I didn't know were part of public consumption: Kayla was a graduate of Paradise High School; Kayla's yearbook quote was from *American Psycho*. For years I'd spent so much time thinking about Hannah Primrose's shadow on the internet, I'd forgotten that Kayla Lightfoot existed too.

As images of Kayla's bedroom—stills from the NBC4 interview—flashed across the screen, @MsCreepyPasta narrated: “Y'all, this case is a real mind bender, and it reminds me of the Casey O'Connor case we did a few months ago; if you're interested, go to the playlist *Teenage Female Criminals* linked down below. What caught my attention in this case, y'all, is the *money*. An eighteen-year-old girl is found dead in a car with fifty thousand dollars in the front seat. At the bottom of the bayou in Louisiana. The police closed the investigation after a few weeks, with no real answers, but I'm always so fascinated by crimes with a financial element, especially when it involves women. Because there's kind of this stereotype, right, that women don't commit crimes for financial gain . . .”

By the next day, the video had racked up 232,000 views. **I'm infuriated this case deserved more attention but she wasn't stabbed 42 times so shrugs from police**, Michelle Smith posted. **No way a trailer-park girl gets hands on 50 grand unless drugs or prostitution are involved**, another user, @cuddlepoggle338, wrote, eliciting a subthread fight over classism. **Gorgeous, beautiful girl**, lamented UK Bill.

But it was the comment from @jennypapxo that got the most likes, even a direct reply from @MsCreepyPasta. **I'd know that bedroom from**

anywhere, @MsCreepyPasta. Kayla Lightfoot was a freshman at Harkness College, and also a huge influencer on Instagram posting as Hannah Primrose. Why isn't anyone talking about this??



I stared at @jennypapxo's comment; twenty-four people had upvoted it. After I hit refresh, thirty-four people. Then forty-five, fifty-five, sixty-seven, the number ticking up throughout the afternoon, the Monday of a long weekend, all of them liking, tweeting, embedding—such that, by the time I thought to Google the video and came across the Reddit threads, I felt like I'd walked into a party that had broken out into a fight, overturned tables and spilled beer on the floor, everybody too far gone, shouting over each other:

Professor def has smthg to do with her death. Based on her posts alone he's clearly a narcissist

1-800-434-8007—this is the LSP hotline; everybody should call them now!!!

**If anyone is curious, I made a timeline:
<https://imgur.com/7cnXCCz>**

The video got picked up by BuzzFeed. It was pure clickbait, one of those articles that some writer in Brooklyn cobbled together in a single, cold brew-fueled afternoon and titled “What Happened to Hannah Primrose?” Heavy on innuendo, and light on details, it mostly traced Hannah Primrose's rise as a dark academia influencer, posting photos of Harkness's spiral-topped libraries and wood-paneled dining halls, whose content veered toward darker—*pun intended*, the article quipped—more adult content about sleeping with her art history professor in the months leading up to her death. There were Twitter screenshots of followers comparing stills from the NBC4 interview to old Hannah Primrose photos of her bedroom in the background, strung together with some general commentary on the ethics of influencers using pseudonyms. Shoddy stuff as

far as investigative pieces go, but the article did identify the professor by name. There, enshrined on the internet for all time, was Wyman's photo, the same one he used for his bookstore signing. According to sources "close to the investigation," Professor Charles C. Wyman, Emeritus Professor of Art History, was questioned in connection with the investigation into Kayla Lightfoot's death.

The BuzzFeed article caused a furor on campus. Wyman's classes were canceled for the week. An email from Bugz was sent late at night with the subject line: **Important Harkness Community Message**. Bugz acknowledged the media coverage and stated, in a vague and terse way, that Harkness was investigating whether Professor Wyman's conduct violated Harkness's code of conduct for faculty. In the interim, Wyman was suspended indefinitely and banned from campus.

It was the loneliest, most surreal time of my life. That term I'd barely been going to classes. I quit my job at the dining hall after a rather disastrous shift that coincided with a protest planned by Women of Harkness outside of McClellan. Girls burst into tears when they saw me at the till, hugging me abruptly. One of them had a sign featuring Wyman's *Artforum* profile in the lead-up to the Picasso and Gilot exhibition, where only the *P* in *Picasso* from the title remained, and the rest read *PREDATOR* in red Sharpie. Somebody told me that Callie had gone home the following Monday, taken a leave of absence. Untethered, I spent my days riding the bus from Franklin to Slidell and Covington and beyond, getting off at random and walking around, smoking cigarettes.

One night I heard a knock on my door, then Avery's voice. "Faith, I know you're in there. Please talk with me." Long moments passed, me smoking a Marlboro down to the filter on one side of the door while Avery stood on the other. Right when I thought she'd walk away, she said, louder this time: "Stop closing yourself off, Faith. You did this with Callie and now you're doing it again." Still, I said nothing. The pounding only got louder:

"C'mon, Faith. I need to talk to you."

Then, with a slam of her hand on my door: "You act like you're the only one who's ever gone through something hard."

I heard other doors open in the hallway. Finally I heard her shout: "There are people here who can help you, if you'd just let them!"

Moments after she left—I had heard Kelly’s voice, scolding Avery for making a disruption—I cracked the door open and peeked out in the hallway. From her desk inside her room Blake caught my eye, then hurriedly looked away.

After Wyman’s suspension, the mysterious death of a popular influencer was no longer the exclusive trade of the local newspapers, BuzzFeed, *New York Post*; even the heavyweights like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* couldn’t resist running titillating headlines about Wyman’s downfall: **He Was a Champion for Female Artists—Now He’s a “Person of Interest” in a Young Woman’s Death; Rockstar Academic Suspended Indefinitely Over Possible Involvement in Instagram Star’s Death.**

It’s hard to say what was the bigger draw, Wyman’s prestige or Kayla’s beauty, but together, the story had all of the elements of an American crime classic: the elite college student with a hardscrabble background and a face of gold, falling under the thrall of her powerful art history professor. Years later, I was at the airport perusing the stands of bestsellers and was startled to come across one of those ripped-from-the-headline books, inspired loosely from these events. The tagline: *She’s a pretty, popular freshman at Franklin College. When she posts about their affair, he’ll do anything to keep it a secret in this dark, twisty tale of death, sex, and deception!*

Like I said, it was a (very) loose retelling. Because by then, of course, the original story had changed.



