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bestselling author of *The Spare Room*

EVERYONE
WHO CAN
FORGIVE ME
IS DEAD

A NOVEL

JENNY HOLLANDER

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A NOVEL

Jenny Hollander



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*For Jean Woolley,
a godmother more magical than in any fairy tale*

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PROLOGUE

DR. NAZARI'S OFFICE, SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

Everyone who was there, or pretends they were there, says the same thing: the tabloids got it wrong. But they didn't, not really.

The articles said: *Charlotte Colbert escaped unscathed*. Which is true. While the others were in surgery or stretched out in the morgue, I was in the shower, scrubbing their blood from my neck and shoulders. The others were carried out; I walked out—or, more accurately, according to the photos, I was walked out, a paramedic hooked under each arm.

But I don't remember it. Which is why I'm here, as it happens.

They wrote: *There were no signs*. That's true, too, unless you knew what you were looking for. Which I didn't. I was twenty-three, for God's sake, charmed and clumsily in love. I didn't know shit.

They wrote, gleefully, about the bloody handprints on the white walls, the crack as the body—bodies—struck the ground. The reams of ivy that clung to the hundred-year-old building. True. True. True.

(That fucking ivy has nothing to do with anything. But this was never a story about murder, was it? Not for them. It was about pedigreed kids with blue eyes and Carroll University School of Journalism's six-figure price tag. The death toll, that was a bonus.)

Sometimes they wrote, *Charlotte Colbert, victim*, and sometimes they wrote, *Charlotte Colbert, survivor*, like they couldn't make up their minds.

The first thing you should know, Dr. Nazari, is that neither of those things are true.

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ONE

NOW

No need to panic. I say it to myself, like a prayer.

“The feedback is consistent,” says Walter Montague, the sixty-five-year-old president of *The Chronicle*. “Charlotte, we need more pages.”

I take a sip of water before responding, a tip I learned from our May feature about staying composed at work. *Don’t answer until you know exactly what you’ll say*, our career coach had advised. “Will we be getting more resources to that end? As you know, I’d love to bolster my fact-checking team. And another senior editor could—”

“No,” Walter says. “Maybe next year.”

“Exactly how many more pages did you have in mind?” I can hear my voice getting more upper-crust British by the second. This is something I learned early on: the more you channel the Queen, the more intimidated Americans feel.

“Sixteen,” Walter replies calmly.

Damn.

“Walter, as you know, we’re working with a skeleton staff.” Unfortunately, Walter also knows that if he told me to jump, I’d ask how high. “I would love to be putting out more pages. Our fashion team has some fantastic ideas in regard to shoots.” *In regard to?* Tone it down, Charlie. “However, at our current capacity, I’m not—”

“Sixteen pages,” Walter says. “Starting Q3.” He glances at his watch. “I need to go. Charlotte, it was a pleasure, as ever.”

It has never, not once, been a pleasure with Walter, who took over the corporation two years ago when his father died. I had just been named editor in chief of *C*, the Sunday supplement of *The Chronicle*, the nation’s fourth-largest newspaper. Walter took me to lunch and doused me in spittle as he ruminated on the “good old days,” the ones where “men could be men and women could be women.” I smiled with all my teeth, even let him “warm up” my hands between his, but no dice. That was the first time he demanded more pages from my team—more pages means more advertisers; more advertisers, more money—as easily as he’d ordered his salmon.

Now, I kiss him on each cheek, a trick I learned when I first moved to New York nine years ago. It makes Americans feel flustered and inadequate. “I hope you have a lovely time in Courchevel. Please tell Lianne I said hi.”

As soon as he’s gone, I drop into my seat beside Alicia, my executive editor. “Is he *joking*?” My voice has returned to its half-British, half-New Yorker twang. “Sixteen more *pages*? We’re barely filling them as it is.”

“We can squeeze four more pages out of Travel.” Alicia reaches for her Smythson and jots something down. “And we can expand gift guides through Q4 ... But we’ll have to figure something else out for January.”

“Christ.” I smooth down my trousers and get up. “Can you loop in Kristin and Mira when you get back? I’ll be up in ten. Fifteen, maybe.”

“You got it.” Alicia waves a manicured hand at the elevator bank. “You’re not taking the stairs, are you? It’s, like, twenty floors.”

“Absolutely,” I say. “It’s better than caffeine.”

★ ★ ★

It is *not* better than caffeine. It is sweaty and miserable, not to mention creepy. The stairwell is always empty, the only noise my heels click-clacking down the stairs. My team thinks it’s a type-A quirk: *You know Charlotte, can’t miss an opportunity to squeeze in a workout!* It’s part of the persona I’ve worked hard to cultivate: the dry boss who works harder, stays later, and demands the very best of her staff. Sometimes overeager interns

or new editors take the stairs with me, using my habit as an excuse for one-on-one time with the boss, but it never lasts. Thank God.

I stop to catch my breath, rifling through my Chanel for the extra-strong deodorant I keep with me for exactly this purpose.

I've been meaning to work on the elevator thing for years. Noor, my therapist, says that overcoming a traumatic memory starts with desensitization: standing in the elevator for a moment, not letting the doors close; next time, taking it down just one floor. But there's always someone in the elevator I know. I've worked at *The Chronicle* since I graduated from Carroll; I know everyone. And even if I didn't know them, they would know *me*. I stand out, thanks to my background and the *Forbes* profile and the work uniform I never deviate from (dark button-down and black trousers; anything I spill blends right in). Sometimes I think, I could go in on a Saturday and work on it. But I never do.

On the bright side, my calves are like rocks.

* * *

Back on floor eighteen, Mira is waiting for me in my office. She's the head of the Travel department, a curly-haired force of nature that can and does move mountains, but only if she thinks she'll get all the credit. I can't believe Julie, my assistant, just let her wander in. We're going to have to have another talk about people making appointments, *Julie*.

"Four more *pages*?" Mira says as I come in. "That's crazy, Charlotte. Q3? I don't even know where we'd begin."

I sit down and wait. I've worked with people like Mira before; I know how to handle this. I only wish I were enjoying a nice cup of tea while I do it.

"It's just not feasible, Charlotte!" Mira's voice is becoming more of a whine. "You *know* how low our shoot budget is. Art never pulls images that are strong enough, and some of the copy we're dealing with—"

"I hear you, Mira," I say. (This is something my first boss at *C* taught me: the "I hear you," followed by a meaningful silence. Works wonders, every time.) "I understand it's a big ask."

"It is," Mira says mournfully. "I just—"

“I believe we’re meeting Wednesday.” For effect, I click my mouse and stare at the screen, as though examining my calendar. The monitor isn’t even on. “I’d like if you could bring some ideas for how we can fill these pages. I know we can find a way.”

Mira just keeps staring at me.

Christ. “I know we can do this,” I repeat. “And I very much appreciate your hard work in advance.”

There it is. Mira’s face softens into a look of vindication. “Thank you,” she says. “You’re right. We always find a way, don’t we.” She pronounces “you’re” the British way, *yore*, rather than the American *yure*. I don’t know if people realize how often they veer into bad British when they’re trying to impress me. I can never decide if I’m annoyed or tickled by it.

After Mira leaves, I turn on my monitor and flick my eyes over my email. Julie has divided my messages into folders: “Urgent,” “Invites,” and “Ignore.”

At the top of the Urgent inbox, there’s an email from Jordan Ford. Subject line: “Some news.”

“Julie?” I call, my voice shaking only slightly. “Cup of tea, please?”

The emails, they’re a new development. *Hey, Charlie*, the first one started, a little more than two years ago. I could hear him say it, the way he came down hard on the *ar* in my name. *I get if you don’t want to hear from me*, the second admitted. *I hope you’re OK*. Then, bland congratulations on my promotion to editor in chief, and—what was the last one? God. The eight-year anniversary. *Shitty day*, he wrote, but he must have known I wouldn’t reply to that, either.

I run the cursor over his name. I don’t even realize I’ve clicked until the message opens.

Hey, Charlie,

I don’t think you read these. So. Hey, Charlie’s assistant. Charlie should read this one, it’s about Carroll.

Julie appears with my tea. I open my mouth to say something about the email—how dare Jordan bring up Carroll with my *assistant*—but then I close it again, uncharacteristically lost for words. It’s enraging. I *never* get

tongue-tied in the office. Is my ex-boyfriend going to follow me around for the rest of my life, clawing away at the trappings of my grown-up, gotten-past-it-thank-you-very-much self?

“Thanks,” I mutter to Julie, but she’s already closing the door.

I saw Steph last night. She says it’s time to set the record straight. Her words, not mine.

I wrap my fingers around the mug. It’s burning hot, the way I like it. The china stings the undersides of my fingers. It helps, but only a little.

She wants to produce a movie about it. A “based on a true story” type of thing. For the ten-year. She already has a studio and a director signed on.

I picture an actress, someone springy and self-conscious like I was at twenty-three, sliding down the wall of a small room, her eyes wide with shock. Someone else yelling, “Cut!”

She says all of us should be involved. Says it’s our story, too. She’s pretty intense about the whole thing, I guess because of what happened to Cate.

I’m breathing too quickly. The edges of my vision are starting to blur. *Go home*, a voice in my head says sternly. *Pull yourself together. Figure it out. You can figure this out.*

I asked about you. She said you wouldn’t want in. But I thought you should know.

Jordan

I fumble for my phone. “Hi,” I say when the familiar voice answers. “I, I need to see you. As soon as possible.”

***INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY AARON KATZ FOR HIS
BOOK THE FALL: THE DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF THE
CARROLL TRAGEDY***

Stephanie Anderson, host of KBC's *This Evening with Stephanie Anderson*: That night changed the course of my life. It was terrible, but it also made me who I ... Wait, let me say that again. It was a tragedy. It changed me, but it also ... No, let me try again, thanks. Living through something like that, it humbles you, and I came out of it a better reporter, a better human being. Use that, please.

Gunnar Korhonen, Weinhart Prize-winning investigative journalist: It was extremely surreal. We spent so long studying reporting, and then we are the story.

Jordan Ford, managing editor, WNBC: I don't remember a lot from that time, obviously.

Gunnar: Things like this happen all the time, but because of the way it happened, because of the people involved, it became so big.

Jordan: I do. Sorry, not a full sentence. I still get recognized. Yeah. You can tell because they stare. Don't say anything, just stare.

Gunnar: All right, maybe these things do not happen all the time. That was an exaggeration. That night, it was unique. I do not know a better word for it.

Jordan: They wouldn't leave us alone.

Gunnar: The press, they treated us like zoo animals. Prodding, poking. The way they shouted at us. *Gunnar! Gunnar! What is the last thing you remember?*

Stephanie: Every time I cover a crime on the show, every time I interview someone accused of something terrible, I see her face.

Despite numerous attempts to reach out, Charlotte Colbert did not respond to requests for an interview.

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TWO

NOW

When I get to the office marked “Dr. Nazari,” hidden inside a labyrinth of rooms in a Columbus Circle doorman building, I swap my heeled boots for sneakers—I’ve been in America so long, I don’t even think the word “trainers”—and pull an old sweater over my button-down. I’ve found I need a physical transition between my *C* self and my therapy self. Otherwise, I find myself talking to Noor in clipped tones, saying things like, “That’s part of my projected growth in Q2.” I’m exaggerating, but only a little. I’m paying a lot of money for someone to help me untie the knots in my head; I need to make sure it’s worth it. So, the sneakers and sweater.

“Charlotte,” Noor says in her gentle voice. She beckons me inside.

“Hi.” My voice is different when I talk to Noor, too—more low-key, more like I used to sound. *C* me, brusque and plummy, has to be shaken off like old skin. “Thanks for squeezing me in.”

“Of course,” Noor says. “You said it was an emergency?”

Gingerly, I lower myself onto the sofa. The movement—the feeling that I’m about to break—reminds me of my mum. “Steph wants to make a movie about it,” I say without preamble. “For the ten-year. I don’t know what to do.”

This isn’t exactly true. I spent the last few hours coming up with a Plan A, a Plan B, and a last-ditch emergency measure. But it’s not like I can tell Noor about those.

“This is Stephanie Anderson?” Noor says. “The KBC anchor?” She writes something down. “She was at Carroll University with you? The twin sister of...” She trails off. The word *Cate*—one of several we don’t use in this room—hangs between us.

“Yes.”

“And somebody would play you in this movie?”

“Of course.” It feels like there’s something stuck in my throat. There isn’t, obviously. It’s just what happens when I talk about Carroll. “Steph would cast someone, I guess.”

“I see.”

“I can’t,” I tell her. Usually I’m clear-eyed and composed in these sessions; I like to think I’m Noor’s most articulate patient. “I *can’t*,” I repeat.

“What can’t you do?” Noor asks.

“I can’t relive it. Not again.”

It’s the truth. There’s more, of course. But that much is true, too.

“You survived ... *it* before,” Noor says carefully. Early on, I made her a list of terms to avoid. *Scarlet Christmas. Gunnar Korhonen. Cate Anderson.*

“But, this...” I try. Then I stop.

There were parts of me that did not survive. This I can say to Noor. What I can’t say is that if my lies are uncovered, I have no idea what will be left.

“This is different,” I say finally.

“Is it?” Noor says mildly. “Let’s talk about that. When it happened, you survived. When the book came out, you survived that, too.”

The book. I didn’t know it at the time, but Aaron Katz was building a time bomb from the moment *it* happened. In the weeks and months afterwards, the story was everywhere, complete with the moniker I do not say and never have. Just when I thought it had all died down, Katz got his book deal. *The Fall* came out on the second anniversary: *the first complete account of a tragedy that transfixed a nation, told by the people who were there.* And like an idiot, I read it.

It shattered me.

Months later, when I could leave my apartment again, after the prescriptions and the therapies and all the debt, I realized I no longer wanted to be a writer. There weren't any words for what had happened. It wasn't that I couldn't find them, it was that they didn't exist. Instead, I decided to become an editor: I wanted to work with words that already existed, not fish around for my own. Not when it felt so frustrating, so pointless.

I decided a lot of things that year. Like: I would never allow myself to break like that again.

"Things are different now," Noor is saying. "We've been working together, what is it, seven years? Think of the skills you've developed. The ones you didn't have when we first met."

When we first met. Before Tripp, before C, before the Upper East Side town house and my green card. Tripp likes to talk about the moment he first saw me: "Drinking by yourself, making eyes at the servers," he says. "I saw you and I thought, *She has to be the most interesting person in the room.*" (Then I say: "And then I started talking," which always gets us a laugh at dinner parties.) But I prefer when Noor tells me about the first time she saw me. Masochistically, I like when she tells me I was bone-thin, gray, eyes darting around the room like a trapped animal. It reminds me that I am no longer that girl. That I could not go back to being her.

When I say that out loud, Noor gives me her usual spiel about how we are all only evolved versions of our past selves, that we carry all of them around in us like Russian dolls. I don't often ignore Noor, but I do then.

She says, "Let's talk about the building blocks of your life."

We've done this exercise before. It's meant to remind me that if one block falls—Tripp and I break up, for example—the others will stand. To be honest, it makes me feel like my life is a series of dominoes waiting to fall at once, but Noor says that's my brain playing tricks on me. "Work," I say immediately. "I am respected and admired at work. I was on the '40 Under 40' list, a Person of the Year, I've won two awards for innovation in media, I was profiled by *Forbes*." I'm starting to feel more like myself again.

"What else?"

“Well, Tripp. This time next year, he’ll be my husband.” I picture Tripp: his boyish, toothy grin, the way his hand shook when he held out the box with his grandmother’s ring. I remember it because it was so at odds with Tripp’s famous certainty. He loved me enough to be afraid. Until then, I had never seen him afraid. “And my family in London, of course. My sister.” Felicity, eighteen years old and the person I love most in the world. “My mum and dad.”

I’ll never forgive myself for what my family had to go through because of me. The reporters beating on Mum’s front door, the *Daily Mail* headlines, the kids in Felicity’s class asking questions until she cried. I was numb at that point, living in a thick gray cloud, but I can’t bear to think of it now. As if my parents hadn’t been through enough.

“My mum and dad, they love Tripp,” I say abruptly. “They’re so proud of ... everything. They special-order *The Chronicle* so they can read my magazine, even though it comes, like, a month late.” My mum, I know, tells everyone about me: the grocer, the neighbors, Felicity’s occupational therapist. *Charlie’s still in New York with her big job, you should see where she lives now, she’s getting married, can you believe it?*

“That’s sweet,” Noor says. “What else?”

“Well, Olivia, of course.” My friendship with Liv was one of the few things to survive what happened—I think of it like a nuclear blast, raining down on parts of my life—and only because she wouldn’t leave me alone. To this day, my best friend calls at least once a week and visits once a year, staying for exactly four days each time, Thursday through Sunday. She’s hasn’t visited this year, but that’s because she just had a baby. I’ve met it over FaceTime. It’s sort of weird-looking.

“Anything else?” Noor says.

“Well. New York.”

I wouldn’t tell anyone but Noor this, because it’s too cheesy. But after everything went down, I fell in love with the city. Before, I didn’t see the big deal: it was too hot or too cold, it was dirty and brash and expensive. It was like London, but meaner, pricier, and with a harsher climate.

“I could never leave,” I say now. “I love everything about it, even the ugly parts.”

It's a survivor's city, New York. People wander around dressed like Smurfs and Spider-Man, singing to themselves with snakes wrapped around their necks, but they'll grab hold of your hand if you have a panic attack on the subway (Londoners would *never*). This city makes you feel immortal, because when you get screamed at, fawned over, and given a free coffee in the space of a half hour, you feel like you must be. The brisk pace is like a sea tide, always ready to sweep you back on your feet. They say you're a New Yorker when you've lived in the city a decade. I have eight months to go.

"I have a few things to add," Noor says. "You take care of yourself in a way that you didn't before, Charlie. You eat, even when you don't feel hungry." Noor knows that hunger is the first thing to go when things get the best of me. "You take plenty of supplements." Tripp, who believes that the key to a well-lived life is a combination of golf and supplements, is behind that one. "You work out."

"I didn't take care of myself before because I was young," I clarify in defense of my younger self, who subsisted on dollar pizza slices and twenty-dollar cocktails.

"Yes. And now you're older, you know how to care for yourself better," Noor says.

I think, but don't say: *I also have so much more to lose.*

Sometimes I wonder if any of it—my job, Tripp, our life—would have happened if *it* didn't happen. I can't imagine having any of these things otherwise. The way I used to be—happy-go-lucky, naïve, and open—somehow doesn't fit with Tripp, who is so type A that his brothers call him the Hammer (it doesn't help that Tripp has quite a square head). It doesn't fit with my job at C. But I think everyone feels that way about their younger self.

"I wonder," Noor says, "if now would be a good time to talk about it."

"We are talking about it," I shoot back, like a child.

She ignores me. "We could start at the beginning." Her voice is still gentle, but animated now. "When you arrived in New York. We can work our way to that night. Slowly." She waves a hand around the room. "Safely. Whenever you need to stop, we stop."

“Why?” I croak, though I know. Noor has been pushing this—trauma processing, I think it’s called—on me for years. *Our work, it can only go so far*, she’s said, gently at first and then more sternly, *if we don’t talk about what happened*.

Now she says, “Think of your brain as a factory.” This, too, I’ve heard before. “Most things that happen—your brain can process them, turn them into memories. But when something terrible occurs, like what you went through, Charlie, the factory doesn’t know how to handle it. The machines break. Everything shuts down. The memory is never processed, and it becomes—what did you call it?—a black hole.”

I said that during my first session. *Dr. Nazari, that night, it’s like a black hole*.

“Your brain is trying to protect you, by not letting you remember. By reacting like it does in certain situations.” Elevators. Sudden movements. The first snow of the season. “It doesn’t want to shut down again. But if we break down that year into pieces, over a number of sessions, in a safe and supportive space...” Her voice is so hopeful. “Your mind can process the events of ... the incident. It would become memory—a terrible memory, of course,” she adds quickly. “But one you’d be more ... desensitized to.”

“And I’d remember all of it.” It comes out accusatory.

“That I don’t know.” Noor gives me a tiny smile. “But it could help. It would help, Charlie, in my opinion.”

Your opinion is not what I pay you for. I think it. I don’t say it. Hundreds of dollars, every week, as you well know, so I can learn how to orbit around it: how to breathe, how to speak to myself, how not to drown in feeling. Your opinion isn’t—

But she’s still talking. “The ten-year, it was always going to be a challenge, Charlie. Even before this. That night, it’ll be back in the news. People will ask you about it. They’ll be far more demanding than me.” Another gentle smile, like we’re sharing a secret. “This work, it could make it easier on you. When Stephanie’s film comes out—”

“If her film comes out,” I interrupt.

“Yes. Of course.” Noor indicates the wall clock. “We’re at time, Charlie. Think about it. Either way, I want you to remember this: Whatever

happens next, you will be able to survive it. You've come a long way."

I wish I could tell her the truth. I usually do, you know. *You're right, Noor, I have come a long way. I have so much further to fall than I did when I first started lying about this.*

★ ★ ★

There's an electronics store with a TV in the window close to the Fifty-seventh Street subway. It's always set to KBC, Steph's station. Usually I see her only in previews—my sessions with Noor are between six and seven, and Steph's show doesn't start until eight—but our emergency session ran late, and as I walk towards the subway I can feel Steph's eyes on me, green and glinting like her sister's.

Sometimes I cross the road so I don't have to see her. But tonight I don't bother. She's all I can think about, anyway. Tonight on *This Evening with Stephanie Anderson*, Steph is wearing a fitted navy dress—Pyer Moss, I think—and pearl earrings. She hasn't aged much in nine years, though I'm sure she's had plenty of work done for that effect. She could be twenty-five. I remember Steph as icy and more than a little terrifying—it was her charm, the way she could turn it on and off like a light—but on camera she looks soft, almost benevolent.

I stop to watch her. Her guest says something and she tilts her head back, laughing, her blown-out hair stroking her shoulder blades. Like she doesn't have a care in the world.

I think of Jordan's email: *Steph says it's time to set the record straight. Steph says it's time.*

Watching her, I think of my own sister. My mum and dad. If Steph does this, it will start up again. The paparazzi in the bushes, the grainy Polaroids in the tabloids. My parents are sixty-three and sixty-nine, but they look a decade older; their grief over Adam aged them, left them frail and slow-moving before they turned forty. My dad forgets to take his blood pressure medication. My sister is old enough to ask questions they won't be able to answer. It will be too much for them, if it happens again.

But it won't happen again, I realize.

This time, it will be worse.

Nine years ago, I was a nobody. Now, I'm an editor in chief, a soon-to-be heir, a person who has been professionally photographed in high definition a hundred times. The only living member of our group who hasn't spoken out. That's what they'll write, over and over again. There's nothing more tantalizing to the press than a shiny, pretty person who won't spill the beans. They were annoyed before that I wouldn't talk. This time around, they'll be furious.

I watch Steph's lips move as she fixes the camera with that classic Steph stare: a hint of a smile, flecked eyes staring straight at you. For Steph, this film is a vanity project, a way to humanize herself. The opening credits will build to a title card: *For Cate*, the words shimmering and then disappearing. Because it isn't enough to be successful and beautiful and unencumbered. Even I know that. You need a tragic origin story, or half of America will flick to a different channel, muttering to a spouse, "Kind of pushy, isn't she?"

I curl my hands into fists at my sides. I can't let her do this.

I won't.

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THREE

THEN

TEXT FROM MSNBC DIGITAL ARTICLE “BREAKING: CARROLL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FOUND DEAD”

Dec. 24, New York City—Six current students of Carroll University’s Graduate School of Journalism were found in serious or critical condition on Sunday evening. All were discovered on campus and taken by ambulance to Bellevue Hospital, where three of the students were pronounced dead.

Authorities have not released the names of the students, nor the nature of their injuries. Two additional students were taken to Bellevue and treated for shock. A spokesperson for Carroll University noted that the incident did not involve gunfire, as was initially speculated, but declined to provide further details.

The university has been closed until further notice.

This is a developing story and will be updated.

NOW

It takes longer than it should for the Q train to huff and puff its way to the Upper East Side. Tripp doesn’t understand why I don’t use a town car—my predecessor at C, Tabitha, hadn’t set foot on the subway since 1987—but I hate it, the prolonged silence and the tight, bland interior. Most days, I like

the blaring and groaning of the subway, the scattered conversations and terrarium-style lighting. It soothes me. Drowns everything else out.

Today, though, I just want—to quote my mum, on her good days—a *moment of bloody peace*.

Because I know, have known from the moment Noor brought it up: I have to go back. Not just because I'm tired of the panic that whips through me every time someone says, *Hey, remember that story ...* or *Hey, you look just like ...* Not just because I've spent years forcing myself to exist in the world without putting pressure on the part of me that once broke. No, the reason I need to do this is because the records are public now, were quietly released on the seven-year mark. Sealed during the first crush of coverage and for the release of Aaron's book—a judge ruled that private interviews with our classmates and the parents involved could “invite more intrusive attention”—the records became public almost two years ago, available to anyone who might file a Freedom of Information Act request.

A couple of journalists did. I started taking Klonopin again, popping one like a breath mint whenever I checked my Google alert. Stopped eating, again, for a little while.

But nothing happened. Slowly, I unwound once more.

Steph, though—she knows what she's doing. She'll use quotes from the interviews—my interviews, recorded in the days that followed when I was stupid and privileged enough to not even have a lawyer present. She'll have entire teams to pore over primary documentation, eyewitness reports, and time-stamped photos, hungry for material. Which they'll find, if they look hard enough.

If—when—they stumble across the discrepancies, the details that don't add up, I need to know more than I know now.

Sitting on the Q train, I think: *Why wait?*

THEN

No need to panic. I said it to myself, like a prayer.

“I said,” the JFK border patrol officer repeated, his voice bored, “what're your intentions in the United States of America?”

I couldn't seem to speak. Partly because of the thick gun strapped to the officer's hip, but also because I somehow expected him, or somebody else in charge, to tell me the answer. "Graduate school, sir," I said finally.

"Yeah?" The officer scratched his face. "What school?"

I couldn't stop looking at the gun. "The Carroll University Graduate School of Journalism. Sir."

"Four fingers of your right hand up against the scanner," the officer said. "That's it. Hold, now. S'good school, Carroll. Isn't it?"

Carroll's journalism school: the Harvard of J-schools, the equivalent of saying, "So there" when someone asks snootily about your credentials. I never thought I'd get in, never even seriously considered applying. But after a bad date, I found myself filling out the online forms—I kept thinking about how the guy had said, *Don't you think you'd be getting paid to write by now if you were any good?*—and afterward I thought, God, that was stupid, and forgot all about it. Until the letter came.

The hard part was telling my sister. Felicity was nine, a waiflike kid with long, Bambi-like lashes and a service dog named Five. (She'd picked the name because she was five when she got him. It sort of made sense at the time.) The year before, when I'd graduated from university and moved back into my parents' house in London, she'd been ecstatic. "Now we're *real* sisters," she said. To Felicity, moving to America might as well be moving to the moon. "But Charlie just got home," she told my mum, her voice bewildered.

I was thinking of Felicity's muffled howl at the airport, her little head pressed into my chest, as I tried to find the graduate dorms among the leafy chaos of the West Village. By the time I found the building, marked by a large flag in Carroll's trademark olive green, I was holding back tears. A sleepy-looking doorman handed me a set of keys labeled "4F" and directed me to a small, shadowy room on the fourth floor. There was a battered-looking bed frame and mattress, a wardrobe, a tiny en suite, and—was that...?—a cockroach lying on its back. *Oh my God*, I thought. As I stared at it, one of its legs twitched.

"Wait, you're here!" A voice made me jump. "Oh! That's a big one."

I turned to see a girl about my age standing in the doorway. Edging out in front of me, she pulled off a fluffy yellow slipper and nudged the cockroach. “Like, fully dead,” she confirmed. Darting into the bathroom, she grabbed a chunk of toilet paper and wrapped it up. Then she slid open the window and dropped the mummified cockroach out onto Third Street.

“Thanks,” I mumbled. (What if it *hit* someone?)

“Oh my God, you’re British!” The girl slid the window open farther. “It’s musty in here, isn’t it? You know, I spent a semester in France. Bordeaux!”

“Cool,” I said, not quite following.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I was just going to the bathroom. Fate!” The girl plopped herself down on the bare mattress and beamed at me. She had nice eyes, flecked and friendly. “You’re the last one on this floor? Floor three is the business school people—they’re not much fun, I did try—and floor two is med students. Oh, also, I’m Cate?” For all of her confidence, the girl’s voice rose uncertainly at the end of sentences, like she was perpetually asking a question. “Cate Anderson? I’m from near here, well, sort of. Greenwich. I’ve never lived in the city before, though. I just moved in yesterday?”

It took me a beat to realize she’d stopped talking. “I’m Charlie. Charlotte. People call me Charlie.”

“Let me guess,” Cate said excitedly. “You’re from London! Do you want a muffin?”

I did, in fact, want a muffin. I also wanted to sleep for the next forty-eight hours, but I’d take a muffin. “Yes. To both.”

Cate disappeared and returned with a muffin and a napkin. “You probably want some tea, too,” she said. She had one of those bright, open faces, pockmarked with acne scars and pink with excitement. “You know, being British? Our TA, Dee—she’s on this floor, too—she has an electric kettle, you should get one. You’re so lucky to have an en suite, the communal bathroom is the worst. Which stream are you in?”

“Magazine,” I said, munching. It was quite a good muffin. Apple cinnamon.

“Me, too! My sister, she goes here as well, she’s across the hall. We’re not super close, though. You’ll meet her, you’ll get it.” Cate stopped suddenly and twisted a lock of limp hair around her finger. “I’m talking too much, aren’t I? Sorry. You must be, like, so tired.” She peered at me. “I mean, you *look* really tired.”

“It’s okay,” I said. The muffin was unexpectedly restorative. “You’re fine.”

“No, no, you should rest!” She leapt to her feet. “You have, like, blankets, right? And a pillow?”

“Um. No. But I have some clothes. I can sleep under them, it’s fine.”

“Dude, *no*.” Cate tore out of the room and returned with a plush blanket and a pillow. “Here, have these. The blanket is Carroll green! My dad bought it from the gift shop, he’s such a goof.”

“Thank you,” I said awkwardly.

“Totally cool!” She waved at me as she skipped out. Each of her fingernails were painted a different color, bright and sloppy. “I’m in 4D, by the way?”

That was how Cate Anderson pinwheeled into my life.

★ ★ ★

It was a good story, that I up and moved to America because I applied to an out-of-my-league school on a whim. But there were other parts, too, parts that don’t tell as well. Like: I knew I could afford it, because my late grandmother had left me a chunk of the money from her long-ago investment in a French biscuit factory—the “biscuit money,” our family calls it. Also: I kept waking up in my childhood bedroom and staring at the crown moldings and thinking: *I can’t live at home any longer*.

Not out of principle, mind you; I *liked* living at home. But photos of Adam are everywhere in our house. I’d see him in his crib while spooning cereal into my mouth, walk past his awestruck expression as I left for my shift at the bar. And every time I looked at his gummy grin—Adam died before his baby teeth had a chance to come in—I would remember that I was using my one and precious life to squelch across a grimy bar to hand gin and tonics to strangers. That I was twenty years older than my brother

would ever be and still sleeping in the canopy bed I'd begged my parents for when I was in kindergarten.

My parents. They're in those photos, too. Even worse than Adam's smile are their hopeful, happy faces. There are tubes snaking out of their son, but they still look more joyful than I've ever seen them. So much younger, too, even though Adam died just a year before I was born. My mum and dad never once said it was up to me to make them proud, to live a spectacular life because Adam didn't get to, but seeing those pictures, day in and day out, it shamed me. I thought, *I can't keep letting them down.*

Then, one evening, close to a year after I'd graduated, I was at a restaurant with a Scottish guy Olivia had set me up with, a trainee banker whose face was so damn *smug*, and he said, "What do you really want to do?"

I told him, "I want to write."

Which was true. In the weeks after I'd moved back in with my parents, I'd applied everywhere: the big newspapers, the fashion titles, the up-and-coming websites. "When you have more experience," a few wrote. "When we have more room to hire," others claimed. Eventually, a friend of my dad's offered me a job at one of the pubs he managed, and that was that.

The Scottish guy said: "Well, are you any good?"

"Hope so," I said, taking a gulp of my wine.

"But if you were, wouldn't someone be paying you to do it?" His watery eyes bore into mine. "You know, by now?"

It stung, but in the same way a paper cut stings. He wasn't saying anything I didn't know. Still, over the next hour, I polished off the better part of a bottle of wine and let the righteous rage build. Who the hell did he think he was? Some of us want more than just to make *money*! And the voice in my head: *Charlie, you're hardly even doing that.*

So I said a frosty goodbye and went home and went to bed, and the next day I took three ibuprofen and applied to Carroll's journalism school. Not to *go* there, obviously. But to prove to this man, and to myself, that I was going to do something with my life. Shoot for the moon, land among the stars, all of that shit.

I wasn't expecting to actually *land on the moon.*

I wrote about Felicity for my essay. How her Down syndrome scared me at first. How I avoided her for the first part of her life while she toddled around, arms outstretched. How, around her fifth birthday, I started letting her climb into bed with me. I fell so hard for my sister that year, lying next to her while she burred about something or other and I combed her golden hair with my fingers, made her laugh by pulling silly faces. When I left for university, I rang home every evening so she could tell me what she and Five did that day. In three years, I never missed a night.

I cried while writing the essay. I'd never been so aware of what my life might have been like without Felicity, how much joy she'd brought all of us. I knew I could never leave her behind. But it was Carroll, it was bloody *Carroll*, so I wasn't going to have to.

And then I got in. And then, before I'd thought it through, I told my parents.

"But it's too expensive," I said.

"Biscuit money," my dad said quietly.

"Felicity," I said.

"You can still ring her," my mum said. "As much as you like."

"Kiddo," my dad said, "we're just so proud of you."

The only person I ever told the truth was Dee. That if it hadn't been for my dad's streaming eyes and my mum's quiet awe, I would have stayed exactly where I was. That I wasn't brave, wasn't ambitious, just afraid of letting them down. I thought Dee would understand. Which makes me wince, now. I should have known, even at twenty-three, that the hopes of my grieving parents and the dreams of Dee's Indian American father were not the same.

Dee's father. Hunar. I met him only the once. I didn't recognize him at first: I'd seen photos of Dee's gentle giant of a father, heard her stories about Hunar's braying laugh and impromptu speeches, but the man at her funeral was bent over and vacant, his eyes clouded over as he chanted along with the priest. I wanted to tell him the truth. But it was kinder, I thought—I still think—for Hunar to accept the public version of events. Besides, even that day, standing in my stiff white dress while Dee was being turned to ash, I think I knew. That I was beyond redemption.

NOW

I can't—I have to—

The train doors are closing but I throw myself between them and half fall onto the platform, forcing gulps of air into my lungs, I can't get enough air—

Then the train is gone and I'm too close to the edge, *don't black out, Charlie, for fuck's sake*, and someone has my elbow—God bless New Yorkers—and is yanking me away from the tracks—“Are you crazy, lady? C'mon!”

“Sorry,” I gasp, “I'm sorry...”

The air is reaching the base of my lungs, now, my heartbeat is slowing, and I'm—oh, God, I'm still holding on to a hairy stranger. “Sorry,” I say again, and stagger towards the exit.

A safe and supportive space, Noor said.

Not the fucking Q train, Charlie. Don't pull that shit again.

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FOUR

NOW

By the time I get back to the town house, it's almost nine. Briskly, I hang my coat in the foyer, push aside the fronds of the palm tree. Jesus, the palm tree. My first apartment in New York had a shower next to the oven and a line of ants ambling between the bed and the trash, and now there's a goddamn palm tree in my foyer.

"Hi, baby," Tripp calls from the kitchen.

I didn't understand the gravity of Tripp's wealth until I saw this place. I actually nearly broke up with him that night. The piano, the working fireplace, the eagerness in Tripp's eyes as he handed me a God-knows-how-expensive bourbon in a crystal glass—it was all too much. "You're becoming very special to me, Charlie," he told me that night, a month after our first date, and I wanted to cry, I wanted to get up and leave, but I didn't do either of those things.

We met through Theo, Olivia's sister. Theo, who was going by Theodore then, was in New York for the annual all-hands at Goodman West's SoHo headquarters. Theo worked—still works—for a small London imprint owned by GW, the New York-based publishing behemoth founded in 1906 by Tripp's great-grandfather. Its all-hands, Theo told me, was her favorite event of the year; Goodman West flew them all over in business class and put them up at a fancy downtown hotel.

Theo invited me to a GW cocktail party as her plus-one. Technically, the plus-ones were meant for spouses, but Theo insisted I come. I had a feeling Olivia had asked her sister to keep an eye on me, though it had been two years since Aaron's book set off what Noor and I call my "episode." Still, I'd attended enough of those events through *C* to know that you can eat a dinner's worth of appetizers if you commit to it, and I was an associate editor living on leftover lo mein at the time, so it was a no-brainer.

The party was held in a Marriott ballroom in the Financial District. I lost Theo quickly, but I didn't care. There was an open bar and appetizers aplenty, so I plopped myself down at the bar with a champagne flute and accepted any food that passed me by. I was drained from work—I was getting to the office at six then, leaving close to nine, scrabbling my way up the masthead—and it was nice, not having to talk to anyone. I liked watching people flit around, breathlessly forming circles of conversation that dissipated as its members gravitated towards other, louder circles. It's possible I was a little drunk.

I was jolted out of my reverie by the loud, I'm-so-maligned sigh of the man sitting next to me. He ordered a whiskey sour from a barman who, it seemed to me, rushed over to serve him—nobody had seen fit to refill my champagne, but sure—and he took a loud gulp, like he was making a point. Then he swiveled his stool around so that he, like me, was facing the crowd. I ignored him in favor of my crab cake.

"That looks good," the man said, his voice crisp.

"It is, thanks," I said, and took another bite.

"Hey, you're British."

"Yup."

"Been in the States long?"

"A while." I didn't bother to turn to face him. I had one objective for the evening, and it centered on appetizers.

"So you work here?"

"No."

"Oh. So why are you here?"

Clearly, ignoring him wasn't working. "I'm not really meant to be here." I turned to face him, just for a moment. He was attractive, if you

were into that sort of thing: wide smile, a smattering of freckles. “Don’t tell anyone.”

He looked amused. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I said. A server swooped in to offer me something pink wrapped in prosciutto; I took it. “I’m a journalist.”

“You’re writing about Goodman West?”

“God, no,” I said. “That would be so boring. No offense.”

The man laughed, a little too hard. “None taken,” he said.

“Are you from New York?” I asked. I’d heard that people born and raised in the city were mildly unhinged.

“I am,” he said. He had kind eyes, crinkled up at the corners with laugh lines. “Not the city, though. I grew up a little outside of here, in a suburb. Westchester.”

“We have a West Chester, too, at home,” I told him between bites of my prosciutto-wrapped ... something. The champagne was going to my head. “I keep hearing town names that are the same as the ones in England. Manchester. Rochester. Cambridge.”

“It’s all the English settlers,” the man said. He didn’t elaborate, which I liked. Men trying to explain American history to me were—are—the bane of my life.

There was a pause, and then he said, “I’m Tripp, by the way.”

“Charlotte.” I spotted another server. “Hey, do you think those are baby ribs?”

He squinted. “Roasted asparagus, I think. Sorry to burst your bubble.”

We talked for another few minutes. Servers flocked to him like a magnet, and I got to try everything: fried calamari, pineapple on skewers, burgers the size of my thumb. I could tell he was flirting with me, but I didn’t care. I hadn’t been interested in anyone in years.

Tripp asked me out that night. I said why not (that’s a direct quote, unfortunately; I made sure it was kept out of the *Times* announcement). No doubt propelled by the invisible force that was Olivia, Theo had been at me about “moving on.” I thought this would get them both off my back.

It did. Later that night, Theo told me Tripp’s full name: William Goodman West III.

★ ★ ★

Now, as I wander into the kitchen, he's there: shirtsleeves rolled up, his face puckered in concentration as he slices a bell pepper: *chop-chop-chop*. "Dinner in twenty," he says when he sees me.

The idea of eating makes me feel ill. "Great," I say faintly.

"Come here," he says, wiping his hands on a dish towel. I let him brush his mouth against mine, wrap a strong arm around my waist. Let myself exhale, just for a moment. "Today was a fucking nightmare," he says into my hair. "Toby and Trent were at it again."

Toby and Trent are the other two Goodman Wests, the second and third in line to the throne. Lazy and arrogant, they alternately try to undermine Tripp as the head of GW or convince him to appoint them as VPs, depending on their mood. "What happened?" I make myself ask.

"Took me out to lunch, plied with me with wine from the expense account, tried to convince me the Lockton acquisition was a bad idea." He dramatically scrapes cubes of pepper into a pan. "You know, the usual. Two hours of my day. I'll have to go in early tomorrow. Crack of *dawn*."

He's exaggerating. For all his talk about being the only Goodman West with a work ethic, Tripp never gets up before eight A.M. It's one of the perks of inheriting your own company. I pour myself a glass of red and say nothing.

"How was your meeting with Walter?" Tripp takes a quick sip of his own wine. I've perfected it myself, the rich-person sip: the rim of the glass just kissing your mouth, the barely perceptible swallow. Since living with Tripp, I've also quietly relearned how to eat pasta (curl the strands around your fork, then dab the corners of your mouth with a serviette between bites) and make coffee (grind the beans, push down delicately on the French press).

"You know," I say. "Fine."

"Let's watch a movie tonight." He spears a couple of steaks onto a skillet, sprinkles a little salt and pepper, flips them over. The steaks start to sizzle, ooze a little blood. "I need a distraction," he's saying, but I'm still on edge from the episode on the subway, the memories of Cate and Hunar, and

that must be why I take a tiny step back, why my heart, my stomach, all of my organs are lurching.

Shit.

What did Noor say, when this was happening almost constantly? Notice the feelings, that was it. Name them. Don't fight them.

I feel the thumping of my heart. I feel the tingling in my fingertips. I feel my breath quicken.

Noor would ask: How bad is it, out of ten?

Four. Five, maybe. I can still breathe.

"Aren't your sessions Tuesdays?" Tripp is saying.

"A cancellation," I hear myself reply.

I can't even *think* about Cate or Dee without crumbling. What happens when they're blown up on a forty-foot screen, their every movement that night grotesquely reenacted? When actresses painted and dressed to look like my old friends are blinking down at me from billboards?

I feel the nerves in my upper body crackle, like when you're at the very top of a roller coaster.

"Maybe a documentary?" Tripp pokes at the steaks. "We can start it, at least. I may have to take a call..."

Tripp doesn't notice the way I've stepped out of my body, how everything around me feels like reverse *déjà vu*. Like I've been in the room before, but nothing in it feels familiar. Tripp doesn't pick up on the moments when I leave my head, never has, and I'm grateful for that. He thinks I drift off because I'm thinking about work, that I'm distracted by my own ambition. Tripp never asks me if I'm okay, and thank God for that, because I think I would break.

"Maybe the one about the whales," I say. My mouth feels like it belongs to somebody else.

"Yes, maybe," Tripp agrees.

What calms me about Tripp, has always calmed me, is that my lost moments are mine alone. Finally, the world starts to right itself again, that comforting sense of familiarity falling in place, and Tripp is still there, has stayed in the same place, is still poking at the steaks.

"Call me when it's ready, darling," I say, and I kiss his cheek.

★ ★ ★

In the library, I pull out my battered old MacBook from underneath the couch. I don't use it often—it's from my Carroll days, clunky and slow—but it feels weird to do this on my work computer, or from Tripp's. I could say I was doing research for a *C* story, of course. But—believe it or not—I don't like lying, not if I don't have to.

Quickly, I type into Google: “Stephanie Anderson.”

The screen lights up with search results. Steph is the only one of us to have escaped what I think of as the Google curse. Even for Gunnar, even for me, when you search our names, the results are largely Scarlet Christmas-focused: write-ups of the investigation, Polaroids of the Champagne and Shackles party. That picture we've all seen a hundred times, the first “survivor” photo: me being half walked, half carried out of the building, my hair hanging limply around my face. I'm staring straight at the camera, as if to say, *Huh?*

But Steph's search results are pristine. A Wikipedia page, her KBC profile, a *Vogue* feature, her Twitter and Instagram handles. I wonder if some tech whiz at KBC was able to manipulate it. When you google me—as Tripp's parents, Jude and Senior, did immediately after we met, which prompted a horrified call to Tripp—the first result is: “Charlotte Colbert, Scarlet Christmas Survivor, Takes Top Job at *C*.”

I know what I'm looking for, and it won't be in *Vogue*. I click on Steph's Wikipedia page and scroll through “Career” until I find it, a single line towards the end: *In 2019, Anderson established a production company, S. Anderson Media. Anderson declined to comment on its scope or potential projects.*

It's not that I thought Jordan was lying. But the proof, the sheer realness of it, it fills me with something: a mix of adrenaline and nausea and that weary sense of *no, please no, not again*.

Close the laptop, Noor would say. Check in with yourself. Breathe through it.

I return to Google and search: “Stephanie Anderson Scarlet Christmas.”

Less results now. Steph wasn't there—not really, not in the way that mattered—and she wasn't named in the news reports. The top hits are blogs, mostly. *There's a crossover I didn't expect!* someone wrote. An excerpt from *The Fall*, Aaron's book, that mentions her. A video titled: "Stephanie Anderson CLAPS BACK at Ottoman over SCARLET CHRISTMAS!"

My torso is feeling tighter and tighter, like someone's wrapping me up like an Egyptian mummy, but I click on it anyway.

"Campus safety is our top priority," an elderly man is telling Steph. I vaguely recognize him: the last administration's secretary of education. "These measures, the armed police on campus, the metal detectors, they're designed to protect—"

"Yet last month, you instructed colleges to redirect funds from mental health support." Steph's tone is clipped. "You also stripped campuses of the protections guaranteed by Title IX. If this is a campus safety issue..."

"There are numerous factors that dictate whether students feel safe on campus, for example, the young men I know, they tell me that a single allegation—"

I recognize the look in Steph's eyes then, that glint. "One in two women will experience sexual violence on campus, Secretary Ottoman."

"That's not—"

"Moreover"—Steph's voice cuts through his like butter—"if campus violence is the issue here, Secretary, that's something I have some experience with. And what I can tell you is that no security guard, armed or otherwise, could have *protected* my sister and my classmates from the events of Scarlet Christmas." She allows for a beat of silence. "Now, mental health support? That's a different story, Secretary..."

Ignoring the Noor in my head—*stop, process, focus*—I click off the video and return to the page of search results. There's one more that catches my eye, an interview Steph did with *Fortune*.

While Anderson was not present for Carroll University's now-infamous "Scarlet Christmas"—named for the bloody scene paramedics were called to on Christmas Eve six years ago—Aaron

Katz revealed in his New York Times bestseller The Fall that the KBC anchor, then a 24-year-old graduate student, was the first to find the victims. Among them: Cate Anderson, Stephanie's twin sister.