Friday of the following week, I went to get dinner from the vending machines. The lounge on the fourth floor was empty and smelled of burned popcorn. In the corner by the window, a TV played *Jeopardy!*

The fridge was filled with leftover pizza, casseroles, cookies wrapped in foil from care packages. On the bottom shelf, there was a chocolate cake with a single slice missing, accompanied by a stern Post-it: *Please Don’t Touch!!!*

I plucked the Post-it off along with the cellophane and dug my fingers into the cake. Icing oozed into my fingernails.

Then, slowly, with a savage kind of pleasure, I ate the hunk of cake from my hand, standing there in the middle of the lounge, and watched *Jeopardy!* It was the college tournament. Three fresh-faced kids in their college sweatshirts. Question: *In occupied Paris, a German officer asked Picasso if he had done this masterpiece. He replied, "No, you did."*

"*Guernica*," I answered through a mouthful of cake.

I walked to the vending machines and swiped my ID. The bag of Fritos rattled in its claws, then fell with a plop. Wendy Landry's voice cut through the room, high and nasally: "*This is NBC4, and we are minutes away from a statement by embattled Harkness professor Charles Wyman, read by his attorney Cecilia Stockman.*"

The Frito bag still in the machine, I sat down on the couch. Chilly with blond hair, expensive tailoring, and precise diction, Cecilia Stockman was, of course, a woman. She read from a prepared statement. The Louisiana Medical Examiner had ruled that Ms. Lightfoot's death was unintentional, she underscored. The extraordinary media attention was unfounded. The allegations were categorically false and untrue. And then, after a beat, she pulled the pin: *In fact, Mr. Wyman was the victim of Ms. Lightfoot, who'd conned her way into one of the country's most elite institutions, posing as a freshman, living in the dorms.* Here, her lip curled slightly—horrified, as if on behalf of every parent watching at home.

It was, under *these* circumstances, she emphasized, that Mr. Wyman entered into a consensual relationship with Ms. Lightfoot, against his better judgment; that Ms. Lightfoot blackmailed him, demanding that he pay in excess of \$50,000 or otherwise she'd inform the school. "Fearful and distraught, misled by Ms. Lightfoot's true identity, Professor Wyman succumbed to her demands," the lawyer finished grimly. (Leaving out the part where he'd negotiated half off.) "That night, driving under the influence away from the scene of her crime, Ms. Lightfoot lost control of the car and drove off the bridge into Bayou Lafourche."

Chapter 29

Stories, all stories, are cursed in this way: Once we tell a story, we find ourselves telling it for the rest of our lives. Some are innocuous, ones we gladly riff on at parties, on a long drive. How we met our significant other. That night we were so drunk we threw up in the back of a cab. All those times we quit the job, took up French, jumped off that cliff.

Then there are the other stories. The stories that follow you around, skittering at the edges, ready to pounce. Stories you're condemned to tell, for the rest of your life, even when you don't want to. Even when all you want to do is to forget, to escape. To tell a different story, any story, but this one, sticking to you like a burr. Digging into your skin, deeper and deeper. Leaving scars that'll never fade.

On the dark bridge that night, I came up with the story I'd tell over and over and over: to the state trooper, who'd dutifully jotted down the details; to the detectives again, a day later; and many, many times more over the next few months. An infinitesimal loop, a spiral of lies, but here's the cruel irony: Lies, repeated so many times, start to resemble truth. It's the truth that's fragile, that starts falling apart at the seams when asked to assert itself, over and over. Lies have stretch, more room to give. Like kneading straggly bits of dough into a smooth, shiny ball.

As a Harkness student sleeping with her older professor, Kayla was the victim—misguided, and attention seeking, maybe, but still a victim. But once Kayla wasn't a student—once it was revealed that she'd been pretending to be a student all these months—she was no longer the victim; she was a grifter, a scam artist, a con woman; one Deadspin article called her the *Jezebel of Harkness*. On Twitter that night, Hannah Primrose and #ToxicFemininity were the top-trending searches. Candice Cox, the right-wing commentator, tweeted, "This is what happens when the #MeToo movement is weaponized. Hannah Primrose is the perfect example of what happens to our young girls when the only skill they're taught is scamming up."

The next morning, Danielle knocked on my door. She was in pajamas, and her hair was still in pink rollers. "Have you *seen* this?" she demanded, thrusting her phone out to me.

Henry's face filled the screen. It was shot, poorly angled, on his iPhone; his sandy hair stuck out from under his backward cap in tufts, and he was shirtless and red faced like he'd just come out of the shower. The caption across his video was in all caps: *STORYTIME—How I Got Blackmailed by Hannah Primrose Part 1 of 4*. It was Henry on that new app, the one I'd been noticing more and more on my classmates' screens this past year: the fifteen-second videos of white girls dancing like Black girls, the viral celebrity salad recipes, the lifestyle and beauty and fashion vlogs of yesterday repackaged in slick, more-compressed sound bites.

Twenty-four hours after the press conference, Infinitive posted a statement on Twitter: "We are shocked and outraged by the recent allegations concerning our former client, Kayla Lightfoot d/b/a Hannah Primrose." If none of it had happened—blackmailing Wyman, the accident, Kayla's death—I wondered if Hannah Primrose would've survived, anyways. The ecosystem was changing and, if Hannah wanted to survive, we'd have had to adapt. There was always another target to hit, another new platform, another feature to give Hannah's audience more, more, more.

Henry was still talking: "Bros, I'm running out of time. Like for Part Two!"

"Isn't that, like, crazy?" Danielle said, looking at me closely for my reaction. "You really had no idea?" Already, I could feel public perception shifting against me too. The smiles curdling on my classmates' faces. *That's the chick with the fake roommate*, I'd heard two guys whispering to each other outside Smith.

"Crazy," I said, not knowing what else to say. Henry's video had racked up two million views.