"I'll say this," Anderson tells me. "This idea that it was this big mystery—it drives me insane. For so long, people kept asking me why, like I had any idea what was going through the mind of someone with those kinds of problems. Like that was what I was concerned about." She continues: "That's what I appreciated about Aaron—that his book paints my sister as a person, not as a victim. He took the time to consider the facts and report the events of that night accurately." Anderson declined to answer further questions about the tragedy, citing her family's desire to move forward.

I check the date, my heart hammering. Three years ago. Clearly, Steph at some point felt—or wanted people to think she felt—that she wouldn't be engaging with the firestorm of it all, let alone making a film. Maybe she still isn't sure, even now. Maybe I'll never have to poke open the holes in my memory. If I can just—

"Baby?" Tripp pokes his head around the door, and I jump.

"Hi!" As nonchalantly as possible, I turn the screen away from him. "I ... what's up?"

"You like it well done, right? I know, you've told me before..."

"Well done is fine." The words rush out: *Welldoneisfine*.

"Five minutes, then." Tripp wags his finger at me. "Stop working! It's late."

"I'll be done in a minute." I stretch out the words, trying to hide my breathlessness.

As soon as he leaves, I log on to the C server. We have a digital Rolodex of big names, a password-protected list that only me and the talent team can access. It only takes a moment to find Steph's address and cell.

"Almost ready!" Tripp calls.

Quickly, I dial Steph's number. It rings a few times, then goes to voicemail. *You've reached Stephanie Anderson*—"Steph, it's Charlotte Colbert," I say in my best I'm-a-grown-up-now voice. It's even more severe than the one I use at work. "It's been a while, I know. I'd like to meet with you. As a matter of urgency. It's about..." What does someone like Steph want? "It's about a cover. Something we'd like to ... lock in." I rattle off my cell and office numbers. "Looking forward to speaking. Bye. Bye—"

"Baby, it's ready."

There's a trace of frustration in Tripp's voice now. He likes people to think he's easygoing, my husband-to-be—*My management style is based on trust*, he beamed to the *Harvard Business Review* when he took over GW, *on giving my teams the space and the faith to do their best work*—but he's secretly a stickler for rules, for schedules and routine and anything comfortably black and white. It's one of the reasons I fell in love with him. It's also one of the reasons I could never tell him the truth.

"Almost done!" I call back.

Sometimes I have to remind myself that it's different, the way I am with Tripp and the way I treated Jordan at the end. At twenty-three, I didn't know shit about relationships. I didn't know about boundaries and baggage and the parts of yourself that don't belong in a partnership. What I did to Jordan was cruel, but the decisions I've made about what I do and do not tell Tripp are based on respect. For him, for the person I am now, for the future we're building.

"Coming, darling," I call, and I shove my MacBook back under the couch.

FIVE

EXCERPT FROM AARON KATZ'S THE FALL: THE DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF THE CARROLL TRAGEDY

On the last day of her life, she wakes up to snow.

Right away, she reaches for her phone. He's texted, like she knew he would. She reads the message.

Again. She reads it again.

There is no en suite attached to her dorm room. Some of the other girls have them, but not her. She drew the short straw, like always. She has to go to the communal bathroom for tissues to blot her tears—she hates the communal bathroom, is forever telling the other girls how gross it is, how unhygienic, to share showers and sinks—and another girl, an acquaintance from the program, sees her. Says: *Are you okay?*

I'm fine, she says. *Just homesick.*

By midnight, that girl will be dead.

She goes back to her dorm. She should work on her thesis—it's due in a few hours—but she doesn't. She's on academic probation, though she hasn't told anyone this. Her advisor has said, *You won't make it to January if you keep going like this.*

She doesn't make it to January.

She texts her parents: *Merry Christmas Eve! I love you!*

They don't reply. But later tonight, her dad will call. He's seen the news, seen the graduate students sobbing like children, others clear-eyed and silent, as they describe the blood, the screams, the sirens. He'll leave a voicemail: *Call me right now*. His voice hitches. *Right now*.

She doesn't, of course.

NOW

It's been a week, and I haven't heard a thing from Steph. I've left two more messages: *Steph, hi, it's Charlotte Colbert*. *Hi, Steph, it's Charlotte again*. This morning, I even had Julie reach out to Steph's executive assistant. Nothing.

It doesn't make sense. *She says all of us should be involved*, Jordan wrote. *Says it's our story, too*. I even used my silver bullet: the promise of a *C* cover. I've had four Oscar winners, two Nobel Prize recipients, and one president on my cover, all shot artfully in black-and-white by a photographer I poached from British *Vogue*, and Steph wants to risk hers over a power play?

Because Steph still thinks we're equals, I remind myself. That's a good thing. Steph doesn't know she has all the power.

She's pretty intense about the whole thing, Jordan wrote. *I guess because of what happened to Cate—*

"Charlotte?" Keisha, Vik's assistant, pokes her head around the door. "She'll be a few more minutes." *Walter*, she mouths. I'm on the HR floor at work, waiting for a budget meeting with Viktoria "Vik" Solovyova, *The Chronicle's* head of human resources. "Do you mind..." Keisha indicates my Louboutins.

I'm drumming the toe of my heel against the floor, I realize. "Sorry," I hear myself say.

Noor's calm voice in my head: *Name three things you can see. Two things you can touch. One thing you can hear*. Next to me, on the marble side table, I see a handful of splayed-out *Chronicles*. Not a single copy of *C*, which is annoying. We're the ones who bring in the luxury advertisers, the Cartiers and the Chanel's, and yet all anyone can talk about is *The Chronicle's* Wall Street scoops, its ball-busting exposés of famous men.

Which, don't get me wrong, are fine and great. But how do they fund all those bureaus in far-flung corners of the world and 12,000-word features on global warming? With our advertising dollars, that's how.

Maybe I'll mention to Vik that *C* should have pride of place on that table.

Who am I kidding? I'm terrified of Vik.

We know each other well, Vik and I. She wasn't the one who hired me as an intern at the beginning—that's way below her pay grade—but when I had my quote-unquote *episode*, Vik was the person who told me she couldn't promise my job would still be there when "everything was fine again." I was an assistant editor making \$35,000 a year. I didn't even have a 401(k).

I don't know if Vik remembers that. Probably not. When I came back four months later, my job at the paper was indeed gone, but another was open: executive assistant at *C*. Working for Tabitha, the then editor in chief, I sucked up to every member of staff, picked up the work that nobody wanted, made the fashion runs even the interns couldn't be bothered with. I was named staff editor within a year and senior editor two years later. When Tabitha went on maternity leave, I fought tooth and nail to be appointed interim editor in chief. Weeks before she was due to return, I made an appointment with Walter's dad, *The Chronicle* president at the time, and I showed him what I'd been doing these past six months. Ad revenue had doubled. Digital sessions were steeply up. We'd published a feature that had become a congressional investigation, another that was set to be a TV show. I told him it was Tabitha or me. I dropped hints about joining a rival weekend magazine. I wore a pinstripe blazer. I don't have any regrets.

I wouldn't be surprised if Vik thinks the shaking assistant editor who begged for leave and the shrewd executive assistant who clawed her way up are two different employees.

Name two things you can touch. I reach for a *Chronicle* from the marble table. A headline jumps out at me: "Paradise Lost: Korhonen's Fiji."

My breath quickens. It'll be a review of Gunnar's latest book, which I've heard rumblings about. This one is about how rising temperatures are ravaging islands in the South Pacific. It's Gunnar's third book, or maybe his

fourth. We've barely spoken since Carroll, with the exception of his email a few years ago: *Dear Charlie: I'm writing to pitch you an essay about our time at Carroll University ...* Exploitative, I fired back, my hands trembling as I struck the keys, exploitative, tacky, the kind of story that would run in *The Chronicle* or *C* over my dead body. Gunnar took it to one of our competitors and it ended up breaking traffic records, earning him the Weinhart Prize and three more award nominations. He and I still run into each other at events and we're cordial, but that's it.

I skim the review. Gunnar has made Fiji's suffering three-dimensional, the reviewer writes, by telling the stories of "those caught in the crossfire of the showdown between earth and man." The word "postlapsarian" is used twice. It's a pretentious review, but the book won't be. I know this because before I rejected Gunnar's pitch, I read the draft of his essay. He's good, even better than he was at Carroll. So good, in fact, that I couldn't breathe. I was furious—I'm still furious—that he expected me to be able to relive it, to *run* it in my magazine. The audacity.

Then, before I even realize what I'm looking for, I see it: the mention that comes up in any article about my success, Gunnar's success, Steph's, even Tripp's. "Korhonen was a student at Carroll University at the time of the tragedy dubbed 'Scarlet Christmas,' which left three graduate students dead. Later, Korhonen wrote an award-winning article, 'The Year That Wasn't,' about his closeness to both the perpetrator and the victims..."

I feel a familiar tug as I begin to drift away from my body, my fingers clenched around the paper, my foot still tapping—*no, no, not at work*. I place my hand on my diaphragm and suck the air deep into my belly, like Noor showed me all those years ago. *Breathe in for four beats, hold for six*

—
"Charlotte?" Keisha is peering at me, her expression concerned. It must look like I'm cradling a baby bump. Pregnancies are to HR what elevators are to me. "She's ready for you now."

I get to my feet. "Thank you, Keisha," I say, stepping past her into Vik's office. I even manage a smile.

★ ★ ★

The moment I get back to my office, I check my phone, my inbox, my voicemail, my goddamn pigeonhole, just in case there's something from Steph among the fawning notes from advertisers and would-be interns. Nothing. "Julie?" I call. "Did anyone ring?"

"Hey, um, yeah." Standing in my doorway, Julie glances down at a blue Post-it. "Veronica from Gucci, and, um, Olivia, and..." She sees my face. "Not Stephanie. Do you want me to try Riley again?"

"Riley?" I repeat.

"Riley Mueller? Stephanie's EA?"

I snap to attention. Surely not. "Can you check something for me? Steph's executive assistant, she wasn't a student at Carroll, by any chance?"

Julie flinches at the word *Carroll*. "Um, yeah, I heard Riley and Stephanie went to school together, years ago. Riley, she's kind of..." She wrinkles her nose.

Riley. One of the Broadcast girls: shiny, sleek, constantly reaching out to touch your arm. They all blur into one now, a single sparkling girl with perfect posture who cocked her head to the side as you spoke, but I think I remember Riley. She was from Melbourne. Bouncy. Extremely pretty. Not the difficult woman Julie is describing, and not—and this I do remember—a friend of Steph's. Steph didn't do friends. It was part of what made her and Cate so different: Cate so hungry for attention and affection, Steph who only ever needed Steph.

"How old is Riley?" I ask. "My age?"

Julie looks horrified. "I, I don't—"

"I'm thirty-two."

"Um. Yeah. I guess she's ... around that."

It must be her. "Do you *know* Riley?" I ask. "I mean, have you met?"

"Yeah, um, like, once or twice." Julie leans up against the door. "She's very..." She gestures to her face.

"Stunning," I say.

"Yeah. Yeah. But, um, kind of scary."

So Steph hired our old classmate as her executive assistant. Anyone else, I'd assume it was out of loyalty, but Steph must get a kick out of

ordering Riley around. A living, breathing reminder of how far she's come in the last nine years.

"So I'll just..." Julie begins to back out of my office.

"Hang on."

If anyone knows why Steph is so hell-bent on this film, it'll be Riley. Executive assistants are privy to everything: emails, calendars, marriages, secrets. God knows Julie has seen enough of Jordan's emails to know plenty of mine. "Call Riley back, please," I instruct Julie. "Ask her if she's free tonight. Tell her I'd like to take her for a drink."

* * *

By the time Riley gets to Savant, a wine bar Julie recommended close to the KBC offices, I've polished off two glasses of rosé and am feeling more like myself again: grounded, in control. A little small talk about Carroll, a few hints about open jobs at C, a couple of well-placed questions about Steph, and I'll know how to stop this. What changed for Steph in the last three years. What needs to change again, for this to all go away.

"Charlie," Riley says breathlessly. "I'm late."

I wave my hand generously. "You're fine, you're fine." I'm using my best C voice, the one I employ with advertisers to make them think we're dear friends, albeit dear friends with hundreds of thousands of dollars hanging in the balance. "It's been too long. You look great."

It is and isn't true. Riley is still beautiful, her eyes bright and ice-blue behind a sleek curtain of hair, but there are deep grooves around her nose and mouth. "Thanks," she says, dropping into the chair opposite me. "Is this for me?" She indicates the wine in front of her, and I nod. "Thanks. You look..."

I wait for it. I rest my hand on my Chanel, like a beloved pet, for effect.

"Different," she says, like I knew she would.

"Older," I joke, like I always do, though I know that's not what she means. I was never what moms describe as *put together*, and at Carroll I didn't bother to try: my skin shone without makeup, my hair looked tousled instead of tangled. But then strangers began to recognize me that way—it was that first photo, me with the paramedics, when my hair was still dark,

my face bare—and slowly, I made changes. Whitened my teeth with my first Christmas bonus. Fixed my nose with what was left of the biscuit money. Highlighted my hair at first, then went honey blond. Learned to walk in heels. The day I made editor in chief, I went to Barney’s—God, I miss Barney’s—to pick out my first YSL clutch.

Like I said, the things that make up my life now—I can’t imagine having them if *it* didn’t happen. London Charlie, Carroll Charlie, with her Topshop jeans and shitty posture and bird’s nest of hair, she wouldn’t have been able to handle a single day in my life.

“If I’m being honest,” Riley is saying, “I was surprised to get your ... invitation. Obviously I know you’re still in the city, but...” I can see her holding back *you disappeared*.

“It’s nice to see you,” I lie.

“You too, you too. Well.” She sighs. “It brings back a lot, obviously. Not good memories. Obviously. But that...” She waves a hand. “That’s not *your* fault.”

My God, you weren’t even there. But I don’t let my smile drop. “I had no idea you were working with Steph now.” *With* is nicer than *for*.

“*Well.*” Riley huffs. Her demeanor has changed over the years, too. We were only acquaintances at Carroll, but I remember her being warm and quick to laugh. Now, she just seems bitter. “That wasn’t exactly up to me. Visa problems, you know. Stephanie sponsored me. Said I’d only be her assistant a couple years, then I’d be a producer.” She snorts. “Never happened. Obviously.”

“That’s terrible,” I say carefully.

“Yeah, well. I’m still in debt from Carroll. Not even making minimum payments with what she has me on. We weren’t *close* or anything at school, but when I heard about this job, I thought...” She trails off. “Well, you remember what she’s like.”

I nod.

Riley finishes her wine and flags down the server for a second. When he brings it over, I ask, “What do you think about this ... movie?”

“You know about the movie?” Riley cocks her head.

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Top secret, I thought.” She takes a sip. “You and Stephanie don’t speak now, right?”

“No. But—”

“It’s not up to me,” she says before I can ask. “I gave her your message. Twice. She just said ‘thanks,’ like always. Maybe she’ll call you back, maybe she won’t.” She shrugs. “What do *you* think about the movie?”

I pick my words carefully. “The timing is ... weird. Like, what made her decide she needs to do this now? And why a movie?”

“Yeah, totally.” Riley nods.

Deliberately, I wait.

“It *was* weird,” Riley mulls. “She just got it in her head, you know? Until then, Carroll was, like, a no-go. Her whole team, we weren’t allowed to mention it. Any interviews that seemed like it might come up—kaboom, off the table. She told me never to pass on messages about it. Said it upset her.”

I digest this.

“Like, one day she never wanted to even *think* about it, and the next day she’s meeting with Aaron, you know, the guy who wrote the book, she’s meeting with producers, directors, I’m bumping her actual *work* meetings so that she can try to get together with Steven fucking *Spielberg*...”

“She met with *Spielberg*?”

“He said no. Said he was busy.” Riley rolls her eyes. “Who does she think she is, right?”

“Right,” I say faintly.

“You want my theory, it was the story. Getting her thinking about it again. She realized there was more money to be made, thought, *we-ell*, I only have three houses— You know, she’s been talking to a real estate guy out in the Maldives—”

“What story?” I interrupt.

Riley looks annoyed to be cut off. “Like, the *story*. The exposé. You know, at the *Times*?”

“The story,” I repeat.

“Yeah. Like I said—”

“What kind of story?” Riley narrows her eyes at me, but I plow ahead. “You said ... an exposé?”

What did someone find?

“I really shouldn’t talk about it.” Riley is enjoying her moment of power, I can tell. “I just, I thought you knew.” She can’t help herself; she adds: “I mean, everyone else knows.”

“Knows *what*?” The words fall out of my mouth. “A new story? About what happened? I haven’t read anything...” I *know* I haven’t missed an article. I check my Google alert every morning.

“No, not a new story. Well. Sort of.”

Sort of?

“Please—please tell me.” I’m trying to keep my cool, but my voice is trembling. It reminds me, suddenly, of Jordan, how he stammered when he was nervous.

Riley shrugs, apparently bored of toying with me. “You remember the investigation.” The three-month investigation that followed the incident, also known as the perfect excuse for the tabloids to keep the story on A1. “There’s this exposé coming out about it. The *Times*—maybe it’s the *Journal*, I can’t remember—they’ve been working on it for months, apparently. There was a cover-up, or something.” She yawns. God, she yawns. “You seriously didn’t hear about this? Everyone from Carroll has been talking about it, like, nonstop.”

I haven’t spoken to anybody from Carroll in years. “What—what kind of cover-up?”

“No idea. It’s big, though. They’ve got this whole team working on it, but nobody’s saying anything. You know how journalists get about *revealing their sources*.” She rolls her eyes. I want to say a silent prayer for her \$100,000 down the drain at journalism school. “Anyway, Stephanie heard about it, realized people still cared, I guess, and she was all, *huh*.” She raises an eyebrow at me meaningfully. “*Money*,” she adds with a flourish. “You know, since Cate was—”

No, no, no. “I have to go,” I blurt out.

“Oh. All right.” She looks affronted.

“I have to run back to the office.” I fumble shakily for a few twenties, push them under my glass. “My treat. We should do this again sometime—and if you wouldn’t mind...”

“I’ll remind Stephanie to call you,” Riley says grumpily.

“Thanks.” Awkwardly, I bump her cheek against mine. “So good to see you.”

“You too, you too. Thanks for the drink.” She’s already on her phone.

This has nothing to do with me. I repeat it to myself, sternly, as I lurch down East Forty-second. I wasn’t part of the investigation—it was overseen by the state attorney’s office, at the demand of taxpayers (allegedly) and the *New York Post* (gleefully)—and I was only briefly mentioned in their report (my name used four times, my quotes twice). Nobody cared enough about the British victim-slash-survivor to stage a *cover-up*, or *something* in my honor, for God’s sake—

Then my cell is ringing, and I’m fumbling in my bag for it: *Steph?* “Hi, this is Charlotte?”

“Hello, Charlotte.”

I recognize the voice instantly. *Fuck.* I should never have picked up.

SIX

NOW

“I would like to come by,” she says. No *how are you doing*, nothing.

At the other end of the phone is Jude, Tripp’s mom. When I first met Jude, I thought her brisk, icy manner must be par for the course for New York WASPs, but Tripp says she’s just wary of outsiders. Once we’re married, he insists, Jude will accept me as a daughter. I find it hard to believe that a woman who once asked whether she would have to plan a green card wedding would consider me a daughter, so we’ve agreed to disagree on that point. (Tripp says she was joking. She was not joking.)

“Will eight o’clock be sufficient?” she asks.

Thank *God* Tripp is on a work trip. “Jude, that would be lovely, but I’m afraid Tripp is in Boston, so—”

“I’m aware of that, Charlotte.” *Shit*. “I have already spoken to Tripp. I would still like to come by.”

Think of something, think of something. “The thing is, I’m still at work, we’re closing a bumper issue and—”

“If you leave now, you should be fine,” Jude says. “I will see you at eight o’clock, Charlotte.”

“Jude—” I start, but she’s already clicked off. “*Fuck*.”

The last thing, the very *last* thing I need is to have to deal with Jude. She wants something, I know it. Like a mob boss, Jude knows I’m more willing to bend when she gets me alone. The week Tripp and I got engaged,

she took me to lunch to inform me that the family jewelry in their Westchester estate was reserved for “Goodman Wests by blood,” which remains the creepiest thing I’ve ever heard. The last time Jude demanded one-on-one time, it was to confirm we would be getting married in the family chapel in Nantucket rather than, and I quote, “somebody’s backyard in England.”

I barely make it back to the town house with time to shower and change and replay the words *cover-up, or something* before she lets herself in. Because of course Jude can’t wait to be buzzed in, like a commoner.

“Charlotte,” she says, bending to kiss me on the cheek. Jude is about six feet tall and so thin she looks like a tan, well-dressed skeleton. “Shall we go to the salon?” (Yes, we have a salon. Don’t make it a thing.)

“Would you like a drink?” I ask.

“I would, thank you. Red, please. Bordeaux, if you have it.”

“We just have chardonnay,” I say apologetically. “I could run out—”

“No, no.” Jude flaps her hands in that way I’ve learned wealthy woman do, as though it’s an outrageous proposition that you go to the lengths they clearly expect. *I can get by, even in these circumstances*, the hand flap says mournfully. “Chardonnay is fine.”

In the kitchen, I pop an ice cube in her chardonnay—Jude grew up in Savannah, Georgia, and though she’d sooner die than betray a hint of a Southern accent, she expects ice in her white wine—and take a deep glug of mine, the word *exposé* still bouncing around my brain. The wine, thank God, helps.

“Let’s sit down,” Jude says when I return with her glass.

This is my house, *Judith*. “I still have some work to do,” I try.

“I won’t take up much of your time. Tangy, this, isn’t it? Now, there are a few things I thought it prudent to discuss in person. First, the bridesmaids.”

I’m going to have two bridesmaids: Olivia and Felicity. Olivia’s daughter, Rose, will be a flower girl. “What about them?”

“Do you have any other friends you might want in your wedding party?”

I don't have a lot of friends. It's what happens when you've lived abroad for so many years. "Not really, no. Why?"

"Tripp has six groomsmen," Jude says primly. "They should escort a bridesmaid each, don't you think? Perhaps you could add some appropriate friends to balance out the group?"

She is *not* saying what I think she's saying. "What do you mean?"

"Well, babies and weddings don't mix, for one. Your friend's daughter—Rosie?—she'll barely be two. I'm sure you've been to one of those horrendous weddings that were ruined by a screaming child. I also think we must consider the photos. Even if *Vogue* chooses to only run them online, we want to project a certain image."

Anger blooms in my chest. For a moment, I forget all about Steph and Riley. "You're talking about Felicity?"

"I'm talking about the wedding party as a whole," Jude says calmly. "The event would be served better with more bridesmaids."

Bullshit. "If you're referring to my sister," I say sharply, "I have no interest in hiding her behind a cadre of other bridesmaids." (Did I pronounce "cadre" right?)

Jude's expression remains impassive. Which is to be expected, because Jude hasn't been able to move her face since the nineties. "I believe you misunderstand me, Charlotte. My concern is with the wedding party, not any person in particular."

I make a mental note to tell Mum and Dad to keep Felicity away from Jude at the reception. If Jude makes my sister cry by telling her her tights are laddered or her lipstick is smudged, I'll kick her out of the wedding she's already paid for in full. "I'll think about adding more bridesmaids." I bloody will not.

"Good. Good. Now, the ... other thing." For the first time since I've known her, something like apprehension flickers in Jude's eyes. "Senior received a call today." Senior is Tripp's dad, the former president of Goodman West. He's what I'd call "larger than life"—in that he's big, and loud, and obsessed with the sound of his own voice—though his family calls him, and I quote, "the patriarch." "From an old friend of ours," Jude is saying. "An executive at, ah, *Deadline*, the website." She says "website"

like she's saying "crack den." "You may not be aware, but what happened at Carroll University is the subject of an upcoming film."

Not if I have anything to do with it. "I know there are plans, yes," I say carefully.

Jude has never approved of my red-letter past. I'm a respected magazine editor, but to Jude I'm still the silly twenty-three-year-old who got caught up in a tabloid frenzy. But like her son, Jude values discretion. Ugly things are to be granted a respectful pause, not faced head-on. This is the first time she's ever spoken directly to me—not to Tripp—about my past.

"It seems an announcement will be made Wednesday," Jude continues. "*Deadline* has an 'exclusive.'"

I almost drop my glass. *Oh, God.* I thought I had weeks, months. Once it's out in the world, once it's not just an idea in Steph's head ...

"We were told," Jude says, "that you will be a main character."

Of course I am. *Of course I am.*

It won't take much. One true-crime podcast host, an eagle-eyed Redditor. *Hear me out, something doesn't quite fit.* Then, pockets of sleuths all over the country, poring over the transcripts, the timeline, the angles at which her limbs were splayed out on the snow—

"When this film is released, you will also be a Goodman West..."

I'm slipping out of my body, my body which is still there, sitting on Senior's mother's lovingly restored chaise longue, listening to Jude talk about gossip and defamation and the family name, but part of me is up, up and away, not listening, not even there at all—

"... a prenuptial agreement," she's saying. "Even outside of these circumstances, Senior and I insist on it. It's standard procedure in a wedding like this..."

A wedding like *what?* I think dimly.

"... we feel you should meet with Gregory. As soon as possible."

Gregory is the family lawyer. The main one, at least. They've been known to bring in an entire team when Toby gets a DUI or Trent gropes a marketing intern—

Wait. *Wait.*

“You have a lot of lawyers,” I blurt out. “Goodman West does, I mean.”
Jude nods, briefly.

I’ve never given much thought to the Goodman Wests’ resources. But with Steph’s film circling my life like a shark, I realize: *I have* lawyers. I’m not yet a Goodman West, but there’s a ring on my finger that dates back to the days when Jude’s family were on the wrong side of the Civil War. In a few months’ time, the lawyers will be as much mine as they are hers.

“Should I...” I fumble. “Maybe I could meet with them? See if they can ... do anything about the film?”

I can practically *see* the cogs turning for Jude. She’s thinking: Charlotte Goodman West will be the name they use in the closing captions, the words appearing somberly over a shot of the journalism school: *Charlotte Goodman West still lives in New York*. Pause. Text dissolves. *She has never spoken about that night*.

Well, Jude, if you think *that’s* bad—

“Do you think something can be done about all of this?” she asks. Before I can answer, she adds: “As you know, Tripp has already been through a great deal.”

It takes me a moment to catch on. She’s talking about Tripp’s college girlfriend, Denise, who died in a car accident when Tripp was in his early twenties. In my head, Denise wears Lilly Pulitzer sweater sets and calls herself a “snow bunny” without a hint of irony, which probably isn’t fair to the poor dead girl.

“Yes,” I say firmly, “he has.” I don’t know how Denise got dragged into this, but I know a lifeline when I see one.

“If there *is* something that can be done,” Jude says—and her tone is almost gentle now—“to protect you—both of you...”

For the first time, it feels like Jude and I are on the same side. I’m three glasses of wine in and that must be why tears are pricking my eyes, why I suddenly want to tell her what I’m afraid they’ll find out.

She would call the police, I remind myself. *She would protect her son, her family, from someone like you*.

So I just say, “I think so.”

“I’ll need to talk to Senior, of course.”

“Of course,” I echo weakly. To get your way with Jude, you have to go along with the narrative that she’s an advisor of sorts to her husband, knowing all the while that Jude runs the show. “Thank you.”

She reaches for her Hermès. Her driver, I know, will be idling outside, ready to ferry her back to Westchester. “We’ll be in touch.”

★ ★ ★

After Jude leaves, I pad from the salon to the bedroom and close the curtains. I should call Tripp and tell him the *Deadline* news—“I think it best he hear it from you, Charlotte,” Jude said before she left—but I don’t. Instead, I take off my skirt and sweater and look at myself in the mirror. I’m still as thin as I was nine years ago. My appetite never really came back after that night, something Cate would have had plenty to say about. She delighted in sharing food, Cate, was always knocking on my door to hand me something bubbling, with undertones of plastic: Kraft mac and cheese, ramen noodles, anything she could make in the slow cooker she had to hide when the RA came knocking—

Wait. Is that my *phone*?

I race back to the salon. By the time I find it, buried deep in decorative pillows, it’s silent. I check the number: Steph’s cell, the one I found on the C server. It’s late, nearly nine thirty now, but she helms a late-night show. She’ll have just wrapped up.

I hit the button to return the call.

“Stephanie Anderson.”

“Steph? It’s, it’s Charlie.”

“Stephanie,” she corrects.

“Right. Sorry. It’s Charlie.” Damn, I already said that, didn’t I?

“I’m sorry I’ve been missing your calls.” I’ve heard her voice a few times in the last decade, on radio ads and of course on the show, but it still unsettles me. Although maybe Steph’s voice, nasal and sweet, was unsettling to start with. “The show is crazy at the moment. You know. What can I do for you?”

She isn’t even going to *mention* the film?

“I ... I’d really like to meet with you,” I say after a moment. “As soon as possible.”

“Can I ask what this is in regard to?”

There’s no point bringing it up now. It’s going to take more than a phone call to make her change her mind. “I’d really prefer to speak in person.”

“Let me pull up my schedule.” There’s a pause. “I’m in L.A. most of next month, then in Greenwich for the holidays. How about the second week of January?”

That’s more than two months away. “Actually, I was hoping for sooner,” I say, my voice plummy but shrill. “This week, ideally.”

“I’m really busy...”

“I realize that. It would mean a lot to me, Steph.” *Goddamn*, I promised myself I wouldn’t grovel.

She doesn’t say anything for a moment. “I have a special coming up,” she says finally. “A new initiative we’re working on. Sanitary products for young women in Somalia, so they can stay in school.”

I feel more disoriented than ever. “Right. That’s ... great.”

“We’d so appreciate C’s support.” Her tone has warmed up a couple of degrees. “After all, when it comes to empowering women, especially underprivileged women, we’re all in this together. A cover would be—”

“Well, I—”

“But I’ll need a special edition,” she says brazenly. “Me with some of the girls. Cover line: Anchoring Women’s Rights.”

“I should be able to make that happen.” It’s going to raise eyebrows at work, but I don’t care.

“It has to come out the same week as the special. Early December, most likely.”

“Fine.”

“All right, then.” Another pause. “I can do Friday. Eleven A.M. I have an hour. You’ll have to come to the office.”

Friday. Two days after the *Deadline* announcement. I wanted to get to Steph first, convince her to scrap the whole thing. “Earlier in the week would—”

“I’m *extremely* busy,” Steph interrupts. “If you’re not available on Friday—”

It will be fine. Movies are announced and then quietly shelved all the time. “I can do Friday,” I say quickly.

“Great. I’ll have Riley set it up. And Charlie?”

“Yes?” I grit my teeth.

“If you’re coming from downtown, can you bring an Azul iced coffee? Light on the milk, plenty of ice. The coffee up here is shocking.”

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SEVEN

NOW

“It’s a form of exposure therapy,” Noor says. “We’ll talk about what you remember from that period—just an overview at first, and then in more detail. When you feel an emotion, or a sensation, I want you to hold on to it. Even if it’s uncomfortable—”

“Fine.” I’m leaning forward on the plush sofa in Noor’s office, elbows digging into my knees, my teeth pressed together. “I’m ready.”

“When unwelcome sensations crop up, I’m going to ask you to rate their intensity on a scale of one to ten, like we always do.” *It’s not a fucking Amazon review, I think, followed by You’re being a bitch. It’s because you’re nervous.* I hate therapy. “When you need to stop, we stop. Sometimes I’ll suggest we stop, even if you want to keep going, because we want to keep these sessions manageable. Right?” She twinkles at me, like she’s excited.

“Right.” I refuse to smile back. I’m angry, irrationally and childishly angry, that I have to do this, that I can’t access the blank spots in my memory without a tour guide. “And then, what, I’ll remember the parts I blacked out? Just like that?”

“I don’t know what you do and don’t remember, Charlie,” Noor says mildly. “You and I have never talked about what you saw that night. I only know what I read at the time.”

“What did you read at the time?” It’s like picking at a scab.

Noor says, “I know there was a student, a friend of yours, with untreated mental health issues—”

I snort. “You *think*?”

To Noor’s credit, she doesn’t flinch. It’s something I appreciate, that she lets me be angry. That I’m allowed to snap. “I know that student brought a knife to school. There was an altercation. Several of your friends were injured. Two of them died. You were there, but you weren’t hurt. Does that align with how you’d describe that night?”

“They weren’t all my friends,” I mutter.

Noor waits.

“I didn’t tell the truth.” My voice creaks. I know Noor can’t tell the police that I lied, but the words leave me raw, exposed. “I told the police I remembered everything. Start to finish. I was the only person who saw it, the whole thing, so they...” I swallow, hard. “So they believed me.”

“Which part wasn’t true?” Noor asks.

“What happened at the end. I made it up—” My breath catches as she writes something on her notepad. “Don’t write that down! Please.”

Noor drops the pen and holds up her hands, a silent apology.

“It’s a black hole. Like I told you. In our first session. But I’m so scared that—” I stop myself. Liv’s voice, years ago, during her training to become a psychologist: *Unless someone’s going to hurt themselves, or hurt someone else, everything they say is bound by patient-therapist privilege.* “I’m scared that the movie will come out and everyone will find out I lied,” I finish weakly.

Like everything I told the police, this is at least partly true.

“And I don’t want my family to have to go through all of it again,” I add. “And I don’t want—I *really* don’t want to have to deal with...” I close my eyes, remembering the flashes of the cameras, the whispers on the street. My sister, crying down the phone. This part is true, too: “I barely got through it the last time. You remember.”

She nods. “Why do you think—”

“I have to go back,” I interrupt. This is the point, the goal, the whole shebang. Knowing what happened, finally, so nobody else can figure it out

before I do. Knowing what happened, before Steph or anyone else can use it against me. “Please. Let’s just start.”

Noor takes the bait. “Tell me about your first weeks at Carroll.”

“Me, Cate, and Gunnar,” I say. Their names feel foreign in my mouth. It’s been years since I’ve said them out loud. “From the start, it was the three of us.”

THEN

That first evening, I padded to Cate’s room, her soft green blanket in my arms, and knocked tentatively. I heard a peal of laughter, but no response.

I knocked again.

And there she was, barefoot and grinning in an oversized T-shirt and shorts. “Charlie!” she said happily, like we were old friends.

”I came to return this,” I said, holding out the blanket, but Cate was already waving me inside—“Come in, come in!” On her bed, a petite boy with platinum hair and round glasses was rolling a joint. “Meet Gunnar!” Cate cried. “Gunnar, this is Charlie, remember, I told you, she’s also in Magazine—”

“Hello,” Gunnar said. “Charlie is a boy’s name, no?”

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Cate said. “I feel like you were, like, *Who is this chick?*”

“Um—”

“She was this way with me as well,” Gunnar said. “I had come off the plane two hours before and was, like, the most tired. Cate, she grabs me and she says”—he put on an American accent—““Oh my gawd, Gunnar, you are from Oslo, this is so rad!””

“I did not say ‘rad,’ dude,” Cate said, but she was grinning. “Hey, Charlie, do you want pizza? Charlie is from *London*,” she added reverently to Gunnar.

“America is very good at pizza,” Gunnar said.

“I’m sure Norway is good at loads of things,” Cate said kindly.

I fumbled for an excuse. Cate seemed sweet, bubbly and bright-eyed, but Gunnar’s expression was blank and impassive and, God, I was so tired. “I should probably, um...”

“Stay and hang out! Please?” Cate patted the space on the bed next to her. “Gunnar and me, we’re on the hunt for new BFFs.”

“You must stop saying this,” Gunnar grumbled.

“Also, also”—Cate dropped to her knees and began fumbling under the bed—“I think I have ... Yup, here it is!” Triumphant, she waved a bottle of vodka at us.

I looked at Gunnar. (I was twenty-three, not fifteen.)

“The Americans, they can only drink recently,” Gunnar explained. “They must be twenty-one. They are”—he smirked at Cate—“excited.”

“I’ve been drinking for years,” Cate said quickly. She took a pull of the vodka and wrinkled her nose. “Ew. I’m used to it, obviously, but ew?”

“Obviously.” Gunnar looked unconvinced. “Do you have something else?”

Still on her knees, Cate tossed him a can of Diet Coke. Gunnar got up from the bed—standing, he was shorter than both Cate and I, with a slim, graceful build that reminded me of a dancer’s—and tipped the vodka and Coke into Solo cups. “I do not think this will taste good,” he said, handing me one.

By the time the pizza arrived, I was feeling better: giggly, loose-limbed, stretched out on the floor with Cate’s ankle draped casually over mine. I’d always had a soft spot for the Cates of the world, the exuberant girls who spat out every thought that popped into their brain. Like all of them, Cate was overly affectionate—maybe it was her personality, maybe it was the vodka; I didn’t really care—and her constant touch, the way she kept reaching for my hand, made me feel safe.

“Hey, hey.” She was jabbing at her phone. “Zach says they’re having some people over. We’re going, right?”

“Steph and Zach are a *thing*,” Gunnar said through a mouthful of pizza. He’d warmed up and was sitting on my other side, his shoulder bumping gently against mine as he ate. “Zach, he is...”

“You just need to get to know him.” Cate was bent over her phone, fingers flying across the screen. “And they’re not a *thing*. Not really? Besides, you think Jordan is cool!”

“Jordan?” I said.

“You’ll see,” Cate said, setting down her phone with a flourish. “Let’s finish up the pizza. I told Zach we’d be there in fifteen.”

* * *

Zach’s apartment was a few blocks away, the second-to-highest floor of a building that felt expensive. The guy who answered the door was tall and startlingly attractive: aquamarine eyes, sinewy arms. “Well, well, well,” he said, his voice gravelly. “If it isn’t my favorite twin. And...” He took me in. “We haven’t met, have we? I’m Zach.”

“I’m Charlie.” Something about the way he was looking at Cate and I, like we were fresh steak, made me self-conscious.

“I am here also,” Gunnar pointed out.

“Well, welcome to Casa Zach!” Zach gestured for us to follow him into a sleek, spacious kitchen. Outside, a fire escape was dotted with tiny lights. “May I interest you in a beverage, *mes chéries*? We have gin, rosé, cider—”

“Cider would be—” I started, and Zach tossed a can in my direction, but I missed and it hit the floor with a *clang*. “Sorry,” I muttered.

A second guy, this one with freckles and hair the color of sand, loped up a spiral staircase and into the kitchen, where he picked up my can. He wore a floral shirt and slides, the kind of outfit that screamed confidence, but he ducked his head shyly when he saw us. “Hey, glad y’all could make it.”

“Don’t open that, it’ll get everywhere,” Zach said to me, reaching back into the fridge.

“I’m Jordan.” The floral-shirt guy waved at me awkwardly. He spoke with a twang, the vowels stretched out and almost musical. “Zach’s roommate.” *Ruu-mate*.

Zach yelled down the spiral staircase: “Girls! Cate and Gunnar and, uh, Charlene are here!”

“Girls” turned out to be: Elise, a waiflike girl with white-blond hair that hung in ringlets down to her waist; Riley, a gorgeous Broadcast student who spoke with a broad Australian accent; and Dee, short for Dhiya, the Magazine TA—“So I’m a few years older than you all,” she clarified drily. Dee *felt* older—for one thing, she was wearing a first-day-of-school outfit, a

long pleated skirt and crisp shirt—but I liked the way she cocked an eyebrow, her mouth an unimpressed line, as Zach yammered about his surf record and his shotski. “Where’s your sister, Cate?” he demanded.

“Probably editing her highlight reel?” Cate said it lightly, but I could tell it was meant as a dig.

Zach wolf whistled. “She’s fiery, this one,” he said in my direction. “Just like her sister. Hey, you met Steph yet?”

“Not yet.” I tried to exchange a look with the sarcastic TA, Dee, but she was laughing with Gunnar, so I turned to the tiny girl with the Rapunzel curls. Elise. “Do you live in the dorms, too?”

“Sure do.” She blinked up at me through white-blond eyelashes. She wore a floaty pink sundress, like a little girl. *Except she’s not*, I thought, as Zach watched her with hungry anticipation.

“I just moved in today,” I offered when she didn’t say anything else.

“That’s cool,” Elise said. Her voice was high-pitched, almost childlike. I couldn’t tell if she was shy, or drunk, or both, but I kept talking, trying to engage her: “I still can’t believe I’m here, honestly, it’s probably the jet lag but it’s all really—”

“I felt the same way when I got here.” Elise spoke with a Southern accent, too, but it was lighter than Jordan’s, more refined. “It all was so ... loud?” The words came out slowly and carefully, like she was unfolding. “But my boyfriend, Matt, well, my old boyfriend, he always wanted to live here...”

Jordan appeared, slung an arm around Elise’s shoulders. He was a curious mix of confident and shy, I noticed, his arm around the pixie girl as he nervously pushed hair from his face. “Y’all meet in the dorms?”

“We just met,” Elise told him.

“Where are you from?” I asked Jordan curiously. I could picture him on a farm, driving a tractor and saying, “All reet, skedaddle” to passing chickens.

“Mississippi, a small town called Meridian.” Jordan looked me in the eye when we talked—unlike Zach—but his head was still dipped low, sandy hair almost blocking his eyes. “But I went to college in D.C.” Elise

unstuck herself from Jordan's side and ambled away. "You're from London, right?" he said. "I always wanted to go, but..." *Awl-whays*.

"I like your accent," I heard myself say.

"Yeah?" Jordan smiled with one side of his mouth. It was a cute affectation; I'd noticed it earlier when Elise was teasing him about something. (Oh, jeez, Charlie. *Stop*.) "I think I've lost it, mostly. My family makes fun of me. I started out, like"—he dropped his voice into a low drawl—"well, gosh darn it, Savannah!"

"Who's Savannah?" I asked.

"Everyone's named Savannah," he said. "Well, not everyone. I did have a crush on a couple Savannahs, though." He blushed a little underneath his freckles. "Y'all just get here today?"

"Y'all!" I clapped my hands. I was more drunk than I thought, I registered dimly. "Would it be weird if I started saying that?"

"Yes," said Gunnar from behind me.

Cate pushed in, hooked an arm around my waist. "Your accent is the cutest?" She was slurring—*accen-tis*. "Don't let Jordan rub off on you, BFF!" She bumped her hip against mine. "Even though he has his, like, sexy farmer thing going on."

"To be clear," Dee interjected, deadpan, "Jordan is not a farmer."

It only took one more round of shots—"mandatory in Casa Zach," according to Zach—for Cate to start losing her footing. Zach instructed Gunnar and I to get her out of the apartment "in case she barfs," but the bulletlike elevator didn't help. Cate barely made it out of the building before sinking to the ground, her face pressed to her knees.

"*Americans*," Gunnar said loftily.

But I felt protective of Cate, whose mascara was streaked down to her cheekbones. I scooped up her hair with one hand and rubbed her back with the other, like I did with Felicity when she got sick. "You're okay," I told her as she vomited flagrantly into the gutter.

"Sorry," Cate whispered.

"Her father is a senator, you know," Gunnar was saying. "Elise. Senator Morrison Winter. I have read about him—"

"Cate, *what*."

We looked up to see a more angular version of Cate standing over us, tutting. Cate 2.0 had longer hair, dark and glossy where Cate's was a limp brown, and tanned, bony limbs. She was wearing a perfectly pressed camisole and printed silk shorts, the kind of outfit I'd spill something on in ten seconds flat. "Cate, for God's sake, get up," she snapped.

"Steph," Cate said sadly.

"The twin!" Gunnar crowed.

"So they tell us." Steph pulled Cate roughly to her feet and wiped her sister's mouth with the back of her hand. "This is ridiculous."

"Is she okay?" a familiar voice asked from behind us.

"Give me a *second*." Steph was patting down Cate's hair. She had none of the acne scars that marked her sister's face. Steph's skin looked like it belonged on the side of a bus, actually. "Oh my God, you are such a mess." She nodded at me. "Help me get her home, will you?"

"Are y'all all right?" It was Jordan. "We saw you from the fire escape." Next to him, Dee was busily taking Cate's pulse, which felt like a bit much. "Can you hear me, Cate?" Dee was asking. "Do you know where you are?"

"Ye-yes," Cate hiccupped. I reached for her, but stumbled in my heels and had to grab Dee's arm to stay upright.

"You're almost as bad, aren't you?" Steph snapped at me. She shifted her weight under her sister. "God, Cate, I thought you were on a diet?"

Jesus. She was like a possessed version of her sister.

"I'm calling a cab," Dee said, her tone businesslike. She turned to me. "You should check on her in the night, Charlie, make sure she's in the recovery—"

Steph cut her off with a world-weary sigh. "God, she's *bleeding*."

All of us, including Cate, followed Steph's gaze down to Cate's knees, grazed and bleeding from her sidewalk vomiting session—

NOW

"Stay with me, Charlie," Noor says. "Her knees were bleeding."

It takes me a few seconds to respond. "Six," I say, my throat scratchy. "It's, it's six."

"Good. Good. Let yourself feel it."

Throat closing: check. Numb fingertips: check. Blood fizzing in my veins: check.

I hadn't remembered Cate's knees, not until now, her childishly hurt knees, how Gunnar and I dabbed antiseptic and applied Band-Aids like we'd known her for years.

I hadn't remembered her stitches from a few weeks later, either.

THEN

They were black and thin, the stitches, like her forehead had been sewn on like a doll's. They had to buzz off some of her hair, a patch to the left of her parting, and the skin around the stitches was pink and swollen. *Frankencate*, Gunnar said.

But Cate loved it. It was a talking point, a conversation piece. "I got stupid drunk," she'd tell anyone who asked, her hands waving as she talked about Champagne and Shackles and the blueberry vodka and the weird amount of blood, because even mild head injuries mean *a lot* of blood, did you know that? Our classmates grimaced, but fondly, because everyone liked Cate, it had only been a month but they'd liked her immediately.

In the hospital, perched on hard plastic chairs as we waited for them to sew up her head, Gunnar said, "Did you see it? She just ... fell?"

I yawned. "Gunnar, she was so drunk—"

NOW

"We're going to stop." Noor's voice rings out. I hear her, but only just.

What was I doing? When Cate fell down the spiral staircase at Zach's Champagne and Shackles party? I was drunk, I know that, had been drinking in that breathless, thoughtless way I'd mocked her for that first night. Cate had been driving me nuts at Champagne and Shackles, the honeymoon period wearing off after four weeks spent weaving in and out of each other's dorms. Then she'd dragged me away from Jordan, sniffing and slurring and stumbling around, her chipped rainbow nails digging into my elbow, and then she snapped at me and flounced off and I went to get another drink. *Classic Cate*, I told someone, irritation in my voice.

Why don't I remember what I was doing? When she fell down the stairs? It was a big apartment, Zach's, the biggest I'd see in the city for

years, but it was still a New York apartment. Nine hundred feet, maybe. Surely I heard Cate scream.

All these years, I've been paralyzed by the possibility of what I might have done, that night on the eleventh floor. *I wouldn't*, I used to tell myself feverishly. *I wouldn't*. But if I *had*—it was the first time, the only time, I blacked out and someone got hurt.

What if it wasn't?