I walked out of Smith into blinding daylight. I sat on the curb by the dumpsters and lit a cigarette. The air carried the hint of spring, of roots pushing through dark, damp dirt. Spring was the shortest season in Louisiana, muddy and vanishingly quick, and soon enough it would be summer again. Soon enough, girls will be showing off their tan lines and whispering secrets in the dark; girls will be taking photos of each other by the beach or at the pool, capturing all those forgotten details the rest of the world can't see: the limbs slick with sunscreen, the scuffed knees, and the

chipped nail polish. Soon enough, girls will be racing each other into the unknown, their long limbs pinwheeling in the air, wild and invincible because, why not? Anywhere is better than here.

It would be my first summer without Kayla.

A stray breeze lifted the little hairs up on my arm. After a moment or two, I pulled out my phone and dialed the number I knew by heart.

Wyman picked up immediately. There was a long pause, and all I could hear was the sound of his breathing, a slight whistle in and out of his nostrils. “You used me,” he said finally.

“We used each other,” I reminded him. “Besides,” I added, “if I ever used you, I used you for my art.”

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Chapter 30

We spent the summer in Brooklyn. Wyman's brownstone was three floors, filled with art and light, on a shady, elm-lined street. I interned at Weatherspoon's—unpaid, of course. Every morning, Wyman picked up coffee and pastries from my favorite bakery and had it waiting for me in a kitchen with a Viking Range and Chinese pottery displayed at the top of the upper cabinets. We settled into an easy, domestic rhythm, Wyman and I; the summer days and nights ran quickly together, a gentle babbling stream of inside jokes and opera at the Met and Indian takeout in front of the TV. I was happy.

The heat of New York in the summer surprised me. The heat had character, just like in Mississippi—it was the antagonist with all the best lines. On my walk to take the train up to Chelsea I sweated through my Ann Taylor blouse and slacks, and by the time I walked through the revolving doors into the gleaming lobby, my underwear was stuck like a wet paper towel to my backside. I wanted to laugh out loud, thinking of all those worn paperbacks, set on snowy East Coast campuses, I'd once devoured: The joke was on me.

At Weatherspoon's, I shared an office with two other girls—one was from Berkeley, the other Yale; I've since forgotten their names. But I remember that they always showed up fresh-faced and perfectly coiffed, not a hair out of place, like they were Barbie dolls straight out of the box. Even the ice in their Starbucks was barely melted. Finally, one night at some dingy bar in the East Village, I asked the girl from Yale what her secret was. She looked at me and laughed. "Uber."

Over the summer, I worked with Weatherspoon's Italian Renaissance expert, Lucretia, a millennial with a penchant for self-knitted cardigans and sculptural earrings. Our project was a paper on the identity of M.C.F. to be published that fall in *Renaissance Quarterly*. During the summer, professional conservators had given the painting I'd sacrificed so much for a final polish, bringing it to dazzling heights—the girl's brocaded robe gleamed like an emerald; her skin, like a real person's, had gradations of shade ranging from an opalescent pink to a tawny brown, and the lines of the painting acquired a virtuosity I hadn't seen before.

On my last day, Lucretia took me out to lunch at a cozy French bistro by the river. “Coauthors,” she said solemnly, raising her glass of rosé.

“Coauthors,” I said. We clinked glasses.

After we drank, Lucretia looked at me with a small, conspiratorial smile. “You know,” she said, “it’s nice to collaborate with a woman. With men, it’s always a fight for credit.”

I fingered the stem of my glass. “Really? I always thought that the problem with men is there’s no fight at all. It’s just assumed. But with women . . .” My voice trailed away.

“True. With women, if we do fight for credit, it’s vicious, isn’t it?” Lucretia’s eyes widened. “Faith, oh my God. Are you okay—”

I was gripping my wineglass so tightly it had shattered in my hand. Numb, I looked down to see a thin rivulet of blood trickling down my palm.

I’d wanted to escape Kayla in Brooklyn, in its gum-flecked sidewalks and cluttered bodegas and Japanese coffee shops, in this place she’d never been before, but I couldn’t shake her ghost. One of my first nights there, I took a bath in Wyman’s claw-foot tub. Sinking down in the hot, soapy water, I scrubbed my arms, my torso. Letting my fingers graze the inside of my belly button, I was startled by the grime that had settled there. I scraped with my fingernail, and out came the gritty smear, the color of tar. It smelled of the bayou, the sulfurous reek and the mud, and then I was seeing Kayla’s face again, sinking in the water, the little frothy bubbles followed by a mirror of black—like a video on loop, a video I was doomed to replay for all eternity. I jumped out of the bath, sloshing water down the sides of the tub. I only took showers for the rest of the summer.



Then, I just woke up one July morning, and it was gone—my interest in conservation. Like a flickering candle snuffed out by the wind. Maybe it was the obvious wealth of everybody who worked at Weatherspoon’s, or the fact that the painting—now aptly titled *La Mano di Eva*—sold at the end of the summer for a cool \$14 million to an anonymous buyer. It could have been a Russian billionaire, or maybe a hedge fund manager. The painting would disappear into a private collection, not to be seen publicly again for another lifetime.

But the truth is, there isn't much of a difference between a ghostwriter and a conservator. Both are in the business of working behind the scenes, elevating the art of others. Amplifying voices other than our own. I felt a kinship with M.C.F. because I knew what it was like: to be a ghost in your own work. As I chased down leads, her shadowy figure seemed to lift off the pages of dense academic jargon, hovering in the air like an apparition. She was a living, breathing girl, a girl who wanted no more and no less than to be lionized for her art. I was proud I brought attention to this unknown painter who, like so many other female artists, had been lost to history. I was proud of the work I did that summer.

But it was the last time I'd help tell somebody else's story.

During our only big fight that summer, Wyman was flabbergasted that I didn't want to be a conservator anymore. He accused me of acting defensively, of not thinking logically because I was so warped with fear that I'd get kicked out of school. I flung back that he took a strange, fetishizing pleasure in fashioning me in his own image. It was an ugly, bitter shouting match, filled with tears and recriminations. I suppose when you blackmail a man, and still date him afterward, that does tend to happen.

Wyman was right about one thing; as the summer months drew to a close, and September loomed large, I got more and more anxious. Right before the semester started, I got an email notifying me that "the Office of Student Conduct has received information indicating that a violation of Harkness College's Honor Code has occurred." It was, in the end, those goddamn PR boxes. Miss Carla had brought them to the attention of Bugz, who took one look at them and decided that I'd been less than candid with her about my involvement with Hannah Primrose. My hearing was set in early September.