“Charlie. Charlie.” Noor's voice, more urgent now. “We've stopped.”

I come back to my body, dizzy and horrified.

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EIGHT

NOW

**STEPHANIE ANDERSON TO EXECUTIVE PRODUCE FILM
ABOUT CARROLL'S "SCARLET CHRISTMAS"**

—*Deadline*

Nov. 15—Stephanie Anderson's S. Anderson Media is teaming up with studio Spire to adapt for film the *New York Times* bestseller *The Fall*, Aaron Katz's reported account of the Carroll University Graduate School of Journalism tragedy. Alicia Flynn and Cameron Toledo are attached to star, with Katz confirmed as screenwriter. Anderson, whose sister Catherine was the first to be attacked, will executive produce alongside Spire veteran Lee Harris.

The harrowing account of a young graduate student turned murderer on Christmas Eve was a two-year project for Katz, who interviewed more than a hundred sources, including almost all the graduate students of that class, for his debut. Among the students Katz interviewed was Anderson herself, a Carroll student at the time and the first to come upon the grisly scene.

"I'm grateful to be working with Aaron on this important work," Anderson said in a statement. "Aaron has always approached the tragedy with the sensitivity and respect it deserves, and I know he'll bring those same values to this film. It's important to all of us that we set the record straight."

The film will also utilize material from Weinhart Prize–winning feature “The Year That Wasn’t,” penned by former Carroll student Gunnar Korhonen. The Carroll University Graduate School of Journalism declined to comment.

★ ★ ★

When the first reporter calls, I’m in the shower.

I’ve showered twice a day, morning and night, since Noor took me back to those first days at Carroll. Any more and Tripp might notice. I stand under the burning water and methodically go through my routine: I shave every inch of my legs, even when there’s no new hair; rub shampoo into my scalp in slow circles; scrub my skin with a soapy loofah until my skin is pink and raw. After *it* happened, I would sit on the floor of the shower and wrap my arms around my legs and try to remember how to breathe, but I’m a grown-up now, so I just make myself cleaner and cleaner.

Tripp’s shower is an upgrade from the one I shared with three girls in Williamsburg back then—for one thing, there’s sufficient water pressure to wash my hair—but back then, I’d only spend ten minutes in there before one of them knocked on the door, asking gently but firmly when I’d be out. Now, I can spend an hour in the shower in silence, the only sound the rhythmic pounding of the water against the floor. It’s not that I *want* Tripp or someone else to come knocking, but it’s like I’m waiting for something and I don’t know what.

I remember every moment of my shower that night. I’d had to sit in those clothes for a while, and even after they’d taken them and bagged them I had to sit there in scrubs with flecks of blood on my neck and arms. The *relief* of that first shower, watching the blood pool and disappear down the drain. I don’t remember much of that day or even that month, but I remember the overwhelming relief of that shower, the sense that I could wash what happened off me and step out fresh and sweet-smelling and new.

When that first call comes, an hour or so after the *Deadline* article goes live—Wednesday morning, exactly as Jude said—I’m in there, cross-legged on the floor, my face tilted up to the water. When Tripp shouts, “Baby?” I

grab for a razor so that “misery” can pass for “shaving my legs.” But he doesn’t come in, so I turn off the water and call back, “What?”

“Someone’s on the phone for you. The landline.”

The landline? Nobody ever calls the landline. Who even has the number to the landline? *My mum and dad*, I realize with horror. If they couldn’t reach me on my cell, if there was an emergency, they’d try the landline.

I drop the razor and run into the hall, grabbing a towel as I do, almost slipping on the hardwood floor. “Hello? Hello?” I say breathlessly into the receiver.

“Hello, is this Charlotte Colbert?” The voice is formal, like they’re at work.

A hospital? A police station? “Yes, yes, that’s me.”

“This is Renée Campos from *Vanity Fair*.” I barely have time to process her words before she steamrolls ahead. “I’m calling because I’ve been assigned to write a profile on you in light of the upcoming film about —”

“You’ve—*what?*”

“This isn’t a hit piece,” she says quickly. “I don’t do that sort of work. It’s a, a re-introduction. You’re a private person, I understand that, but you’re also a public figure, and when people realize that the editor in chief of *C* magazine is one of the girls from that news story—”

“I’m not a *public figure!*” I’m an editor, for God’s sake! “How did you even get this number?”

“Charlotte, you want to get ahead of this. I can help you do that.” I can hear the desire in her voice. It makes me feel ill. “We’ll do a photo shoot. Tasteful, black-and-white, like your covers. It will be sympathetic—”

“*Sympathetic?*” The *Deadline* article has barely been out an hour, and already I’m a person who needs *sympathy*? “Do not call here again,” I say, breathing hard. “Everything I just said is off the record.” I slam the phone into its cradle.

This can’t be happening again. I can stop this, I know it. I just need more *time*. Time to talk to Steph, talk to the lawyers, talk to my *parents*—

My parents.

They won't have seen the *Deadline* article, thank God. My mum and dad were never big on the World Wide Web, disinterest that became derision when they "went surfing" and read what people were saying about their daughter. Even now, they barely use email.

But what if Renée from *Vanity Fair* calls them, too?

I grab the phone and dial the number etched in my head, knowing the familiar *trill* that will reverberate around my parents' kitchen. I picture my dad, wiping his hands on his favorite apron, walking over to the receiver, calling, "I've got it, love!"

"Hello-o?"

But it's not my dad. It's Felicity.

"Hi, angel." I try to steady my voice. I use the same language with Felicity that Mum and Dad do: my angel girl, honey, my darling. I'm not her parent, but all of us are engaged in the same mission: to make sure Felicity knows she's loved as fiercely as she loves us. "It's just me."

"Hi, Charlie!" she says happily. "What are you doing?"

I drag in a breath, through to the base of my lungs. To Felicity, I'm still the warm, wide-eyed big sister who got on a plane to America nine years ago. In spite of all my physical changes—my Crest-toothpaste smile, my nose that no longer looks like Dad's, my light hair—Felicity has only ever seen me as the girl she hugged goodbye at Heathrow. I don't want that to change. "I just got out of the shower," I say. "The one in the blue bathroom." I always try to make where I am real for her. "What are you doing?"

"Drawing," she says. "Five is sleeping on my foot."

I can picture them: Five at her feet, his graying spaniel ears tickling her bare toes. "Can I talk to Mum?" I ask, as calmly as I can.

"This isn't the normal calling time," she reminds me. Then: "Mu-um! Charlie is on the *phone!*"

"Hello, love." It's Mum. "Everything all right? This isn't your usual time—Fel, don't *pick*, love."

"She's picking?" That's one of my sister's tells, the scalp picking. Something rises in me: *I can't let this reach her.* "Mum. Did anyone ring? Asking about me?"

“Erm, no, I don’t think so.” She sounds distracted. “Like a friend?”

“No, not a friend. Like a reporter.”

“A reporter?” Her tone has changed. I know she’s remembering the last time, how reporters had the gall to walk up to her front door and ask if they could talk to her about her daughter, her daughter who was involved in a murder investigation in America. For weeks they knocked, until finally she and Dad put a sign on the front lawn: PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO COMMENT. The neighbors are still talking about it. “Did something happen?”

When I was little, maybe five or six, I was sure my mum was dying. I knew it wasn’t normal, the way she bent over sometimes, hands flat against her rib cage, a soft *oh* escaping from her mouth. Anything would trigger it: a McDonald’s menu item, a cartoon I liked, a new word I’d picked up. If my dad was there, he’d wrap himself around her like he knew she was dying, too. Finally, I asked Mum if she had cancer—my friend Annabel’s mum had had it—and she cried and told me about Adam, how he was so brave and special and now he was an angel watching over me, but all I remember thinking was: *This is why I can’t make you happy, not properly, not ever.*

It got better when Felicity was born. Like the sun came out. But it’s still there, how not whole my mum is, when she laughs but her eyes are flat, when she gets up slowly from a chair, looking so much older than she is. Even before I knew about Adam, I was careful around her, like she might shatter at any moment.

I can’t tell my mum about the movie. Not if I can still stop it.

“No, nothing happened. It’s ... it’s a thing for work. Like the *Forbes* profile.” A journalist called my parents then, too, but that time they had scones over video call and talked about the stories I wrote about my stuffed animals when I was five. “But will you let me know if they do ring?”

“Course, love.” Her voice is normal again. My mum could talk all day about my work, how I started correcting her spelling when I was nine, how I forged library cards so I could take out more books. “You just let us know, hmm? I’ll tell your dad.”

“Thanks, Mum. Love you.”

“Love you to the moon, sweetheart.”

Maybe the profile *will* be about my work. What is there to say about the murders, at this point, anyway?

Well, plenty, if Renée sketches out a timeline or goes over the transcripts of my interviews with the police and realizes that it can't have happened like I said.

"Baby?" Tripp has popped up like a goddamn Whac-A-Mole. "Mother is here." He takes in my towel, the wet hair plastered to my forehead. "I'll just ... make her a pot of coffee. You take your time."

Oh, *fuck*. I forgot why I was in the shower in the first place.

Jude is taking me wedding dress shopping.

* * *

Three hours later, I'm in Nantucket, clutching a glass of champagne with shaking fingers and pretending to think about who I *am*: a scalloped, sweetheart-neckline bride, a ballgown princess bride, a tulle sheath bride.

I am someone who is drinking heavily.

"I think a higher neck," Jude is saying to the saleslady. "The question is *how* high."

Stupidly, I thought Jude, of all people, would understand. "I'm getting calls from reporters," I said to her this morning, quietly, once Tripp was out of earshot. (Of course I'm going to talk to him about it. I just need more *time*.) "I don't think today is—"

Jude cut me off. "The wedding is ten months away. Frankly, I thought you'd be glad of the distraction, Charlotte. Given that you're so eager to use the services at your disposal as a member of this family..."

Game, set, match. I knew it. She knew it. "I'll just go and get dressed," I said.

By lunchtime, the two of us and Cynthia, the wedding planner Jude hired, were in Nantucket. Once I decide *what kind of bride I am*, I can have fittings in New York, but this boutique has been patronized by four generations of Goodman West brides, which I know because Jude spent the entire flight over talking about it. It's the Goodman West way: if one continues to behave as one *should*, all that's bad and frightening will surely

disintegrate. Jude probably thinks she's *helping*, dragging me across state lines to distract me with hand-sewn bodices and champagne.

"So you have a range in there, Ms. Colbert." The saleslady deftly tops up my glass as she speaks. "And we'll go from there?" She indicates the dressing room.

"That's fine, thanks," I say coolly. These past few years, whenever I feel out of sorts, I revert to my chilliest *C* self. I don't even realize I'm doing it until people mirror my coldness. The saleslady bows her head and disappears.

"We'll be right here!" Cynthia calls. Indeed, she and Jude are perched in blush seats opposite the podium, sipping their champagne.

"Great," I mutter, like a spoiled child, as I pull the curtain shut.

There are a thousand woman who would die for this. I know that. But I *hate* this shit. The pomp and circumstance, the fittings and the tastings, Cynthia's emails about centerpieces, entrées, videographers. I tried moving myself to bcc, but she and Jude just kept re-adding me. I told them a million times: I. Don't. Mind. Orchids, tulips, risotto, soufflé, *I don't mind*. I tried to joke, "Just tell me what time to be there!" which men have gotten away with since the dawn of time, but apparently it's my *duty* to devote time and energy to these things.

It felt—feels—like an agonizing countdown. Not to the marriage itself, that's fine. But I can't bear to think of people staring at me, talking about me in hushed voices, crouched on the floor taking photographs. It feels like a betrayal, that Tripp proposed and threw me into the middle of yet another circus, even though I *know* he had no idea, even though I *know* that's my fault.

Cate would have loved this. The thought occurs to me before I can stop it.

She would have cannonballed into the middle of all of it and made it bearable. She would have protected me from Jude's sharp tongue and taken all of Cynthia's calls. Cate would have picked me out a wedding dress, charmed the saleslady, and have me back on the jet by dinner. (She would have loved the jet most of all.)

The dress. I need to focus on the dress. *Which* dress? Did they say which one should go first?

The champagne is going to my head and I feel almost hysterical, like I'm trapped in a prison of tulle and lace and satin.

Tentatively, I reach for one and separate it from its hanger. It's the simplest of the four, a long ivory sheath cinched in at the waist. It's the kind of thing you'd wear to a white party, just with more lace and a longer skirt. Very carefully, I step into the dress and button it closed.

"How are we doing?" the saleslady trills.

Get it over with, Charlie. I step out of the dressing room and onto the little platform with all the mirrors. I look refined, classic. Not necessarily bridal, and maybe a little older than I am, but fine. The saleslady starts fussing with the back of the dress, cooing about how breathtaking I look, tightening the bodice more with every clip she adds, and Jude is looking me up and down appraisingly. I can't tell what she's thinking and I don't really want to know. Probably that I should have brought a hairbrush. (I didn't realize it would be *this* humid in Nantucket.)

"Will you get me another one of these, Rachel?" is all Jude says, holding up the champagne glass. (I must remember that the saleslady's name is Rachel.)

"Of course, Mrs. Goodman West!" Leaving the clips balancing precariously in the back of my dress, Rachel swoops in to grab Jude's empty glass and then my own. I'm smoothing down the skirt and wondering if I can get away with saying, "That's the one!" so I can go home when suddenly one of the glasses slips from Rachel's hand and hits the floor—hard—and shatters, feet away from where Jude's sitting.

"My God!" Jude shrieks.

Pure horror is written all over Rachel's face. "Excuse me, excuse me," she babbles, desperately trying to pick up the larger shards from the floor. Her face is flaming red. "I'm so sorry! Gosh, I'm so sorry."

"Is everyone okay?" Cynthia barks, as though a bomb's exploded rather than a crystal champagne flute.

"I am so sorry," Rachel stammers, still on her hands and knees. "I don't know what happened..."

I know *exactly* what it's like to drop something expensive at the worst moment and I feel a rush of tenderness for Rachel, who reminds me of my twenty-year-old self. "Be careful," I tell her, and I step off the platform and lean down to help her, "those shards are—"

"*No!*" Jude and Cynthia bellow at the same moment.

The sound scares the shit out of me, and without meaning to I clench down on the piece of glass I just picked up. *Ow!*

"Don't *touch* it!" Cynthia wails, but it's too late.

Rachel lets out what sounds like a sob.

Instinctively, I open my hand to see the damage. The slash of blood is red and angry, and suddenly I'm so dizzy I can hardly stand. (I used to be good with blood. I dissected a mouse in biology class without so much as blinking.) I stagger backwards, away from the glittering shards, and try to steady myself.

"*Don't touch the dress!*" Jude shrieks, but I must have touched it, because there's blood on the bodice, smeared into the lace detailing.

"I'm so sorry," Rachel hiccups, but I hardly hear her; I'm staring at myself in the seven-foot mirrors. The blood on the ivory fabric. The vivid redness of it, swelling slowly across the white. My throat clenches.

Sometimes I'm so afraid of stepping out of my body, and other times, like now, I would give anything, anything, to be outside of myself, away from my electric blood and my shrieking brain. *Tell me what number it is*, I hear Noor say in my head, but I can't, I can't, it's all so much, it's too much.

She was wearing white. A white silk shirt. Sleeveless, slightly crumpled, under a black cardigan. The blood spread quickly and it didn't stop. It disappeared under the cardigan. I don't remember her face in that moment, if she was screaming. If she said anything to me. All I remember is the blood, the way it swallowed the silk of her shirt and kept going.

"Charlotte!" I hear someone say, and I'm dimly aware that I've dropped to my knees, that I'm tugging at the bodice of the dress.

It was warm. There were too many people in that small room. The heating was turned too high. *I should be dead*, I thought, but instead I'm too hot. I'm too hot. Except then the air was pouring in, turning everything cold, and the room was emptier and suddenly it was still. For a moment I

thought time had stopped. I didn't move for I don't know how long, thinking that if time had stopped, surely it could be reversed, surely we could go back just five minutes. And then Steph was screaming and I was *so angry* that she had ended the stillness, so furious that she had made time start again, I could have hit her.

Hands are grasping my shoulders. "Charlotte, stop! Stop! Charlotte, are you all right?"

I drag my eyes up, away from the stain on the dress, away from the ripped bodice that is *still* squeezing me, and to Cynthia, who is kneeling in front of me, clutching my shoulders.

"Breathe," commands Cynthia.

My breath is coming in short, rapid bursts and I can feel and hear every part of every strained breath, like when you're snorkeling.

Behind Cynthia, Jude is staring at me, slack-jawed.

"In. And. Out," repeats Cynthia. "With me, now. In ... and ... out."

Like a child, I copy her.

"Good," Cynthia says encouragingly. "Good."

"I..." I manage.

"You had a panic attack," Cynthia says with authority. "It's very common, especially in the lead-up to weddings."

"The dress," Jude says in low tones from behind her.

"Is fixable," Cynthia says, her voice businesslike. "Treat the stain ASAP and it'll come right out. And the rip is superficial," she adds. "Rachel, can you please help Charlotte out of the dress and take care of it?"

"Of course," Rachel says, hurrying over and helping me to my feet.

In the dressing room, as I allow her to strip me out of the dress, I hear Jude say to Cynthia, "Will we have to *pay* for that?" I can't hear Cynthia's response, but whatever it is sounds reassuring and even. I have never loved Cynthia more. Or at all, really. But I do now.

I have that dazed feeling I get in the aftermath of a bad episode, like my brain has been pummeled.

I need to get out of here.

When I was younger, I could drink through the cloud of fatigue that came after a bad panic attack and keep going—not at work, but when I was

with friends or my roommates in Williamsburg. They'd assume that my slow responses and glassy eyes were from the alcohol, and if they were matching me drink for drink sometimes they wouldn't notice at all. The drinks would settle into the cloud and leave me floating, detached from everything and everybody and not particularly caring. Later, when I was prescribed Xanax, I recognized the feeling from those moments.

I tell myself that I lost touch with my friends from that time—the women who, in another life, would be my bridesmaids—because I wasn't much fun to be around. But the friends I had then, the girls I lived with in Brooklyn in the years after Carroll, didn't seem to mind. It was me. I didn't like spending time with people anymore, so I just stopped doing it. Socializing would trigger micro-episodes, weird periods where I was talking and laughing and eating like a normal person but also entirely outside of my body, watching everything with a cool detachment, and it freaked me out. It wasn't worth it.

"I need to go home," I say now.

Jude looks put out. "But we haven't chosen one, Charlotte. We'll have to come back."

"I'm sorry," I say with as much dignity as I can muster. "I don't feel well."

She sighs. "I'll have the jet ready shortly," she says curtly, tapping at her phone with her red lacquered nails, like she's calling an Uber.

"Please email me the details," Cynthia tells Rachel. "And tell Donna that we'll see her next time."

"Of course, of course," says a miserable-looking Rachel, who I have a feeling is not long for this boutique.

I don't realize it's our cue to leave until Cynthia places one hand on my back. That's another thing I notice in the aftermath of episodes: slow response times, like the synapses in my brain aren't linking up. "Thank you again," she says to Rachel. To me: "Let's get you home, shall we?"

Like a child, I let myself be led out of the boutique and into the car. Jude doesn't even look up from the passenger seat when we climb in. "Go, please," she says curtly to the driver, and we pull away from the curb before I've even put my seat belt on.

★ ★ ★

The panic attacks started in the run-up to the first anniversary. Five months after the graduation I hadn't attended, three months after *The Chronicle* had upgraded me from intern to staffer. They were horrifying, blinding and suffocating, but I ignored them as best I could. I didn't think they were related to what happened at Carroll—I blamed my new, capital-I Important job—and I was hopelessly in love with my work, even then. Other editors hated the long hours, the missed drinks with friends and dinner dates, but I savored it. I *wanted* my work self to subsume who I used to be. I didn't want to spend any more time with that girl than I had to.

But the panic wouldn't go away, cresting like waves during meetings, lunches, nights on deadline. I googled “how to reduce anxiety.” Exercise, all the articles said. It's the body's way of releasing stress. So I bought a pair of running shoes and started jogging, first for just a minute or two at a time and then for a mile or two. I found a local track near my new apartment in Williamsburg, lit up by floodlights no matter how late it was. There were always joggers there, even at one or two in the morning. It felt safe. I never spoke to them, but I felt comforted by their presence. I thought they had probably googled “how to reduce anxiety” and decided this was the way to do it, too.

I got really fit that year, fitter than I've ever been. I did a couple of 10Ks, just for fun. (I never thought I'd be a person who did a timed race *for fun*.) My new roommates came to support me, holding up a glittery cardboard sign that read COME ON, CHARLIE!

And maybe I would have gotten better then, if it wasn't for the book.

Aaron Katz released his book on the second anniversary. It was billed as “the first complete account of the Scarlet Christmas tragedy, told by the people who were there.” I'd heard there was a project in the works, but I had no idea everyone had spoken to him, that I was the only one who hadn't. I'd gotten a couple of emails from Katz, but I was always getting emails from reporters. I didn't think twice; I just deleted them.

Aaron's publisher held nothing back with their marketing campaign. I saw the book cover, a red and black illustration of the journalism school, everywhere. Literally: the ads were all over the subway, lining bus stops

and bookstore windows, and the sides of taxis. One night, drunk on my way back from a bad date or a boring night out, I can't remember, I tore down part of the ad from inside the station. (Which I think is illegal, actually. But it wasn't like they didn't have more.)

I kept reminding myself that Aaron hadn't found out. I hadn't heard from the police in years. But I didn't know what he'd written about me. I didn't know if someone else could read it and figure it out. In the weeks before the book came out, I stopped sleeping. I couldn't eat. I could barely speak.

I read it, start to finish, the day it was published. I should be relieved, I thought dimly. Aaron had written so beautifully about my version of events—the moments I'd pretended I remembered, the timeline I'd provided to police—I was almost convinced myself. And yet, after I finished it, I felt worse, my nerve endings aflame, my body pulsing with terror all over again.

I couldn't turn it off.

That week, I blacked out in the elevator at work. It was too confined, too hot, like it had been in that room. The next time I took the elevator, somewhere between the second and the nineteenth floor, I saw it: the red and white illustration on the back of someone's *New Yorker*. That was all it took: I was trapped all over again, unable to get out, a fly in a spider's web. The tight heat of the room. The smell of the blood. Sweet. Metallic.

It was the worst panic attack I ever had. I'm sure people still talk about it. That's when I stopped taking elevators. Even now, just the thought of being inside one—trapped within its sharp, tight contours, washed in cheap lighting, alongside people who are capable of anything, anything—it activates something primal in me. *I can't*. That's what I told Vik that day, after I walked up thirty-six flights of stairs to tell her I couldn't come in any longer. *I just can't*.

★ ★ ★

“Baby?”

The bedroom door opens a fraction. Tripp is standing there, his brows knitted together.

I stare at him blearily. I was completely asleep, so deep that it feels like I've been wrenched from the bottom of the ocean. I remember this, too. After Aaron's book came out, I would sleep for entire weekends, getting up only to eat and to use the bathroom.

"Mother called," Tripp says by way of explanation.

I put my head back down on the silk pillow. I never understood the appeal of silk pillowcases until I met Tripp. Now, when we stay in hotels, even five-star ones, the pillows feel scratchy and uncomfortable. How ridiculous my life is.

Tripp crosses the room, gets down beside me. "Mother told me about the dress. And ... about her visit. When I was in Boston. She showed me the *Deadline* article." His voice is soft, but I can sense the ripple of frustration underneath. "She thought I knew."

I want to go back to sleep so badly, my body aches with it. "I'm sorry," I say thickly.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." *Leave me alone.*

"Baby. Why didn't you tell me?" Tripp reaches for my hand. His thumb traces circles against my palm. When I don't answer, he continues, "Mother said that you had a nervous breakdown. At the bridal suite."