Chapter 31

Since my future at Harkness was up in the air, I opted out of on-campus housing in the fall; if, by some grace of God, I somehow avoided suspension or expulsion by the Honor Committee, I planned to live with Wyman, discreetly, until the spring housing lottery.

A few days before the start of term, Wyman needed to go to campus for department meetings. I went with him. We parked off campus, on a nearly deserted street next to a chicken shop. In the car, Wyman and I talked about the classes I was enrolled in—even if I wasn't kicked out, I was going to drop my art classes, I kept reminding him, and take some creative writing classes instead. "Writing?" He laughed. "Since when?"

Looking out the window at Main Street, I replied, "I've been known to dabble here and there."

We walked from the car to campus together, hand in hand; but once we got to the entrance gates, Wyman gave my hand a squeeze, walking ahead of me across the quad. I watched his figure get smaller and smaller. It felt strange to be on campus. After I dropped my art history classes, I stood in line at the Harkness Card office for my new ID. There was a piece of paper stuck to the glass partition I hadn't seen before. *****STUDENTS SHOULD NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO BORROW THEIR ID CARDS *** IF LOST, REPORT IMMEDIATELY.**

Then I had nothing but time to kill. I walked around North Campus in no particular direction, but half an hour later found myself circling the stony bulwark of Shearman Library. On the front steps a girl was taking photos of her friend. For a moment I just watched them, my throat constricted.

A voice behind me: "Faith?"

I turned around to see Avery. She was clutching a paper coffee cup from North Grounds Café, and she was smiling wanly at me. I noticed, right away, that she was very tan; her skin glowed with deep sun.

"Did you have a good summer?" Avery asked.

"It was okay," I said, smiling back. "How about you?"

"I interned at an archaeological site in Cairo."

"Wow," I said, impressed. Cairo was as far-flung as I could possibly imagine; the flights alone must've been thousands of dollars. "How'd you

swing that?”

For a second I thought I might’ve offended Avery; something flashed across her face—surprise, replaced by a stony rebuke. “Let’s just say I had a benefactor,” she said coolly, leaving no room for follow-up. Then Avery raised her brows. “Weren’t you in New York?”

“Listen, Avery,” I began to say, “I’m really sorry for—”

“Leaving me hanging? Never returning my calls?” Avery said, still smiling. She shook her head and studied me. “Weren’t you even a little bit curious about what I had to say to you?”

My cheeks warmed. “There was a lot going on.”

Avery nodded. “You know, I’d see you and Kayla on campus last year, having so much fun together, and I’d feel lonely. I thought that was what college was about—finding your best friends for life—and when it didn’t happen for me, I felt like there was something wrong with me. But then all that stuff came out about her . . .” She trailed off. Narrowing her eyes at me, she shook her head again, amazed. “You had no idea, huh? I guess that tracks. You’re pretty myopic.”

“Myopic?”

“You’re so wrapped up in your own pain, you don’t see anyone else’s. Even when it’s right in front of you.” She said this calmly, with not even a hint of malice; like she just found me interesting, in a clinical way. I was flabbergasted. Then, not even waiting for my response, Avery took a sip of her coffee and walked away.

In a tumult, I walked back to the car and waited for Wyman, sitting on the curb, fumbling for a cigarette. Over the summer, Wyman had extracted promises to cut back—“A controversial new study is going around that cigarettes are terrible for you”—but I still kept a pack, sneaking a cigarette every now and then during my lunch break. As I lit up, I fumed over Avery’s words. *Myopic*, really?

Wyman came up just then, a stack of books under his arm and the other one holding a cup of coffee. I could tell he was in a good mood, because he was whistling Vivaldi. He even chose to ignore the cigarette burning between my fingers. “Nothing like the beginning of fall term.” He grinned at me and took a deep breath, fluttering his fingers toward his nose. “This smell. What do you think this smell would be, if you had to bottle it? Cedar smoke and honeysuckle?”

I stood up and brushed the dirt off my butt. “Chicken grease and bug spray.”

But Wyman wasn’t listening to me: He opened the car door and set his coffee in the holder and tossed the books at the foot of the passenger seat. I got in after him. After kissing me quickly on the forehead, Wyman turned the ignition and drove away, still whistling.

“How was the meeting?” I asked.

“Long,” Wyman replied. He stole a look at me and added, “We’re interviewing two postdocs to round out our little diversity problem. Burt Kempler got gout surgery in July.”

Again, I thought of Avery: her brittle, accusatory words; her tanned skin; and the strange, clipped way she’d spoken about her mysterious *benefactor*. The meaningful way she asked me about New York; as if I, too, had something to be ashamed of. The paper coffee cup she took a sip from as she calmly, coolly eviscerated me.

Absentmindedly, I took a sip of Wyman’s coffee. It was a caramel macchiato. That was one of Wyman’s funny quirks, a penchant for extremely sugary drinks that he—an upstanding, discerning gentleman of the finest espresso—did his best to hide. When I stumbled across his secret over the summer—a Venti Starbucks creme brûlée that he hid behind the trash can under the sink, like a schoolboy—I had teased him mercilessly.

The sugary notes of vanilla and caramel rolled over my tongue. Only North Grounds Café made a caramel macchiato on campus. I wondered if Wyman and Avery bumped into each other . . .

The car lurched over a pothole. Down by my feet, the books slid over each other, and the title of one caught my eye: *Methods & Madness—the Archaeology of Old Cairo*.

I gaped at the book. *You’re so wrapped up in your own pain, you don’t see anyone else’s. Even when it’s right in front of you.*

I leaned down as if to tie my shoe. It was a heavy, stylish book with a burgundy cover and the title spelled out in gold lettering; flipping through its pages, lush, exquisitely detailed drawings leaped out: hieroglyphics, a cross section of an urn, a room-by-room overview of Queen Nefertari’s tomb. There was a crispness to the pages; like just yesterday, it had been sitting on the shelf of some obscure specialty bookstore, pristine in its plastic wrapping.

Wyman’s voice: “Did you get your classes sorted?”

Hurriedly, I straightened up. My heart was in my throat. Somehow I found myself saying: “Sorry, yeah. I got my classes sorted.”

He put his hand on my thigh. Playfully, he worked his way up under my shirt and gave me a pinch—not too hard, but enough to leave a mark. “The Department loses yet another promising scholar.” He sighed. “Want to do takeout from DaVinia tonight?”

Seconds, or maybe minutes, passed, Wyman’s question still hanging in the stale humid air of the car. “Faith?” He looked over at me.

“Since when did you specialize in archaeology?” I asked.

Wyman kept his eyes on the road. “I dabble in it here and there,” he replied with a grin, echoing me earlier. “A colleague gave it to me.”

“Was this at North Grounds Café?” I tried to keep my voice light, casual; Wyman liked it when I did this anyways, play the role of loving girlfriend who was interested in every mundane detail of her man’s life: when he got up, what he ate for lunch, how that crick in his back was coming along.

Whom he met with for coffee.

He made a *you-got-me* face. “I had to get my fix.”

“Weren’t you in department meetings?”

“I swung by before.”

Innocently, in that same low and even voice, I said: “You ran all the way to North Grounds just for coffee?”

We were on the freeway, going under a bridge. The car plunged into darkness. Against the brightly illuminated dashboard, Wyman’s once-handsome face was aglow. He, of course, had no idea I’d run into Avery; he had no idea that my mind was thrashing wildly, going up for air again and again only to be swept away by the undertow of that single, inexorable, heartbreaking conclusion . . .

So Wyman didn’t know just how chilling his words were:

“Darling, you should know this about me by now.” He smirked. “When I love something, I can’t get enough.”

Chapter 32

On a wet, balmy Sunday afternoon in September, we met at a little diner on the other side of the train tracks.

When I texted Avery after a few sleepless nights, asking if she'd meet me, she replied quickly, suggesting the place. An older Asian woman with a silver bob showed me to a booth by the window. "You're a student?" she asked warmly, handing me a menu. The diner was empty except for an elderly man drinking coffee at the counter.

I spotted Avery walking toward the diner. It was gray outside and had begun drizzling a little, and Avery was in a red parka, her glossy black head ducked down and covered by her hand. Something about the moving *tableau* of my window—the gray smoky mist, the light from the streetlamp knifing off the puddles, and Avery's figure clad in maroon red getting closer and closer—made me think of color. The way painters from Velázquez to Caravaggio to Monet used color with the goal of not only drawing the eye toward the subject of the painting but also encouraging the eye to wander, to explore, to take in every part of the painting. Vermeer yellows, Picasso blues, Goya red, Hopper white: Wyman had changed my vernacular, the colors I saw in the world. He'd left his mark on me.

Did Avery feel the same way?

The bell jingled and Avery walked in. Locking eyes across the tables, Avery nodded at me.

As soon as Avery sat down, the woman came over, beaming. They greeted each other warmly, Avery telling her about her Cairo trip, then asking after her husband's health. The woman's smile faltered slightly; then she switched to Chinese, speaking in rapid fire, while Avery's command of the language was slippery, less sure of itself. I looked at Avery carefully. Her lashes and eyebrows reminded me of dandelion-fluff—delicate and wispy, as if they were about to blow away. The little whorls of hair on her forehead were wet and stuck to her temples, in a pleasing sort of way. *How strange*, I thought. *A girl can seem plain to you, but if a man thinks she's attractive, you start to notice it too.* Or maybe—here, my stomach knotted painfully—looks had nothing to do with it at all. Maybe what drew Wyman to us was something else we had in common.

Mrs. Lee poured coffee into our mugs. “How long have you known?” I asked as soon as she left.

“Since that meeting the first week back from winter break.” Avery smiled. “I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you this, but your face is *loud*. It was obvious you were upset with him.”

“And he’d just been with you.” This was a statement, not a question.

Avery released, like a breath held too long, a short, bitter laugh. “You got summer break, I got winter break. He’s been busy, our professor.”

Avery told me that she’d spent the holidays with Wyman. Every day, they’d gone to the Observatory to work on the painting; among other things, they relined the canvas, treated for wood beetles—and did in-painting of the fill by the girl’s right hand.

I thought of all those times Wyman called over winter break, his voice carrying as if he was in an empty room. A chill swept over me. The details he’d shared with me about his trip to New York had been so . . . specific. The paintings he saw and the galleries he visited. That fucking pastrami sandwich he sent a photo of. All that time, he’d been here, holed up with Avery, stealing away to call me, even using old photos to sell me on his story. He told me that I was the only one he trusted with this painting, I was special, worthy. When really he hadn’t expected me to notice a damn thing.

“He’d always just disappear, you know?” Avery said. “Blaming it on a gallery, a show. The day before New Year’s Eve, I woke up and he wasn’t there. He texted me that something came up with one of his galleries, and he had to fly to Atlanta for the day.”

She shook her head. “I’d never had a boyfriend before or anything like that. I didn’t know what was normal or not. I didn’t want to be clingy. But that night, some voice inside me just told me, *This isn’t right*. So, when he came back, I took his phone when he was cooking dinner the next night, and looked through it. He met this girl, Michelle, in Boca Raton. She’s in your sorority, actually. And then he told her—”

“Wait.” I felt nauseated. “*Michelle*? I thought she took a leave of absence . . .” Then it all clunked into place. Michelle’s mysterious departure from campus during finals. It must’ve been just a week or two after Callie and I had gone to her room to get pills, the same day I’d snooped in Avery’s room. Had she really been seeing him then? Was that why she’d left school?

“He called me that day,” I realized. “He told me he was in New York.”

Avery shook her head. “He told *me* that he was in Atlanta, he told *you* that he was in New York. In reality, he’s with this third girl, Michelle, in Florida. And I saw his phone that night. There are others. His TA. A junior in his intro class. He was seeing us all. *Sleeping* with all of us at the same time.”

We were quiet for a moment.

“Okay, the logistics, though,” I said finally. “He must’ve been constantly scheduling, planning. I’m almost impressed.”

Avery, deadpan: “Well, he was always going on about attention to detail.”