A nervous breakdown. What an antiquated term. In modern mental health parlance, it means "major depressive episode." Which is not what I had. I had a panic attack sparked by past trauma. I've had the psychiatric appointments and the cognitive behavioral therapy and years of sessions with Noor. I know what happened.

But I can't say this to Tripp.

It's not like we haven't talked about that night. I told him in dry, bare-bones terms, bar a few key details, just like I always do when I'm asked about it. It was our second date, I think? I told him that I fell apart two years later, then put myself back together. That I've been in therapy ever since. I made sure I didn't seem ashamed of it. Tripp didn't seem afraid of it. The subtext: I survived, I thrived, what didn't kill me made me stronger.

And it did. In some senses.

I didn't tell him about my lies. I didn't tell him about the moments when I leave my body, when I look at my hand and every part of me believes it's someone else's. Dissociative symptoms. They're common, more so than people realize. Even for people who have lived perfectly normal lives and not had something that happened to them become a punny headline in the *New York Post*. It's not that I'm ashamed of them. It's just that I don't want to *talk* about them.

"You're too afraid of the symptoms," Noor said once. Well, of course I am. It's why I never took hallucinogenic drugs. Why would someone *voluntarily* experience something they know isn't real? It's horrifying, feeling something in your bones that your head knows doesn't exist. You realize how quiet logic really is, that it's the overwhelming tide of *feeling* that propels you forward. It's all so ... unstable.

Besides, how do you say that to someone? "Just give me a minute, darling, I feel like I'm outside of my body even though I know I'm not"?

"We're a team, Charlie. At least I thought we were." Tripp isn't angry, exactly, but there's something bubbling there—a *big feeling*, Felicity would call it. "It was ... upsetting, to have to tell Mother I didn't know what she was talking about. Why my fiancée might be having a breakdown—"

"I'm sorry." I just want to go back to sleep. "You're right." I know how important it is to Tripp, that we're a *team*. I already know he'll say it in our vows, that he'll tear up and use phrases like *partner in crime* and *better half*. In Tripp's world—for all the Goodman Wests—you're on the team, locked together and pressing towards the finish line, or you might as well not be there at all.

"Mother says you have no interest in the wedding," he's saying. "You had a breakdown while trying on a dress. I have to ask..." He swallows, his stubbled Adam's apple bobbing, and suddenly I understand: he's afraid. Afraid that he's wrong about me. "Do you even *want* to get married?"

"Yes." I force myself to a sitting position. "Of course I do!" It's my turn to swallow in the dark. I can't lose Tripp, too. "Darling, it's just ... Steph's film. It brings a lot back. It's been hard. But I should have told you. I'm sorry."

“All right.” Reassured, he squeezes my hand. “I accept your apology.” He’s speaking in certain, even tones now, the voice he uses at work. The voice he got from his mother. “So. We’re talking to the lawyers, I hear. That’s good. Have you been seeing”—he pauses to conjure my therapist’s name—“Noor? Have you spoken to her about ... all of this?”

“Yes.”

“You can talk to me about it, too. You know that. I know it’s hard for you. Being as independent as you are.” He squeezes my hand again. “It’s hard for me, too, to talk about difficult times in my own life. But”—he pauses, suddenly unsure again—“I think we need to talk about it, Scarlet Christmas, because there—”

“Please,” I croak. “Stop.”

“There are some things that—”

“*Stop!*” It takes all my energy to say it with force, to pull my hand away. “Please, darling. Not right now.” I can’t do this today, this back-and-forth about *teamwork* and *communication* and *getting on the same page*. I need to rest, I need to sleep, and then I need to get up and figure out how I’m going to stop this, whether as a *team* or entirely on my own.

He waits for a moment, crouched beside me in the dark. For an apology, for reassurance, for a plan, I don’t know, but he waits for it for a minute, maybe two, and then he gets up and leaves.

Pulling the covers up over my shoulders, I exhale, and then I close my eyes and return to the depths.

NINE

NOW

All this time, I thought my success was on par with Steph's. But the second I step onto the *This Evening with Stephanie Anderson* floor, I know we're in different leagues. Blown-up photos of Steph dot the walls: Steph shaking hands with George H. W., giggling with Oprah, bowing to the Queen. There must be fifty or sixty people milling around, talking in urgent tones and pointing at images on computers. "Where is *Sal*?" someone yells.

I thought I'd be nervous, especially after the disaster at the boutique the day before yesterday, especially after the email from Jordan this morning. But I'm calm, my breaths full and even. I *know* Steph. Everything she does is to feed her professional ego. She wants an origin story, a narrative arc worth talking about. A white girl from Greenwich, Connecticut who was granted her every wish—it's not much of a story.

I need to convince her that this film isn't going to feed her legend. That dramatizing what happened to her sister, her classmates, it's only going to cast a shadow over her legacy. Poison it, even, leave it rotting like an apple.

If I can do that, it's all over.

"Can I *help* you?" someone says aggressively, and I realize I'm standing uncomfortably close to a stranger's monitor.

"I'm looking for Stephanie Anderson," I say.

"Up *there*," says the woman, indicating a set of stairs.

"Thanks."

She sighs loudly.

The stairs lead to a glass-paneled landing, the door flanked by a bored-looking Riley. “Hey, Charlie,” she says, barely glancing up from her monitor. “Give me a couple of minutes. She’s just finishing something up.”

“Thanks.” I peer over the landing at Steph’s army of worker bees. On the wall, a quote is stenciled: “*When people with passion come together, amazing things happen.*”—Stephanie Anderson. God, it’s like being in L.A. I smile in spite of myself. The Ativan I took on the subway has kicked in, smoothing out the spiky edges of my feelings about this meeting.

Suddenly Riley is behind me, a little closer than I’d like. “She’s ready for you now.”

She ushers me into a huge room, all wood paneling and floor-to-ceiling windows. Steph is sitting at an enormous desk, tapping away at a shiny Mac. Her skin is even better than it looks on television. “Charlie! Welcome to KBC.” She continues to type for a moment, then nods at Riley. “Thanks, Riles.”

“I brought this.” I hold up the iced coffee and a small brown bag. “And a muffin.”

“God, thank you.” Steph takes the coffee and bag, then gestures for me to sit opposite her. The door shuts with a *click* as Riley leaves. “Charlie Colbert,” Steph says, sounding slightly incredulous. “Well, you look good.” She takes me in: my tailored slacks and new nose, my honey highlights. “Different,” she says, a note of admiration in her voice.

“Thanks.”

She unwraps the muffin. “Is this—”

“No nuts.” I’d remembered Cate’s EpiPen, the one she always carried in case something triggered Steph’s allergy.

“Great.” She takes a bite. “God, when was the last time we saw each other?” Too late, she realizes. “Oh, well, actually. I think I remember. A sad time. A sad time.”

“Yes.” I allow for a respectful beat of silence. “Things are going well, it looks like?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Steph clicks a pen against the table. “And you! You’re marrying the oldest Goodman West, aren’t you? The president.”

I'd have expected Steph, of all people, to mention *C* before the wedding. "Yes, I am."

"I've met him once or twice, at some function or other." *Click-click*, goes her pen. "I wondered if that was why you wanted to get together so badly."

"Sorry?"

"Well, I could have him on." When I don't say anything, she clarifies: "The show. He'd do well to be more high profile, you both would. That young Gregory Peck thing? Dynamite." She assesses me again. "You do look good, Charlie, you know. No kids?"

"No kids." She nods, like I've passed a test. For Tripp's sake, I parrot out the line I throw out in these situations: "When the time is right." Whenever the hell that may be. "Listen, Steph—Stephanie. The reason I wanted to meet with you—there's something that's been on my mind. About your ... the film."

She waves a hand as if to say, *Go for it*.

I've practiced this speech every night this week, flat on my back while Tripp snores. "I can't help but think about how hard we've worked, you and I, to *not* be associated with ... that event. Our brands, they're about being polished. Respected. Empowered. About as far as you can get from ... tabloid fodder."

Steph is nodding. I've got her this far.

"My publicist has a saying: You don't get two strikes. One horrible thing someone thinks of when they hear your name—you're finished." I don't have a publicist. "For some of our classmates, this project is their big break. They can make a lot of money from rehashing what happened, especially with your name attached. But from where I'm sitting, having seen some degree of success myself"—I allow for a modest pause—"well, I can't help but think, isn't it a step back?"

"Mm."

I lean forward. "I wondered if I should even say this. But we've known each other a long time, Steph ... anie. We've been through so much. So I'll just tell you, this feels"—I pretend to wince—"tacky. For what happened to Cate, to the others, to be used as bait for the"—I make quotation marks with

my fingers—“‘true-crime junkies.’ The people who are pushing for it, cashing in on it, they’re not thinking about your legacy. They’re not considering the backlash.” It’s a magic word, I know, for women at the top of their fields, “backlash,” second only to “cancellation.” It has a whiplash effect: a reminder that our success can collapse in on us, crushing us, from a single misstep. That men get a second chance, but we never will. “But it did get me thinking. We could make a fantastic team, you and I, given our ... resources. So.” I hold her gaze. “I’d like to work together on something else. The special edition you mentioned. Or something even bigger. Something we can be *proud* of,” I finish.

“Uh-huh,” Steph says thoughtfully. “Right, right.”

I wait.

“The thing about success,” Steph says slowly, “which I know you know, Charlie ... is that you’re surrounded by ‘yes men.’”

Oh my God, did it *work*?

“I’m grateful you came to me to say that,” she continues. “It can’t have been easy for you.” Okay, a little patronizing, but fine. “I understand your concerns. I want you to know: *I hear you.*”

This is beginning to sound familiar.

“I’ve thought about this, too. I’ve never made a film before. And this one is so emotionally charged. For me, of course, because of Cate”—she bites her lip, a practiced gesture—“but for everybody else, too. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, Charlie”—she leans forward—“it’s that success doesn’t come without fear. Without risk. This, this is a risk I want to take. I believe in this film, Charlie. I really do.”

I can barely process what she’s saying. “So you’re ... you’re going to make it?”

“Of course I am,” she says simply. “Besides, it’s all been announced. Maybe you missed it? But the cat’s out of the bag, so to speak.”

Okay. Okay. Time for Plan B. “Steph ... I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this. But, as you know, I’m about to become a Goodman West.”

“Yes.” I can tell she’s annoyed I didn’t say *Stephanie*.

“We have a robust legal team at our disposal.” This, too, I practiced. “We are prepared to intervene ... if you insist on moving forward with

this.”

“Wow, Charlie.” She leans back. “Really?”

“Really.” I keep my voice firm.

She sighs. “This film is going ahead. Whether you like it or not. You don’t think I’ve had people look into this? That was the first thing I asked: What if the other *families* sue? We’re protected. This story, it’s in the public record. The public interest.”

“You weren’t even *there!*” It bursts out of me.

“Yes, I was.” Steph stands. “I think this meeting is over.”

“You *weren’t* there! And I was!”

Steph holds my gaze with those flinty green eyes. *I was there*, they say. *I know what you did*. “Thank you for coming,” she says after a moment. There’s something triumphant in her face, like she’s already won. “I hope you change your mind, Charlie. I really do.”

★ ★ ★

At first I think the crowd of reporters outside KBC are there for Steph. I duck my head, my breath coming in short, hot pants—*could* she have seen it? What I blacked out?—and try to slip past them. “Charlotte!” one of them shouts, and I barely have time to think, *Oh, God, please, no*, before the clicking starts, the bursts of white light.

“Charlotte! Do you have a comment?”

“Over here, Charlotte! Charlie! Do you prefer Charlie?”

“Who do you think should play you, Charlotte?”

They descend on me like a horde of insects, all *click-click-click* and buzzing voices. Someone grabs my elbow and says, quietly, in my ear: “Don’t say anything.”

I’m frozen, stunned as a wild animal, but the stranger guides me through the crush of people and pushes me towards a waiting cab. “We gotta get out of here,” the voice says, breath hot against my ear, and even in my daze I recognize it, that *gotta*—

“Come *on*,” he’s saying, urgently, and I let myself be folded into the cab, my limbs refusing to do what they’re told—*run! run!*—and it’s like being in a dream, trapped in the headlights of an oncoming train, watching

Jordan slide into the seat next to me. “Just drive, please,” he says to the cabdriver, his voice ragged but so polite, even now.

“Are you all right?” he asks, turning to face me, and all I can see are the years etched onto his face: gray gathering at his temples, laugh lines I’ve never seen bracketing his eyes. “I tried to tell you...”

It comes back to me in a rush, his email this morning: *Hey, Charlie. There’s a story coming out. Stay home if you can—*

I thought he meant the *Deadline* announcement. *I’m way ahead of you*, I thought dismissively.

“I have a friend,” he’s saying. “At *VF*. I heard last night.”

“*VF*,” I repeat dumbly.

Jordan reaches into his coat pocket—it’s an expensive-looking peacoat, black with chrome buttons, so different from the zany sports jackets he favored at Carroll—and hands me his phone. “About you,” he says. To the cabdriver: “Let’s turn on Fifty-ninth, please. Charlie, you’re in the Upper East, right?”

I touch the screen with a numb fingertip. The phone lights up with two side-by-side photos: me in my *C* best, red lipsticked, unsmiling; me being helped out of the journalism school by the paramedics. *Charlotte Colbert, now and then*, the caption reads, my years spent separating the two gone in an instant. Underneath, a *Vanity Fair* article.

CHARLOTTE COLBERT, *C* EDITOR, “DEVASTATED” OVER SCARLET CHRISTMAS FILM: SOURCES

by Renée Campos

Magazine editor Charlotte “Charlie” Colbert, the only witness to “Scarlet Christmas” who has never spoken publicly, is “totally devastated” by news of a film by Stephanie Anderson, a source close to Colbert tells *VF*. The editor in chief of *The Chronicle’s C* magazine is “losing her mind” over the as-yet-untitled film, which is planned for theatrical release next December, the tenth anniversary of the tragedy. “She won’t ever talk about what happened that night,” the source says ...

It's happening. Already, it's happening. They're going to start digging, examining decade-old photos and my garbled statements to the police and the hospital staff, and I knew, somehow I always knew it would all unravel, but I thought I'd have more time, I thought—

“I wasn't following you,” Jordan is saying. “Just to be clear. Where I work, it's a KBC affiliate, I saw you running through the lobby. You look different, obviously, but...”

I stare at him, his freckles faded now, glasses I've never seen perched on his face, his still handsome face, and suddenly I'm angry. I'm so angry. “This is...” I stop myself from saying *all your fault*, it's been years since I let myself think that way, but in my head I say it: *your fault, your fault, all of this happened because of you*.

“Let me the fuck out,” I say instead.

“Hey,” he says. Gently, like you'd talk to a scared animal. I'm still staring at his face, the familiar contours and new lines, his hair darker and cropped shorter than I've ever seen it. And his suit: navy blue, crisp—does he still iron his shirts the night before? Does someone do it for him?—with a teal tie, inexplicably embroidered with smiling daisies, and it's this concession to the old Jordan that does it, a dam breaking inside of me.

“Stop the car,” I say fiercely to the driver. “Or I'm calling 911.”

He pulls to a stop, the tires shrieking slightly.

“Leave me the hell alone,” I tell Jordan, and then I'm out of the car and it drives away and I'm left standing on the street, afraid and aching.

TEN

NOW

Noor has every right to say, *There are only so many sessions that fall under the category of emergency, Charlie*, but instead she says, “Tell me what’s going on.”

I’m breathing hard, sweat beading the back of my neck. I half walked, half ran to Columbus Circle from where Jordan’s cab left me, pausing only to call Noor’s office—*an emergency*, I panted. “I need to remember what happened. Everything. All of it.”

She nods, slowly, carefully, like always. “I understand. And I agree. That’s why I’m so glad we’ve begun our work on—”

“No. That’s not what I mean.” I’m getting agitated again, the adrenaline cresting inside of me. “We have to do this now. I need to remember *now*.”

How stupid am I, to think I could go up against Steph? She and I were never equals. Not in journalism school—something I knew then, at least, before my years in America tricked me into believing I could *do* or *be* anything my *heart desired*—and not now. Especially not now.

I knew Steph had money. Resources. Power. But I didn’t know—not until that last moment in her office—that she had more than that. The look she gave me as I left was the same look she gave Secretary Ottoman, like they were playing chess and she knew how to take his king. She was

enjoying herself, both with me and that ridiculous old man, toying with us, knowing that she could wipe us out in an instant.

Steph was there when I came to. Screaming. Shattering the stillness.

She was there before that, too. I don't know how long. I don't know a lot of shit that I should. But I *do* know this: Steph is the only person—the only living person, at least—who remembers more of that night than I do.

That needs to change. Now.

“Let's start. Please.” We only have thirty-five minutes left of the session. “I, um, I'd met Cate and Gunnar and Dee, I had a crush on Jordan but I thought he was with Elise—”

“We can't rush this work, Charlie.” *God*, would it kill Noor to talk at a normal speed for once? “We need to take it one step at the time. Remember, the factory—”

“I *know* about the factory! Look, let's just start. Champagne and Shackles,” I say hurriedly. “That's when Cate fell down the stairs. That's when things started, with me and Jordan.”

“Champagne and Shackles,” Noor repeats slowly.

I hold myself back from saying, *Don't pretend you don't know*. The signs were there, the press said, even then. The Polaroids from that night were among the first photos to be leaked, all of us young and glittering and holding bottles of champagne—it was cava, we were students, but nobody mentioned that—as we pushed our heads together for the camera flashes, high on new friendships and golden bubbles.

“It was a party at Zach's,” I say. “He invited half the class. Everyone was handcuffed to someone and given a bottle. Cheap plastic handcuffs. Cheap champagne. You couldn't be un-cuffed until you'd finished the bottle.”

THEN

Maybe I was imagining it, but Zach's doorman looked worried when we told him we were there for another party. “It's called Champagne and Shackles, Ashar,” Cate gushed. “So you put everyone's names in a hat, and —”

“You're good to go up,” Ashar said quickly.

“Thanks, Ashar!” Cate blew him a wet kiss—we probably should have left the dorms a couple drinks earlier—and Gunnar took her elbow, shooting me a look: *She’ll be a handful tonight*. Cate rested her head on my shoulder as we ricocheted upwards. “This is going to be fun,” she said happily, almost to herself.

We had our routines down by that point, our dynamics and traditions. Cate hurtled into my dorm most mornings like a charged battery, peppering me with questions about my plans for the day, what we should eat for breakfast, my dreams (who cares about someone else’s *dreams?*). We’d collect Gunnar and walk across the park to Carroll Avenue, where the graduate journalism school—bigger than it looked in the pictures, all Doric columns and ivy—was nestled between the business school and the medical school. Between classes, we’d drink coffee in the den (the first floor) or work in one of the study pods on the “pod floor” (the eleventh), small rooms that fit three if we didn’t mind squeezing in. (We didn’t. Well, Gunnar did, but we made him stay anyway.)

We favored the pod in the corner, the one closest to the kitchen and therefore the coffee machine. The others always knew where to find us: Zach, who’d lurch in to brag about his story ideas and surf record and make suggestive comments about Steph, and Jordan, who would make us coffee without being asked and drop it off wearing one of his Jordan outfits: loud print shirts, light-wash jeans, sweater vests. (We’d rank today’s look out of ten after he left; Cate and I would lean towards giving him points for experimentation, whereas Gunnar, regularly horrified, would vote him down for the same reason.)

Now, Jordan opened the door to Zach’s apartment in what, for Jordan, was formal wear: loafers instead of New Balances, a silk shirt dotted with embroidered sheaves of corn. “Getting back to your roots, dude?” Cate asked, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Late to the game, for once, bud,” Jordan replied, his voice muffled in Cate’s embrace. “Everyone’s already made fun of me for this shirt. I *like* this shirt.”

“I like the shirt,” I heard myself say. (Like I said, we should have left the dorms a couple of drinks earlier.)

“Thank you, Charlie.” Jordan grinned at me.

“Everybody!” Zach’s voice came booming from the kitchen, where he was waving an upside-down baseball cap and basking in the attention of the crowd. “It is *time!*”

Cate wrestled her way through the hot, packed room and wrapped her arms around him. “Let me do it, Zach!” she said into his shirt, her voice loud and shrill. “Let me pick the names!”

Cate, I’d learned, was all bluster: loud and dominating in public, the kind of girl who marched up to strangers and spilled her life story. Afterwards, when we were alone, she was overflowing with panic. “I can’t believe I said that,” was forever her refrain. “Do you think they hate me?” was another. It had become my job to calm her down in quiet corners: They didn’t mind. You’re not an idiot. “Okay, thanks, babe, you’re right,” she’d say, and then she’d march up to someone new and start talking. Gunnar and I would watch on, fascinated; it was like watching a concert violinist collapse backstage after playing for thousands, then go back out for an encore.

Gunnar, for his part, was more guarded, a little defensive—a person who made you earn the right to his attention. But he and I had gotten comfortable hovering beside Cate, nudging each other when one of the Americans said something particularly insane, while our friend chatted easily, laughed her raucous Cate laugh. She reminded me, comfortingly, of Olivia, who had played the alpha to my beta since our first day at school, when she strode up to me and told me my new pinafore was muddy. When I started to cry, Liv took my hand and marched me to the bathroom, where she washed out the mud with hand soap. Being with Cate felt the same way, like we were bound together in this weird new world.

“I want to pick out the names!” Cate repeated now. Annoyance streaked Zach’s face, and then he turned his mouth up at the corners. “Catherine, of *course,*” he purred, handing her the cap.

“Yay!” Cate rifled through the loose papers in the hat, swaying as she grabbed for some. Gunnar moved closer, reached out a hand to steady her. “Steph and ... Michael!” Cate cried.

“This is so dumb,” Steph muttered, but she let herself be handcuffed to Michael, a shy redhead from the Digital Media stream.

“Dee and ... Gunnar!” Cate exclaimed. Dee gamely stepped forward and let Zach cuff her to Gunnar. “Charlie ... and Jordan!” Cate wasn’t even pretending to look down at the paper now. *Subtle, Cate.*

“Looks like it’s you and me, Charlie!” Jordan called over the crowd. He was with Elise again, I noticed. “Bet we can’t finish first!”

“I bet you’re right,” I called back. “I can’t drink champagne too fast or it comes out of my nose.”

Behind me, Gunnar snorted.

“Wanna go out to the fire escape?” Jordan asked me as Zach snapped the cuffs shut. “The view’s awesome.”

“Zach and ... Cate!” Cate was saying, faking surprise. (Cate was a terrible liar.) “Hey—that’s me!”

Jordan slid up the window and maneuvered us outside, gently, so the cuffs didn’t bite our wrists. The city was lit up below us: cabs crawling like ants, bridges glistening, rooftop pools glowing aqua. “Awesome, right?” Jordan repeated.

“Right,” I echoed. Truthfully, it felt like a photograph from someone else’s New York album—I still didn’t *get* the city like everybody else seemed to—but I wasn’t going to tell Jordan that. “Really cool.”

We were quiet for a moment, watching, and then Jordan broke the spell: “I bet London is great, though.” He opened the bottle—*pop*—and slid down to sit on the slats of the fire escape. “What’s it like there?”

I shuffled down until I was next to him. “When you’re there, you think it’s so loud. But compared to here...” I shrugged. “I never thought of Londoners as unfriendly, but then I met New Yorkers. It takes a while to get to know people at home, you know? Here, people tell their life stories to anybody. You don’t have to”—I mulled it over—“earn it. You know?”

Jordan nodded. “I meant, does it rain all the time, is the Indian food as good as they say, that kinda thing.”