And then—we couldn’t help it—we both laughed. Giggles, at first; then faces in hands, hands over chests. Hysterical, desperate cackles, our bellies full of rage. When we settled down again, Avery fiddled with the little pink sweetener packets lined up in a row in the jar on the table. Then, with a savage kind of pleasure, Avery tore open four packets at once and dumped them in her cup. In that single gesture, I thought I saw Wyman’s mark on her. I heard his voice, the same voice that chastised me all summer about smoking: *Don’t you know how terrible those are for you?*

Avery took a large gulp. “I reached out to Michelle in January. We swapped stories, and it was creepy how similar we were. Each one of us was on scholarship. He’d single us out, shower us with praise. Then he’d invite us over to his house, ply us with alcohol. We were thinking of coming forward, filing a complaint with the Title IX officer. I kept trying to reach out to you. I wanted to help you, to see if you wanted to come forward, to at least give you a heads-up about what was coming. But then . . .” Her eyes flashed, scrutinizing me. “Your friend happened.”

She paused, waiting for me to explain. Our eyes met, and I gave a small, imperceptible nod. Confirming what Avery already suspected, that there was more to the story than anyone knew. “Everybody was calling Kayla a grifter,” I finished for her. “As far as the public was concerned, Wyman was the victim.” It wasn’t the full truth, but I was acknowledging to Avery that I knew more. Baby steps.

She flicked the empty packets. “I told myself that if I was staying silent, then I might as well get something out of it, play the game. Wyman was more than happy to pull strings to get me an internship in Cairo. Paid for everything too—flights, housing, books. For weeks, he’d call me in the middle of the night in New York, hoping I’d pick up. I never did. He kept

calling, emailing. Finally, I met him for coffee when I got back to campus. He tried all of his usual tactics. But I was done.” She smiled ruefully. “I don’t think he believed me. After all, I’d gone back before.”

We sat in silence for a while, drinking the rest of our now-cold coffee. Then I asked Avery something, but I was really asking myself.

She scanned my face slowly, intently, and when she saw that I was earnest—that I was deadly serious, even—an alarming transformation came over her: The corners of her mouth stretched into a gum-showing laugh; her eyes were two brilliant cracks of light. For a split second, I saw Kayla.

“I’m in.”



After Avery left, I logged in to Hannah Primrose’s account for the first time in months.

Comments had proliferated on the old posts, like barnacles on a shipwreck. **RIP, still miss you, my angel, poor baby, LOOOOOOOL glad ur ded. Hannah I’m struggling today, hello, RIP beautiful, WHY ARE PEOPLE STILL HERE.**

Why, indeed? Because people are fascinated with death. Because people are bored. Because people are destructive. Because people crave authority. Because people, in the wake of loss, want tidy, little answers. Because people fall in love with strangers on the internet. Because people can hate a stranger on the internet with more passion, more oddball specificity, than they might hate themselves. Because people, when they pass by a dark abandoned house—sagging porch, weeds growing out of the cracks—will always, always look in. They wonder. They wait. For what, you ask?

For that flicker of light.

I tapped the + button for a new post. On my phone, I had screenshots of all the texts, all the emails, to not just me, but her, and her, and her, and her.

I looked out of the window of the Uber as it drove away from the diner, took a deep breath, and began to type.

Seven Years Later

We all know the famous painting by Artemisia Gentileschi: *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. It depicts an act of heart-pounding violence: two girls, Judith and her maidservant, Abra, decapitating a man. Judith presses Holofernes's head down with one hand and pulls the blade against his neck with the other. He struggles mightily. Abra pins Holofernes down, her fine, delicate features contorted in a mask of grim determination, dwarfed in size by Holofernes's thick, muscular hand grabbing at her collar. The sheer physicality of the girls' struggle is in the details: those beautiful, athletic limbs, the rolled-up sleeves, the dynamic creases in Judith's wrists as she saws, saws away. And then, of course, there's the blood: Jets of blood arc and descend in droplets that splatter the girls' arms and dresses. Blood runs down the edge of the white silk bed in rivulets.

I lean forward, pointing out Judith's blood-soaked gold bracelet. I take out my phone. "Remarkable," Maya, the reporter from *La Repubblica*, says. She writes a column for one of Italy's oldest newspapers, but she's American and interviewing me as a correspondent for a podcast about women and crime. They want to do an episode on Hannah Primrose, telling the "untold story" behind the grift and blackmail. At least, I think that's the angle.

"*Signorina, per favore, mantenga una distanza dal dipinto!*" the guard clucks over me. I smile apologetically at him, and instantly he relaxes. As he takes me in—pretty American in Florence—his eyes widen slightly.

"*Una foto?*" I cajole.

He smiles magnanimously. "*Sì, sì, sì.*"

During this whole exchange Maya is staring at me, something unreadable in her hazel eyes. She's in her mid-thirties with curly brown hair and a long chin. She likes to wear fitted thermal shirts over khaki pants from Gap, or long, shapeless dresses with a belt. We've already spent eight hours together. Four of them in the Uffizi this Saturday afternoon, which is bright with people, voices, smells. It was a condition I placed on my participation in the podcast. I never give without getting anything in return anymore. Or as the Italians say, *Non si fa mai niente per niente*.

Earlier that day we had strolled down the corridor—soaring, light filled, graceful with statues from antiquity—and passed by the paintings: Raphael’s *Madonna of the Goldfinch*; Caravaggio’s *Bacchus*. Onlookers were as thick as flies, jostling each other for real estate. Some just want the money shot; when they get it, they leave. Others fight to read the plaque but barely glance at the painting itself. A few—but only a few—will stand still, rooted in place: for seconds, minutes, sometimes whole afternoons, they’ll contemplate the old masters in a fugue delight.

“You never answered my question,” Maya says now. Her patience is starting to wear thin. She has largely let me talk this afternoon, interrupting only to clarify. Except once.

“Do you think you could’ve saved Kayla that night?” Maya asks.

Our eyes meet, and not for the first time I realize that I may never be as intimate, as revealing, to another person as I am to this stranger, knocking on my door, hand jiggling the doorknob to this innermost room, dark and damp, filled with skeletons and broken mirrors, that I’ll keep shut away for the rest of my life. For a second I almost want to crack the door. I almost want to show her.

I let my gaze fall back on the Gentileschi. At the detail I never noticed before. A single droplet of blood falling on Judith’s pale right breast.

Finally I look back at her. I smile, and say, “Do you?”



My post on Instagram—title: **Hannah Was Right All Along, Just Not in the Way You Think**—went viral, amassing more than one million likes in forty-eight hours. In it, I admitted everything: I was the one who was sleeping with Wyman, not Kayla; I wrote Hannah Primrose’s posts in collaboration with Kayla; I was behind the blackmail plot, just as much as her. This was no simple or straightforward story; it was filled with zigzags and serrated edges. Posting the story at midnight after I met with Avery at the diner, I was aware of the consequences. For once in my life, I wanted to take responsibility.

If I was going down, I was going down swinging. I laid out the evidence: the time-stamped texts and emails that, taken altogether, formed a damning portrait of a familiar tale. Professor Wyman abused his power. He

dangled internships at prestigious museums and galleries in exchange for sex with no fewer than four women—all under the age of twenty-one, all on scholarship. He had unprotected sex with all four of us.

In the end, I asked Hannah Primrose's followers: **Why is it that a man in this country can sexually assault a woman and then offer her \$\$\$ in exchange for her contractual silence and that transaction is legally binding and enforceable in a court of law? But if the victim offers her silence to her abuser in exchange for \$\$\$ that is blackmail, a felony punishable up to 25 years in prison? A transaction is "economically efficient" if there's an equal exchange of value. Each side needs to give up something. What's more valuable than a woman giving up her right to tell her story? Aren't these two transactions identical to each other except if it's initiated by a man it's law but if it's initiated by a woman it's a crime? Isn't the law of blackmail just an institution of misogyny?**

I guess all those Econ classes were worth something, after all.

Overnight, I was anointed an activist; the top-read headline the next day on *New York Magazine* read: **The Paradox of Blackmail—Faith Thibodeaux speaks out against her professor and ignites a fierce debate.** Op-eds and think pieces were written. Men in blue suits debated the merits of my arguments on Fox News and CNN. Right-wing podcast hosts called me a "bitch" and a "psycho cunt." On TikTok, girls recited my words, like an incantation, while applying a full face of makeup—hundreds of them, if not thousands; their mouths moving all at once, when I searched #BlackMail; they had co-opted my story, and I was glad. Of course, I recognized the irony of it all, that I had become famous for an idea that wasn't mine.

That I'd stolen the idea from Kayla.

Hannah Primrose's followers were, at first, livid. My mea culpa was an affront, a slap in the face. They'd been duped.

Or had they?

It was a Saturday. It was the last warm September rain, and I was in New Orleans for an interview; *Marie Claire* had put me up in a hotel in the French Quarter, only a block away from the Troubadour—that New Year's Eve party, with Kayla, seemed a lifetime ago. I'd flung the doors to the balcony wide open, to invite warm, crackling billows of air, swirling all around me. The darkening sky made a charcoal drawing out of New

Orleans and, as the rain fell, I watched as the lines of the city blurred, then melted away in inky streaks. It was Kayla's birthday. She would've been nineteen. "Happy birthday," I whispered.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. Scrolling through the folder on my phone named, simply, "K," I saw Kayla grow up—redheaded and blond, thick eyebrows and pencil-thin, matte lips and sparkly gloss and bodycon dresses and sweatpants—until Kayla reached the age that she'd always be. After a while, I found the right photo of us. I'd forgotten who'd taken it, or where. In it, Kayla and I are looking up, grinning. Our eyes are huge and black and reflective.

I logged in as Hannah Primrose and posted it. **Happy birthday to my best friend, my ride-or-die, and my brilliant collaborator Kayla Lightfoot, who the world knew as Hannah Primrose. I miss you every day. When Kayla was alive, we talked all the time about our vision for Hannah. We wanted Hannah to be bold and provocative, vulnerable and funny. In other words, the best parts of her, and the best parts of me. Since Kayla's death, I've thought long and hard about Hannah—if Hannah is dead too and, if that is true, what that says about me, and the role I played as her ghostwriter. There are no easy answers. But today, on her birthday, I remember this about Kayla: She always kept a Post-it Note in her bedroom with all her passwords. I made fun of her for it but, now, I wonder if Kayla was trying to tell me something about her legacy. That even if she was gone, she'd have wanted Hannah Primrose to continue.**

The post got 532,257 hearts and 15,432 comments—most of them overwhelmingly positive. Even Brenda commented—she had her own modest following now after her daughter's passing, based loosely on grief therapy and astrology—calling me her *second daughter*, with a string of heart and unicorn emojis. The couple dozen who called me creepy or opportunistic, I blocked.

A week later, I posted a photo of just me, dressed in my courtroom best—black blazer, oversize glasses, chunky gold earrings—right after the judge gave me probation and three months of community service for the blackmail charges. I got a slap on the wrist; of course I did. Still, my followers were outraged:

And HE isn't behind bars???

#OUTLAWNDAS

Ofc the judge was white male

You're my Joan of Arc

I dropped out of Harkness. After I finished my probation and community service, I hired a professional photographer. If Kayla was the cool, effortlessly beautiful Hannah, then I was relatable Hannah, the girl who'd mastered the art of self-optimization. I presented a carefully casual, perfectly imperfect, aesthetic: makeup-free selfies, quirky knitted hats, self-proclaimed "nerdy" posts about art history, photos of me at the occasional protest. And, as I—or Hannah—got older: Botox "self-care," Japanese chef's knives, the perfect black leather jacket, antidepressants, a Bernese mountain dog named Bo. Brands loved me because, even years, and hundreds of posts, later, I was still a vaguely tragic, and therefore uniquely compelling, figure on the internet. The products I endorsed—therapy apps and ceramic jugs, Japanese eyeliners and silk pajamas and, yes, celebrity tequila—routinely sold out in hours.

Even the Alpha Rhos followed me. Ginny was engaged to a tech millionaire; they lived in Menlo Park, and Ginny's feed leaned heavily on Cartier love bracelets and her social impact fund. I sporadically liked Ginny's posts; she'd reciprocate in kind. Our relationship, then, had not fundamentally changed since college. After graduating from Yale Law School, Andy worked as a PR flack for Scott Jones, who was running for New York City mayor. She was, unsurprisingly, outstanding at her job. Jones won. In a profile in the *Daily News*, Andy was described as some "ungodly combination of Lady Macbeth and Machiavelli in pearls."