Shit. “Oh.”

Jordan chuckled. “I’m kidding, Charlie.” He bumped my shoulder with his. “That’s one of the things I like about you. You’re not great at small talk.

You don't, like, think in those terms."

He's talking about me as a friend, I reminded myself, but a frisson of excitement slipped through me anyway. "Thanks, I think." I reached for the bottle with my free hand and took a slug. "I get it from my mum."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." On good days, there's nobody like my mum: frank and magnetic, with a deep, dry chuckle. On bad days—and there were a lot of those before Felicity was born—she doesn't really talk at all. It can be hard to tell where Mum's personality starts and her grief ends, but I didn't want to get into all of that with Jordan. "My sister is like that, too. Felicity. She just says what she thinks. All the time."

"That's cool," Jordan said. "I wish my family was like that."

"They're in ... Mississippi?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't want to stay there?"

He shrugged. "I mean, would *you* stay in Mississippi?" I got the sense it was his knee-jerk reaction, to make a joke about Mississippi.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never been to Mississippi. I might like it." Feeling bold, I added: "I like the accent, at least."

"Why, bless your heart," Jordan said in a put-on drawl. "Nah, I tried to lose it. Nobody in D.C. took a corn-fed boy from Meridian seriously, talking like I did. Gets strong again when I drink, though." He pulled a worn joint from the pocket of his jeans. "Hey, you want some of this?"

I glanced inside. Cate was talking animatedly to Zach, her chin tilted upwards, but his body was turned away, his eyes fixed across the room. Jordan followed my gaze. "You don't have to, I didn't mean—"

"No, no, I'm good. Sorry." I took the joint, inhaled. (It would be years before I figured out it only made me nervous.) "I just," I said, gesturing at Cate and Zach, "I worry she likes him. Like, *likes* him."

Jordan looked uncomfortable. "But what about him and Steph?"

"Exactly." I handed him back the joint.

"Hey, do you like it here?" he asked abruptly. "New York, I mean."

My boilerplate answer was "I love it," but that wasn't quite true. "I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

Jordan nodded. “I get it. I felt the same way about D.C. Sometimes you gotta adjust to somethin’ before you know if it’s your thing—”

“Your accent!” I interrupted. “It *is* getting stronger!”

Jordan laughed. “Lord, it’s so dumb—”

“No, it’s—”

“Charlie!” Cate was yanking open the window. She looked close to tears. “Can you, like, come back in here?”

“But we haven’t finished the bottle.” It was all I could think to say.

Jordan gently unhooked my wrist from his. Disappointment radiated through me, a chaser to the cava. “Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll finish it.”

“Thanks, Jordan,” Cate sniffed. She hustled me through the open window and the living space, darker than it was earlier and heavy with bodies, and into the bathroom. I squinted against the lights, annoyed.

“He *unshackled* me!” Cate wailed.

“What?”

“Zach! We were shackled, we were getting along so great, Steph comes over and says she’s leaving, says the whole thing is trashy—”

“Well—”

“So Zach is all, *No, Steph. Stay!* And she’s like, *No, thanks.* And I’m like, *Zach, it’s fine, let her leave.* And she’s all, *Yeah, Zach,* and Zach is like, *No, shh, Cate.* He *shushed* me!”

I didn’t want to say “No shit,” so I didn’t say anything.

“She doesn’t even *like* him!” Cate was crying hard now. “She just, like, wants someone to fawn over her, and even though I’m right there, even though I’m, like, interested in him as a *person...*”

I reached for a tissue to blot her face and heard myself say, “But they’re hooking up, right?”

“That doesn’t m-mean anything!” Cate wailed. “Not to Steph. Maybe to Zach, because he has such a big heart and—”

I couldn’t help it. I snorted. “Cate, come *on.*”

She pushed away my hand, still clutching the damp tissue. “Fuck *you,* then,” she slurred, barreling out of the bathroom and almost into Dee. “Shoot,” Dee said, stepping backward, at the same time as Cate spat in my direction, “Will you leave me *alone* for once?”

Take a deep breath, my dad always said, before you say anything you can't take back.

"Are you okay?" Dee asked as Cate disappeared into the crowd.

"Just fine," I lied. "Classic Cate."

"Can I get you some water?" She cocked her head to the side.

"I'm fine," I repeated. "Thanks."

Then I went to the kitchen and I made myself a questionable cocktail: ginger ale, leftover cava, tequila.

And then ...

NOW

"Did you black out?" Noor is asking.

"No. I remember going to the hospital."

The sound of Cate falling down the spiral staircase in Zach's kitchen: *thump-thump-thump*. Looking down at her from the top of the stairs: her eyes open, shiny and swollen, one hand pressed to her head. Racing down the steps, leaning over her as she slurred, "I think we should go to McDonald's," and Gunnar huffed, "I think we go to the hospital instead."

Did I push her?

Noor, as if reading my mind, says, "You were drinking. It was nine years ago. You won't remember every detail."

I went to the kitchen. I made the cocktail. (It was barely a cocktail.) What happened then?

"Let's move on," Noor says.

I want to protest, but then I look at the clock: twenty minutes left.

THEN

She was fine, of course. Five stitches, a mild concussion. Later, after *it* happened, I thought of that line of stitches. How gleefully she'd worn her injury, never daring to dream that months later she'd be hurt in a way that would be discussed on primetime for years to come.

All my thoughts at the time were like that. It's why I had to leave.

As for me, after Champagne and Shackles, I was sure: I liked Jordan. It wasn't just the accent, the "y'all's" sprinkled into his sentences, that half smile. I liked his gentle demeanor, the way he tried so hard to put people at

ease. I liked his weird outfits. I liked how he defended his friends, even when that friend was Zach.

But, of course, there was Elise. She was always with him, their fair heads side by side on the pod floor, in line at the cafeteria, bobbing around campus. They never kissed in public, but we all knew there was something going on, just like we all knew about Zach and Steph. (At least, I knew about Zach and Steph, because Cate was always asking for my “theories.” My theory was that Zach and Steph deserved each other.)

“Elise is so pretty,” I whined to Dee, now my thesis advisor and sort-of friend, because I couldn’t whine to Gunnar or Cate—Gunnar was friends with Elise, and God knows Cate would have let it slip—and because, at the time, I believed that beauty was threatening, especially when beauty came in the form of a five-foot-two senator’s daughter.

“Your thesis is going to be better than hers,” Dee said loyally, because that was the only way Dee tolerated comparisons to other women.

Dee was pretty, too, but in a hidden way, high cheekbones and expressive brows hidden behind square glasses and bangs. She had been assigned to supervise my thesis—our semester one project, a 5,000-word feature, was due at the end of, well, semester one—and she intimidated me a little, but we had a rapport going. Dee specialized in deadpan one-liners, mostly about how she was older and wiser—she had only three years on us, but twenty-six felt a world away from twenty-three—though she let her guard down when she talked about her boyfriend, a preppy NYU guy she was clearly obsessed with, and in return I told her about Jordan when we got bored of my thesis. (Which happened a lot, because I’d decided to write about climate change, on Gunnar’s recommendation, which was important but also very, very boring.)

“When I told Liam that I liked him—” Dee started.

“It’s different,” I protested. She’d already told me the story: how she and her boyfriend had volunteered together at a senior center her last year of high school—“Ivy bait,” Dee joked—and during their second shift, sitting at the reception desk, Dee had announced, “I think I have a little bit of a crush on you.” He’d laughed, and asked her out, and they’d been together ever since.

That was Dee, though. Dee got what she wanted, mostly because she wasn't afraid to ask. I, Charlie Colbert, was extremely afraid.

"You have to tell him," Dee said with an air of finality.

It's funny, how I thought at the time that Dee and I were so different. Her unapologetic ambition, her no-shit-Sherlock attitude, it both intrigued and frightened me. I felt like a child when I was with her, frivolous and unfocused. It was the opposite to how Cate made me feel, like I had to be the grown-up.

I whined, "It's too hot in here. I can't concentrate."

Dee just shrugged. Dee was from Kolkata, had moved to Queens with her dad in middle school. There was a late September heat wave that week, so cloyingly hot my palms itched, but she didn't seem to mind. "It's fine."

I reached for the window. "Does this thing open?" None of the pods on the pod floor had air-conditioning, and after just six weeks in New York I'd learned that the summer months were insufferable without air-conditioning. The window swung open with a groan, revealing a wide drop. I shrank back, noticing for the first time the sticker: DO NOT OPEN.

Dee sighed and reached over me to pull the window closed, like you'd correct a misbehaving toddler. "Let's call it a day," she said. "Get you out of here and back to the AC and your loud friends." (Dee didn't like Cate—"too much"—but she liked Gunnar, and I thought she liked me, even if I wondered sometimes if she thought I was a hopeless case, academically and romantically.)

That night, I went to bed early—Zach was having another party, but I was sweaty and tired and didn't trust myself to not be an idiot around Jordan, or not spill the beans to Cate—but halfway through the night, someone started hammering on my door. "Charlie, Charlie, Charlie!" Giggling. "Let me in? Pretty *please*, BFF?"

I rolled out of bed—I knew that voice—and opened the door. There was Cate, her arm wrapped around Jordan's waist, both of them grinning at me blearily. "Where *were* you?" Cate cried.

"I was sleeping." I pulled down my oversized T-shirt. "Why—"

Cate was already catapulting onto my bed. "We came to tell you about the party! Because you weren't there!"

“That’s ... nice.”

“Jordan, sit down here on the bed with me!” To me, Cate added: “Jordan is *not* here to see Elise.” Her face was lit up with what could only be described as a shit-eating grin.

So much for Cate not knowing. So much for *Jordan* not knowing. But she was still rambling: “We played a round of Never Have I Ever!”

“A few rounds,” Jordan interjected from my other side.

“A few rounds.” Cate yawned.

“So, you were at your apartment,” I said to Jordan. “But you ... left?”

“I had to walk Cate home!” Jordan said indignantly.

“He did,” Cate agreed. “Jordan is a gentleman. Oh my gosh, I’m so *tired!*” She yawned dramatically. Cate had abandoned her drama major to pursue journalism—*Hollywood was calling, but I changed my mind*—and every time she lied, I understood why. “I’m gonna go to sleep! I love you guys,” she trilled, and ran out.

Jordan leaned his head against my upper arm. “How come you weren’t there?” His accent was strong—*wurren’t thurr*—and I could smell something on his breath. Beer?

“I was on the pod floor,” I said awkwardly. “With Dee. Then I was ... sleeping.”

“Sleeping!” Jordan blinked hard. “Sleeping is good.” (Rum. It was rum.)

“Do you, um, want some water?”

“No! I’m fine.” He suddenly seemed more sober. “Is this weird? I just, Cate said we should come see you after I, I walked her home...”

All right, not that sober. His eyes were drifting shut. “Um, no, it’s fine,” I said. “Are you ... do you want to, I don’t know ... sleep here?”

“Is that weird?”

Yes. “No.”

“Don’t tell anyone, Charlie, but I don’t always like it there. Zach’s place.” He yawned loudly. “Hey, you’re the best, Charlie. D’you know that?”

“Yes.” I reached over him and flicked off the lamp.

“The best,” he murmured.

I pulled the duvet up to my waist. After a moment, I pulled it over him, too.

“Bless your heart,” he says without opening his eyes. *Yaw heart.*

“Good night, Jordan.” Had he *meant* to stay with Elise? Maybe he’d been on his way and forgot?

“‘Night, Charlie.”

★ ★ ★

But I couldn’t get back to sleep. Jordan was a snorer, as it turned out, and his long body radiated heat. Every time I shifted away from him—not an easy feat, considering it was a twin bed—he moved to fill the space between us. It was so hot that night, the only air coming from a cheap fan in the corner, and after a while I pushed myself out of bed to get some water. (Besides. He’d need water in the morning.)

Later, it felt like a comedy of errors.

My first shock: Elise. She was pacing up and down the hallway—it must have been three or four in the morning by then—sleepwalking, or maybe trying to get reception, because her phone was in her hand. She was still wearing a dress from wherever she’d been, a flimsy white slip, and her frame was so pale in the dimly lit hallway that I nearly screamed.

“Oh my God, sorry!” She looked terrified. “I’m sorry! I didn’t think anyone was up!”

“Jesus!” I was panting. “Are you, are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” She shook her head, curls flying. “My dumb phone, it’s broken...” She edged away from me, like *she* was afraid—like it had been me haunting the hallway like a Victorian ghost—and disappeared into her dorm. “Sorry,” she said again, her voice almost a whisper, as the door closed behind her.

My next shock: Dee. Leaning over the sink in the communal bathroom, splashing water on her face. Unlike Elise, she’d at least gone to bed—she was wearing a tank top and ratty shorts—but she, too, seemed possessed, mumbling to herself and kneading her face. “Dee?” I said, now half wondering if I was dreaming.

“Oh.” Dee stopped massaging her face. “Charlie.”

“I came to get water.” I held up my mug, like it was proof. “You know Elise is, like, wandering the halls? Scared the shit out of me—”

“Which one is Elise again?” Dee seemed tired.

“The one whose dad is the senator.” I turned on another tap to fill my mug.

“Oh.” Dee sniffed.

Up close, I could see that her cheeks were swollen, her eyes pink-tinged. “Hey,” I said. “Were you crying?”

She looked like she might deny it. Then she sank down to the tiled floor, her fingers still clutching the lip of the sink. “Shit,” she said, her voice breaking. Dee didn’t swear.

All at once, I felt like the grown-up. “Hey,” I said, getting down beside her. “It’s okay. What’s going on? You were fine earlier...”

“My da-dad,” she hiccupped. “He—he returned my letter.”

Estranged, she’d told me, last week, in one of the pods. With a smile on her face, like it was no big deal. *We’re taking some time apart. We’ve always been so close, too close, almost. It’s good for us.* “You wrote him a letter?”

She nodded, fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

Why weren’t they speaking? I fished around in my memory. Liam—something to do with Liam? Liam’s parents, maybe. They’d been rude to Hunar. Or something? “I’m sure he’ll come around,” I said, kindly, stupidly.

She sniffed. “You don’t know my dad. He’s, like, the most stubborn man in the world.”

“My mum is stubborn, too,” I said. (*God. Like Dee’s dad—who I knew had pulled her out of school in Kolkata when it became clear she was brilliant, who had put her on a plane to stay with relatives in Queens, for months, until he could join her—was just like my mum. I can’t bear to think about it now, my try-hard sympathy.*)

“Thanks,” was all Dee said. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Jordan’s in my bed,” I told her.

“*What?*”

“I know.” I took a sip from my mug. “Anyway, I should go deal with ... that.” I was feeling very adult at this point, smug from my dealings

with drunk people and hysterical people and God knows what Elise was doing. “It’s going to be okay, you know. With your dad. It’ll blow over.”

“Yeah.” Dee took a long, shaky breath. “Thanks, Charlie. See you tomorrow.”

★ ★ ★

The third shock: Jordan. Just as I was drifting off. Touching my inner arm. So gently, I wondered again if I was dreaming.

His fingers stroked the patch of skin inside my elbow. I twisted my head to face him. His eyes were closed.

Surely not.

Then he opened his eyes. Ever so slowly, he moved his hand from my elbow up to my face, cupped my jaw. “Hey, is this okay?” he whispered.

I nodded.

He leaned forward, still holding my face, and his lips landed on mine. His mouth was gentle, his lips soft. He reeked of rum. He reached up with his other hand, grabbed my face as he kissed me. And then he was really kissing me, cautiously at first and then more deeply.

Then he exhaled; it was almost a sound of relief.

“Charlie,” he mumbled. He pulled back slightly and said into my mouth, “I’m so *tired*.”

“Me, too,” I whispered stupidly.

He pulled me into the crook of his arm and covered my hand with his. Moments later, he was snoring again.

By the time I woke up, Jordan was gone.

NOW

“We’re at time, Charlie,” Noor is saying.

I push myself to my feet. “Okay.” I feel weak, breathless, like I’ve come down with something viral. I forgot that was how Jordan made me feel: no butterflies, just elephants, clomping their heels on my head and chest. I worked hard to forget that feeling. I forgot that, too.

You have so much more to go, a part of me scolds myself.

“Can we do this again tomorrow.” It comes out in a rushed breath. I haven’t even gotten to Thanksgiving, where everything started to go wrong.

“I’m on vacation for a week,” Noor reminds me gently.

Fuck. How much time have I wasted, letting myself be dragged back into my feelings? “When—when you get back, can—”

“Of course.” It irks me, how Noor is speaking to me, like I’m unstable, when she’s about to leave me by myself for a week. “Tuesday, ten. It’s my first appointment.” I turn to leave. “Charlie...”

My head is swimming. “Yes.”

“I know this is hard. It has to be, to get to the other side.”

“It’s fine.” Noor has to think I can do this. She has to think I’m ready, or she won’t take me further. “I’m fine.”

“A word of advice, for this week. Try not to push away the feelings. Try to observe them, like you’re sitting on a riverbank. Watching a leaf in the stream.”

“A leaf,” I repeat. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

“I’ll see you next Tuesday.”

I walk unsteadily out of the room. *Observe the feelings. A leaf in the stream.* God.

These feelings, they’re no good to me. They’re how I got here in the first place.

ELEVEN

NOW

Was it this bad last time? The reporters blowing up my phone, the flashes when I go outside, the *hot takes*? I can only remember bits and pieces, but I don't remember it being so ... desperate. So fast-paced, everyone scrambling for a bite of the action. There are podcasts, op-eds, goddamn *listicles* headlined *The Carroll Survivors: Where Are They Now?* There's a glee to it, an appetite for this kind of *content* that I don't remember from the last time.

Tripp blames the timing. We just had an election year, he'll tell anyone who'll listen. We're in a news desert. Scarlet Christmas, as it turns out, is the perfect combination of salacious and nostalgic. Yes, *nostalgic*. People *remember* following this story, trying to parse answers from Polaroids and glossy head shots. They remember talking about it in their high school cafeteria, their parents saying it wasn't appropriate for the dinner table. By the time the state attorney's investigation ended, the news cycle had moved on, leaving a generation of people feeling like they never got answers. (Which they did, by the way. Mostly.)

This time, the crush of coverage isn't restricted to facts, or what they think are facts. It takes a day, maybe two, and then they're gorging themselves on a new angle, a way for even the *respected* outlets to jump into the fray: the Reckoning of it all. The commentary was sexist! The perpetrator was glorified! The kids were stalked, their boundaries ignored!

(No shit!) The op-eds and podcasters wax on about *doing better*, how it was a *different time*, but they're not and it isn't, they've just learned how to exploit us in ways that let them sleep at night.

Well, not *us*. Steph is basking in all of it, speaking on not just KBC but MSNBC and CNN and God knows what else. They do her up to look somber: black dresses, tasteful jewelry, nude lipstick. She crosses her hands in her lap and talks about the *record to set straight*, the *lessons we must learn*. But it's not just her talking to the press, it's Gunnar, too, and a couple of our professors, and Aaron Katz, and they're all repeating Steph's line about setting the record straight, like they think this film belongs in the Library of goddamn Congress. Though none of them mention me, graciously declining to answer any questions about *C* editor in chief Charlotte Colbert, it still comes up: Are you still in touch with Charlotte? What does Charlotte think?

Charlotte thinks you're all full of shit.

Even *The Chronicle* gets involved, publishing two articles about Steph's film. *Looking Back with a New Lens, a Decade Later*, blares the first; the other, *Carroll Survivors Pledge to Set the Record Straight*. "No reporting, no new photographs," Walter assured me, as though his half-assing it would make me feel better. "Nothing about you," he added, and I had to hold myself back from spitting, "Oh, you martyr." I am not, thank God, the biggest part of this story. Not with Steph at the helm. She wouldn't let anyone else become the main character, even if any part of me wanted it. There are only a couple of articles about me after Renée's *Vanity Fair* story, short pieces featuring "sources" with vaguely accusatory quotes—I'm convinced they're connected to Jude, though Tripp says he draws the line at that sort of talk—but without new information to feast on, the press finds fresh meat. Specifically, Stephanie Anderson with her funereal outfits and endless interviews, each one embedded with a new, let-me-just-click-on-that detail: the bloody handprints, the first thing she saw. Her parents' faces when she told them. (Steph didn't tell them. The paramedics did. Like I said, I was *there*.)

It will die down, Olivia says. (She calls every day now. Sometimes I pick up, mostly I don't.) *It went away last time*, she says. *It will again*.

Olivia is wrong. This is just a prelude to the main event, which is *the actual movie coming out*. There's a girl *Deadline* reports as being considered for the role of Charlotte Colbert, a young British actress with reddish hair—she'll have to dye it—who cut her teeth in one of those cancer movies. You know, sick girl falls in love with sick boy and they make every moment count. I saw it on a plane once. She's good: hopeless-seeming in an endearing way, just pretty enough to scream *relatable*. She'll play me in all my naïveté, act out my love story with Jordan just as she did in the cancer movie: touching, doomed. The millions of people who see this movie, they're going to watch her and think that the girl with the warm, open face is me. That they deserve to be privy to all of my secrets.

★ ★ ★

Six days and forty-four articles after *Deadline* makes it official, Walter asks me to come to his office “to talk about all of this.” I pick my way carefully up the nineteen flights of stairs, even though I'm wearing my therapy sneakers instead of my work heels, because—and it's a funny thing, though not funny *ha-ha*, that this has started *now*—I don't feel safe. Ever since Noor and I started talking about Carroll, I've felt unstable in my own body. I can't touch sharp knives or boil water, won't open windows or hurry up or down stairs. I take cabs instead of the subway so I don't have to stand near the edge of the platform.

What are you so afraid of? the voice in my head jeers. *You survived that, but you think you'll break your neck between floors twenty-seven and twenty-eight?*

By the time I get to Walter's floor, I'm late. Amma, his secretary, opens the door to his office without a word, a silent rebuke. “Walter,” I say smoothly—it's amazing, this skin, how I can step in and out of it—“I'm so sorry; our SEO meeting ran late.” (Walter is terrified of Search Engine Optimization. Doesn't understand it. All he knows is revenue, like a cartoon character with dollar signs in his eyeballs.)

“That's all right.” Walter leans back in his chair, clasps his hands together as I sit down. “Now, Charlotte. This film.” Walter's father was a

beacon of misogyny, but at least he had tact. “Quite a nightmare for our PR team, your involvement.”

I reorganize my face to look contrite. “Yes.”

“Regardless. We’re going to be running our own story about your ‘Scarlet Christmas.’ Our investigative team started writing this morning after sources spoke to the fact-checkers. It’ll run tomorrow.”

No reporting, he told me a week ago. “You said—”

“You must appreciate that the circumstances have changed.” Walter gestures to his computer, which he’s apparently using as a stand-in for *the internet*. “This is a bigger story than it was a few days ago. Still, at any rate, we weren’t planning additional reporting. The sources came to us.”

“Sources,” I repeat. My gaze catches on a letter opener on his desk: silver with a black handle, like a tiny samurai sword.

“Yes. They were frustrated with the *Times*—they’d gone to them first, but it was taking so long. We move much faster at *The Chronicle*.” He’s delighted, I can tell. “These sources were involved in the investigation, the state attorney’s? It seems some information was withheld from the public.”

Riley’s voice: *There was a cover-up, or something.*

“What information?” I try to keep my voice still. “Who are the sources?”

“We’re still hammering out the details. Our sources, they’re very concerned with anonymity. They still work in the federal government, you know!” Giddy. Walter is *giddy*. “Not to mention, we’ve gotten Stephanie Anderson on the record for the story. Exclusively—”

“What is she saying? Steph?”