Surprisingly, Andy wasn't the first of our generation to be featured on the cover of Harkness's alumni magazine. That distinction went to Regina Campbell, my former shift supervisor at the dining hall. She went on to be a cast member on *SNL*, and became the showrunner for an Emmy-winning TV series called *Ivy Mess Hall*, an upstairs-downstairs dramedy about students working lowly campus jobs, and the students they serve.

Henry Taylor became a right-wing celebrity, of sorts; the rehabilitation of Kayla in certain corners of the internet did nothing to hinder Henry's ascent as a frat-boy provocateur with millions of followers on TikTok. The last time I checked, he was banned from YouTube after he posted a video

arguing that “American women are going to make themselves extinct because no man is going to want to fuck them.”

And Wyman? I never came home that night after I met Avery at the diner, after we’d texted the other women and gotten their permission to use their texts, their proof of Wyman’s pattern of predation. I posted on Instagram from the back of an Uber on I-10, heading to New Orleans. All night, Wyman had texted me with increasing frequency and concern: **Faith, where are you? Are you OK? Are you coming home tonight? Did I do something wrong?** But the next morning—once the post was live—I heard nothing. I never heard from Wyman again. He resigned after a formal Title IX complaint was filed by Avery Chen and was even stripped of the title of the department chair named in his honor; these days, the post is named after another old white man: the *Burt G. Kempler Chair of the Humanities at Harkness College*. It should be noted that Wyman’s trustees plaque is still hanging in the main stairway of the Met.

Based on her LinkedIn, Callie is a lawyer too. Like Andy, she graduated from Yale Law and is working as a transactional lawyer in New York. She stopped posting on social media a few years after college; I was thrilled for her.

Avery got her PhD in archaeology at Brown University and is now an associate professor at Harkness, teaching the introductory and mid-level courses in Egyptology. I saw on Instagram she got married a few months back: Michelle was her maid of honor, and the other two girls who came forward were also in attendance. I never got the invite. I’d like to blame it on time—*so hard to keep in touch these days!*—but I know better. We all came forward against Wyman, but Avery was the one who put it all together, who sought us out and filed the Title IX complaint, and yet it was *my* story that people kept talking about, *my* voice that was elevated above the others, *my* face that became the first Google image when you search *Harkness #MeToo allegations*.



Outside the Uffizi, I say goodbye to Maya, who is stuffing her notepad and recorder into her shoulder bag. “When will the episode air?” I ask. Seven years of posting as Hannah, of schilling magnesium supplements and chat-

therapy apps to thousands, and I still can't mask that distinct note of anxiety in my voice.

Maya pauses. "Not for a while, I think," she says, and the caginess is there. "Fact-checking takes a while, of course, especially on our show, and I still need to interview Avery Chen."

"Right," I say. "Of course."

I watch Maya disappear into the crowd on the piazza, which is effervescent with lively conversations over checkered tables, the growl of careening Vespas. It is golden hour, aperitivo hour, that magical time of day when obligations evaporate, as weightless as the lines of sea-foam left by the tide. I take a deep breath and tell myself I'm okay, I'm in Italy.

But then, just like that, it all comes hurtling toward me, like a wave sweeping me off my feet.

I hear her voice as clearly as if it was just yesterday we were back in Gator Park. *That's how big we'll be someday. Big enough to travel the world and get a karaoke machine.*

There's a screeching of tires, and I'm standing in front of a taxi in the middle of the street. The taxi driver is yelling at me in Italian, gesturing wildly. He gets into the taxi, and I jump inches back as he peels away, and it's only then that I see *her*. Tall and thin, with red hair pulled into a messy American bun, she's standing on the corner of Via Nazionale with her back to me. At her side she's holding two plastic kitchen bags, and from this far away I think I see a pink wig sticking out of one of them.

I blink twice, and she's still there.

Heart pounding, I walk toward her. Three feet becomes two, then mere inches, when the girl turns.

It's not her. *Of course* it's not her. This girl has brown eyes, and up close I can see her dark roots. I've startled her, and she looks at me, wary. "Can I help you?" Midwestern accent.

I look down, and the bags at her feet aren't even plastic. They're bulky hiking backpacks, and there's a pink beanie lying on the top of a laundry bag.

What I *thought* I saw, what I so clearly imagined, means that I will not sleep tonight. Again. But now all I can do is smile brightly. "Can you take my photo?" I gesture widely toward the piazza just behind us, the two *fontane dei mostri marini*—the "Sea Monster Fountains," as they're called in the guidebooks. Twins of each other, the statues flank a larger equestrian

statue of Ferdinand I. The girl follows my gaze. The monsters lean on each other's backs, atop a mannerist proliferation of tritons, dragons, and other long-forgotten beasts—all shimmering, bioluminescent, in the honeyed light.

She agrees and walks with me toward the fountain. I feel her taking in my blowout, my expensive linen sundress. “Want one too?” I ask.

The girl giggles, charmed by me already. “Sure.”

She doesn't know how to pose. I half-heartedly snap away because I know the photos will be mediocre; after all these years—watching Kayla, emulating Kayla, and then practice, practice, practice—I know that a great photo is a state of mind, some strange alchemy of the right light, angles, and confidence. After the girl pretends to be satisfied with the photos, she takes a few for me. Okay, more than a few.

“Wow.” The girl is impressed. “Are you an influencer or something?”

“I'm pretty online,” I say.

After we exchange Instagrams, I extract myself. I check the time. It's four o'clock in Florence, ten o'clock in New York, nine o'clock in New Orleans, seven o'clock in Los Angeles. My followers are getting ready for the day, waiting: waiting for their coffee to brew, their classes to start, their bus to come, their boss to call, their hair to dry, that guy to text, the check to cash—for their lives to, finally, begin. In those liminal spaces, as my followers slip from the realm of one world to that of another, I exist. I post.

Girrrrrlllllll

!!!!

Where in Italy?

green looks amazing on you

mesmerizing

I wish I had your life 😊

your photos are amazing—wanna collab?

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