Walter slackens a little, like he remembers who he’s talking to. “You know I can’t reveal that. But the reason I wanted to speak to you, Charlotte—outside of keeping you apprised, of course—is that I’m afraid this is going to ... exacerbate the situation.” *Afraid*. He’s fucking thrilled. “We’ve had numerous complaints about the photographers outside.” Three or four of them, waiting for me to arrive and leave. “And I have to tell you, Charlotte, that several of your staffers have mentioned that you’ve been ... distracted.”

What? My eyes fall, again, on the letter opener. “Excuse me?”

“It’s to be expected, of course, but...”

For some reason, of all of it—*The Chronicle’s* betrayal, Walter’s condescension, Steph’s complicity—*this* hurts the most. This past week, I’ve been at the office earlier than ever—God knows the photographers will catch me otherwise—and leaving later, swearing blind to myself that even if everything else falls apart, the magazine I built will not.

Distracted?

“... a leave of absence,” Walter is saying, but I miss it because I am, in fact, distracted.

“You want me to *leave*?”

“Eighty percent of your salary. It’s better than our maternity leave plan.”

“Oh, good!” I can’t help it. “Walter, I don’t think you understand—”

“This isn’t a recommendation, Charlotte. This is a very generous offer, in extreme circumstances...”

The letter opener is winking at me in the late-afternoon sunlight. I think of the word *distracted*, of Walter forcing me out of the way before his precious Pulitzer-bait story suffers a conflict of interest.

I think of the letter opener in his neck, of my boss slumped over in his chair.

I think of Cate lying at the bottom of the stairs in Zach’s apartment.

I think of blood on the snow—

No.

“I’ll leave.” I say it quickly, cut him off mid-sentence. “I’ll go. Now.”

Walter doesn’t even pause. “We’ll be in touch.”

I push back my chair and get out of there, away from the glinting letter opener and the terror of what I might do, the image of Walter’s blood pooling all over the papers he’ll have had HR draw up, it must have been days ago, he must have known all along that he’d—

Don’t get angry.

I don’t know if I’ll ever feel safe in my own body again.

★ ★ ★

Hours later, I'm in the shower, scrubbing so hard with a pumice stone that red welts are rising on my skin, when my phone starts beeping, again and again. Which is unusual, and not just because I don't have all that many friends. My phone is always set to silent, with the exception of texts or calls from a handful of people: Mum. Dad. Felicity. Olivia. Tripp.

Ping! Ping! It keeps going.

I grab a towel from the heated rack and climb out. My phone is lit up with texts from Felicity. That's unusual, too. She has a special assistive smartphone, but she doesn't like to use it, preferring to call from the house phone instead.

Hey Charlie what is a scarlet Xmas

Mum and Dad won't say

Please I want to know

Please—

There are more, but I don't read them. Instead, I call her, droplets trickling down my back and pooling at my feet. Her phone just rings and rings, so I hang up and call the house number. This time, my dad answers. "Hello, Colbert residence?"

"Dad—it's me."

I told my parents about the film a few days ago, when the stories began multiplying. I told them that it was nothing to worry about, a blip, everything was okay, please don't worry, Mum, I said it two or three times, and then Tripp gently took the phone from my hand and spoke to them, his voice strong and reassuring: "Phil, Cath, we're in touch with our lawyers, we don't want you to be concerned..."

They believed him. They trust Tripp.

"Hello, love," my dad says. "How are you holding up?"

Tears prick at my eyes. "I'm fine ... Can I talk to Felicity?"

There's a pause. "She's having a little lie-down just now."

I know my dad. He's a terrible liar. "Can you put me on to Mum?"

"Well ... she's having a little lie-down, too, at the mo."

My mum doesn't believe in naps. The last time she had a lie-down, she had pneumonia. "Dad." I clench my still-damp fingers around the phone. "What's going on? I got some texts from Felicity..."

"Ah." I can hear him considering how much to reveal. "What did she say, then?"

"Tell me what's *happening!*" I sound like a five-year-old.

"All right, all right." He sounds tired, suddenly. "The thing is ... well, Fel was followed home by some reporters earlier. They were ... shouting things at her, I suppose. She was upset. Your mum, she was very upset."

No, no, no. "Is that even *legal!*" I spit. "She's a fucking *minor!*"

"Don't swear, love. And I don't know. Your mum handled it. I don't know much, to be honest. They were both"—he pauses—"upset."

The *idea* of a group of strange men following my sister home, cameras in hand, *shouting* at her, making her cry ...

How did I forget about the British tabloids, how bloodthirsty they are? How they stalked my family last time, set up shop on our street with their satellite vans and periscope cameras? How much they relish the *one of our own* stories from abroad, especially when they're bloody and a little lascivious, especially when the *one of our own* is white and upper middle-class?

How many papers did my stupid face sell last time? How many more do they think they can squeeze out of me and my family? If I'm there, they'll follow me around instead of Felicity. If I'm there, I can protect her, protect my mum—

"Dad, I'm coming home," I babble. "I'm getting on the next flight, I —"

"I really don't think that's such a good idea, love."

He doesn't want me to come home.

"We're trying to ... lay low. It *is* better than it was a couple days ago," he says brightly. "It was just ... the one incident, with your sister. We weren't even going to mention it, your mum thought it would just upset you..."

Should I hire bodyguards? Body doubles? Move them into a hotel? No, no, no, they'll never go for it ... I try to stretch out my breaths. "Dad, I'm

so sorry.”

“Love, this isn’t your fault.” It’s the tone he uses with Felicity: gentle, soothing. “It’s quite exciting, in a way.” Oh, my sweet dad. “Well, not the bit today. But, you know, your mum always says, this is how celebrities must feel...” He drifts off. “We’re trying to look on the bright side. And we want you to do the same. You’re doing so well in New York, love. Don’t let this ruin it. All right?”

“All right,” I repeat.

“We love you, Charlie bear.”

“I love you, too,” I tell him. Then I hang up and rush into Tripp’s study, my hair still sticky with shampoo. “They followed Felicity home!” I explode. “They yelled at her, they made her cry, Tripp!”

“Oh, babe...” Tripp reaches for me, but I pull away, agitated.

“I need to see the *lawyers*! It’s been a *week* already! Tripp, it’s like your mom is holding them off, I *know* you think that’s crazy but—”

Tripp is shaking his head. “You know what happened. That partner, he’s on vacation until Monday. He’s the best in the game when it comes to this sort of thing. We’re meeting with his team as soon as he’s back. Monday,” he repeats.

“Your mother—” I rail.

“Baby.” Tripp takes off his glasses and wipes them clean. “Believe me when I say that nobody wants this to go away more than my mother. You should see some of her emails to Phil, the partner. She practically insisted he cut his Zurich trip short.”

“Maybe he *should*!”

“It’s been a horrible day for you. I’m sorry. Come here,” Tripp says, opening his arms. “Come here,” he repeats.

I turn around. “I have to wash out my hair.”

★ ★ ★

Maybe it’s the steam, maybe it’s the panic, maybe it’s the fact I’ve barely eaten in days, but my legs are weak and wobbly when I step back inside the shower. I let myself sink to the floor, the bones of my bare ass hitting the tiles with a jolt. The hot water pounds my scalp and shoulders. Tripp would

have picked this model for its water pressure. He cares about things like that.

They were shouting things at her, my dad said.

The first time around, nobody knew my name, not really. They'd seen my photo, that first shot of me bleary-eyed, pale, my hair tangled around my face. But that girl was a secondary character, forgotten after a few months, doomed only to be discussed in the years afterwards by true-crime obsessives, and I don't know how I didn't realize it before. How lucky I've been. To have evolved into a version of myself the press hadn't touched. To have been left alone, for the most part, all these years.

If the worst day of my life is immortalized, blown out to the world in high definition for thirty bucks with popcorn, I will be, too.

I'll deserve it. But my family won't.

Until now, I haven't let myself think about Steph's nut allergy. Not really. Not properly.

It was the only thing she ever seemed afraid of. Steph prepared all her meals herself, a rainbow of bell peppers and grains in shiny Tupperware. She wouldn't eat anything packaged, not even if it was specifically nut-free. Cate always took so much joy in sharing food, ordering for the table at restaurants, dipping her fingers into our classmates' bags of snacks. Because Steph couldn't. But I also remember that Cate slept with her door unlocked, her phone on loud, her shoes by the door, just in case Steph ever needed her to administer that EpiPen.

It would be so easy. Steph trusted me to check the muffin I gave her, that time in her office. She'd trust me again. I don't know how long it would take. Half an hour? I don't want to google it. I know from the state attorney's report—which I read when it came out, though apparently nobody else did—how your search history can be used to build a case against you.

But I can't.

Can I?

What's holding me back isn't some childlike sense of right or wrong. It's not even fear—I'm far more afraid of this continuing to unfold. It's the extra weight that I know would come with doing something like this.

And how do you know that? something inside me jeers.

I've wondered if it's evolutionary. This weight. Perhaps we have to be incentivized, people like me, to not cause any more death. The weight, it isn't sharp like guilt, or blunt like regret, or animating the way anger is. It's more of a ... heaviness. Like the person whose life you ended is sitting on your chest, all hundred and fifty pounds of them, or clinging to your ankle as you trudge through the day.

It isn't what I expected. In my childish ways, when it happened, I thought I'd cycle through emotions: predictable ones like sadness, unpredictable ones like relief. Like I did when I was normal, like normal people continue to do. But I got stuck. I felt things, I still feel things, I'm not a psychopath, but this heaviness is more than a feeling. It's a physical force, like gravity, tugging me down. All of my feelings—my anxiety, my coming-and-going depression, my excitement and joy and frustration and everything in between—they rise and fall, though the bad ones go away more quickly if I work with Noor on them. But the heaviness, it stands apart. It never leaves.

I'm not afraid of what it might feel like to watch the life disappear from Steph's face. I'm not afraid to watch her suffer, though I know from what happened on the eleventh floor that it would be awful. Maybe less awful, if I thought about those men chasing Felicity, about being banned from my own magazine, about Steph saying, *This film is going ahead. Whether you like it or not.*

But I am afraid of having to carry around more than I do already. I'm already not alive in the way I was, not since they died. I'm already a ghost, slipping in and out of my own life, holding tight to what I can control.

"Will it get worse?" I asked Noor when we first met. I couldn't imagine, *could not fathom* carrying more than I already did, and yet I was so afraid that I would have to.

"Psychic pain has no limits," she replied. She sounded sad, like she was letting me in on a secret that people shouldn't have to know.

I think about that a lot. That it could get worse, always.

I can't let that happen, either.

EXCERPT FROM GUNNAR KORHONEN'S ARTICLE "THE YEAR THAT WASN'T."

We were about to finish our first semester. We had five months to go. Five months left, and nobody could enter the school. At first because it was a crime scene; later because we couldn't bear to. They had sat with us in class, studied beside us in the den, kicked the ailing vending machine with us. Their ghosts were on every floor, in every room.

But we had to finish our degrees. So they moved us into the other graduate schools: our lectures in the business school, our classes in the medical school. A few times, we had class in the gross anatomy lab, where first-year med students took apart cadavers. They had cleaned it thoroughly, but the lab reeked of formaldehyde and occasionally we'd spot a fleck of blood on the ground. More than one student had to leave class to vomit.

New rules were created: Any student who wanted to drop out after that first semester was refunded their tuition, no questions asked. A therapist was installed in the business school, where she remained for the rest of the year. (And if we had been thinking in these terms: What a bargain, in America! Months of free therapy; a semester's free tuition!) A few people did leave, but not us, not the people who had known them. Whether we were dogged about completing the year because of what happened or in spite of it, I

can't say, but we all graduated on time, every one of the seventy-two students who remained.

I thought our shared grief would bring us closer—us, the ones who were left. After all, if you'd asked me that first semester, I would have said we were like family.

But that wasn't the case.

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TWELVE

NOW

The Chronicle puts me on leave for three weeks. Three weeks! In all the years I've been at *C*, I've never taken more than four days of vacation. Once, I would have said three weeks was *unfathomable*—I'm only planning to take a week for our wedding—but Vik “strongly advised” me to accept their terms, lest *The Chronicle* be forced to “consider further action.” I can't work, I can't sleep, I can't go outside in case someone takes my picture, so I pad from room to room, fingering the bumpy spines of the books in the library, checking and rechecking the Google alert for my name, and generally, in Tripp's words, “not acting like myself.”

Talking to Tripp makes me feel worse, so I've stopped doing it.

Instead, I've been researching defamation law. It's terribly American, all of it predicated on what's *true* or *false* about your life. I don't believe in much that's entirely one or the other—you wouldn't, either, in my shoes—but I do believe in money, the other American canon. The Goodman Wests, Jude in particular, have made very clear that no expense will be spared in protecting the family name from “Charlotte's past.” It would have upset me once, the way they talk about me, but now I feel pathetically grateful.

Because I know how good their lawyers are. I've seen them in action, thanks to what Jude calls Trent's “wandering eye” and what I call predatory behavior. In the last few years, their all-star legal team has batted off at least

seven accusations of sexual harassment (Trent), two DUIs (Jude), and a Class A drug charge (Toby). And those are just the ones I *know* about.

“Baby, are you still working?” Tripp asks me. I’m bent over my phone at the kitchen island, reading a legal brief I found online. A city councilman who sued a TV station for defamation, for reporting on his second family. A precedent-setting case, Google tells me.

“Yeah,” I lie. (It’s just easier.)

I’m dimly aware of Tripp sitting down next to me. It’s Saturday morning, and he’s been trying to act out our usual weekend routine: bathrobes, the papers, and caffeine. For me, tea from the miniature teapot that we found at auction; for Tripp, Ethiopian coffee made with his beloved French press. The whole thing struck me as unsettlingly adult when I began sleeping over, but I came to love it. Just not today.

“I think maybe you should get dressed,” Tripp says.

“What?”

“You don’t have to put on anything special. Just...” He gestures towards my robe, which is actually his robe. “Something else.”

“Do we have people coming over?” Oh God, it’s not Jude with the prenup, is it?

“I can’t say.” Tripp looks almost mischievous, like a little kid with a secret.

Confused, I return to Tripp’s bedroom—I still think of it as Tripp’s bedroom, maybe because it’s so bachelor pad-y, with its king-size bed and indigo walls—and change into a long skirt and sweater, the kind of outfit that says, “I have no interest in stealing all the family money.” Then the buzzer goes. Which is weird, because Jude usually lets herself in.

“Buzz them in!” Tripp calls brightly.

Them?

I press the button.

A beat, and then: “Darling, please stop pulling Mummy’s hair. Pull Daddy’s instead, hmm?”

“Not much of it left,” a man’s voice says ruefully. “Bloody hell, *look* at this place.”

“Shh!” the woman says impatiently.

Oh my God.

“Olivia?” I croak.

“Charlie!” The front door swings open. My best friend throws a small human at her husband and rushes towards me, arms outstretched. I haven’t seen her in a year and a half, the longest we’ve ever been apart. She hugs me tight. “Charlie, oh my God, Charlie.” There are tears in her eyes as she holds me at arm’s length. “I’ve been so *worried!*”

“*Liv.*” Emotion swells in my chest, and for a moment I think I’ll cry, too—but then it settles, heavy under my lungs. “*Liv,*” I repeat dumbly, and she hugs me again, the familiar smell of her shampoo disarming me for a moment: my shoulders dropping, my jaw unclenching.

“Freddy,” I hear Freddy, her husband, saying to Tripp behind us. “Good to meet you, mate. Great place. This is little Rose.”

“Your goddaughter!” Olivia cries, and she grabs the child from Freddy and thrusts it at me.

I take it, stagger back. “Wow, she’s beautiful,” I say faintly. “I ... I can’t believe you’re here.”

I’m lying, but only about Rose being beautiful. (Rose is a small, bald version of Freddy.) I would never have expected them to do this, in part because Tripp hardly knows Liv. She’s only visited once since I moved into the town house, and Tripp had to work the entire long weekend she was here. And Liv—unfailingly, sweetly predictable Liv—has never, ever arrived on a Saturday. I wouldn’t have thought she was capable of breaking her Thursday to Sunday routine if the proof wasn’t standing right in front of me, wiping away tears.

“We wanted to be here for you,” she’s saying. “I couldn’t just keep sitting at home while all of this was...”

“We’re so glad you’re all here,” Tripp says warmly. “Let me help you with the suitcases. Your room is down the hall.”

“We have our own *room?*” Olivia squeals. (I am one hundred percent sure Liv would not be here if she wasn’t certain she’d be getting her own room.)

“Absolutely.” Tripp picks up a suitcase with each hand and leads Freddy and his mini-me to our guest room. “And of course there’s a

bassinet for Rose...”

“There’s a *what?*” I say.

“He means a cot,” Olivia says.

“We have a *cot* in the guest room?” I’m bemused.

“Oh, Char.” Olivia takes both of my hands in hers. “I like your hair shorter. God, it’s good to see you! I had a bit too much champagne on the plane...”

“You had *champagne* on the *plane*?”

“Tripp flew us over in first class.” Liv is trying to look solemn, I can tell—*This isn’t a holiday, Fred*, she would have said sternly on the plane, champagne in hand—but she’s practically bouncing. “We’re here ’til Tuesday.”

Shit. The meeting with the Goodman West lawyers is Monday.

“But ... you usually come Thursdays,” I manage.

“You look thin, babe.” Ignoring me, Liv reaches out a hand, with those perfect oval-shaped fingernails I know as well as my own, and smooths out a crease in my sweater. “Really thin. Have you been eating properly...?”

But I can’t focus. Everything, *everything* hinges on this meeting. I need the Goodman West lawyers to start throwing their weight around—I’m picturing them as a suited-up army, laden with checkbooks and threats, breaking down Steph’s resolve piece by piece—and I need them to do it *fast*. Steph’s team has already cast their Jordan, it came up on my Google alert—

“Here’s what I’m thinking.” Tripp reappears, bouncing Rose on his hip. “You two should get some rest. Charlie and I will spend some quality time with our goddaughter, isn’t that right, hmm, Rose? When you wake up, we’ll all go out for brunch.”

Olivia looks like she’s going to cry again. “Oh, Tripp, really? We couldn’t...”

“We insist,” Tripp says, steering them towards the guest room. “Mom and Dad are going to take a well-deserved nap, aren’t they, Rose?”

“Tripp, you angel,” Olivia says, touching Rose’s cheek and then Tripp’s. I get the sense she’s about ready to trade in Freddy for him. “I’ll

just freshen up quickly. Be right back.” Freddy has already disappeared into the guest room.

Tripp turns to me, smiling from ear to ear. “What a surprise, hey?”

“Yup,” I say weakly.

It’s not that I don’t *want* them here. Olivia is my oldest, closest friend, my maid of honor, the yin to my yang. Freddy is like a brother. It’s just ...

“We have a lot to prepare,” I hear myself saying. “For the meeting. On Monday.”

Tripp is still bouncing Rose, hardly listening. “It was your dad’s idea. I said, ‘Phil, this is exactly what she needs.’”

This is the thing about Tripp: He has an ironclad belief in the *should*. If he *should* be overjoyed, stressed, miserable, whatever it is, he feels it with his whole body. He thinks that if you *should* feel better and don’t, you *should* be trying harder.

“I just wish you’d told me.” I know I should be nicer, tread more carefully, but I’m frustrated. “Did you get baby food? Diapers? They’ll need—”

“They brought their own.” Tripp is pretending to nibble at Rose’s fingers.

Even under normal circumstances, our fights tend to devolve into this: me the mean Wicked Witch of the West, Tripp the martyr. That we’re having to play our roles in low voices frustrates me even more. “Tripp, we have so much going on right now...”

“They’re a family, baby. They’ll take care of themselves.”

“They bloody *will not!* You don’t know Liv like I do, she’ll want restaurants, Broadway tickets, photos with giant Elmos—”

“She’s here to be with *you*. You’re overreacting.”

“I’m *not!*” I am, but I can’t help it. “Did you even think about what I might want?”

“Charlie.” Tripp lowers his voice from its usual easygoing tenor into *I’m serious* mode. “Thinking about you is all I’ve been doing. It’s all Olivia and your parents have been doing. I appreciate that this is a difficult time for you, but you have to help us help you.” He likes the sound of that; he repeats it. “Help us help you. All right?”

This won't help me. I don't bother to say it. It won't help to be scheduled up to my eyeballs by Olivia, Olivia who treats me like I'm still soft and warm, like I'm still pinballing my way through life with a smile on my face, when I'm not. It won't *help* to be distracted from the one thing I have to do—get the Goodman West lawyers to red tape Steph's film out of commission—with heart-to-hearts and bottles of wine. Not now. Not with so much on the line.

"We agreed, all of us," Tripp is saying. "The best thing for everyone was for Olivia to be with you right now..."

But I'm not listening, because I've just seen my phone, upturned on the kitchen island and lit up with notifications.

Stephanie Anderson (2)

A missed call from Steph. And a text.

"Your parents wanted to come, too, of course," Tripp says, "but since they have Felicity, we thought..."

I tune him out, open the message.

I've been thinking about our conversation

Did I change her mind? Did I pull this off?

You say I wasn't there, but I was

My throat closes up like a fist.

I know what happened

Tripp is still talking and I mumble something about a shower and walk away from him and the baby and shrug off my clothes and step under the hot water, the highest setting, I let it hit my skin like a slap.

★ ★ ★

There's a photographer lurking outside the town house when we leave for brunch. Dimly, I register that it's just the one guy, down from two yesterday and four earlier this week, which means Steph's campaign to make a

tragedy about her and her alone is working, and I would be relieved if I wasn't outside of my body again, watching myself and my friends and my fiancé push past the photographer, duck the flashes, mutter to each other, "Just keep walking, just keep walking..."

But I don't miss it, that glint in Olivia's eyes, the thrill I know is coursing through her, and when she reaches for my arm I move away.

The photographer doesn't bother following us to the brasserie. I hear him drive away on his moped, hear Olivia exhale and say, "My *God*, that was awful," hear Tripp say, "Yes, it's been challenging," and still I'm outside of my body, watching myself walk down the street in my pleated skirt and my four-hundred-dollar haircut and the stupid baseball cap pulled low over my eyes, like I think I'm Angelina goddamn Jolie.

Olivia waits until we're seated and the boys have gone to find Rose a high chair, and then she grabs my hand and says, "Char, how are you? Really?"

"It's been hard," I parrot Tripp. I can't away with *I'm fine*, not with Liv. "But I'm okay."

"Because all of this," she says, "it must be so..." She hesitates. "Triggering," she says finally.

I force myself to make eye contact—she'll never believe me otherwise—but something in her face catches me before I can speak: concern, real concern, her cheeks pink and puffy like when she's trying not to cry. "Don't cry," I say before I can stop myself. "Please. Then I'll cry, and..."

"Okay. Okay. No crying." Olivia takes a sharp, deep breath. "It's just ... Seeing you like this. You're so thin." Her voice cracks. "I hate that you're being pulled back into it. I *hate* it. Everything's been going so well..." It's the same thing my dad said. "Shit," she mumbles, dabbing at her eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I *said* I wouldn't do this..."

For all her directness, Olivia doesn't often bring up what happened. To her credit, she never asked for details, though I'm sure she wanted to (I have a feeling Freddy had a word). She knows I still take an antidepressant and see Noor. She knows I no longer talk to my former classmates. She doesn't know a lot else about what happened, and I'm grateful she's never demanded more. I don't want to lie to her.

“I had to be with you this time,” she’s saying. “You said you were okay, but you said that last time and I still wish I’d tried harder, I wish...”

When we *have* talked about it, it’s mostly about this. The year I attended Carroll, Olivia was deep in the weeds of her final placement; she completed her master’s in psychology the following year. Olivia thinks she didn’t make enough time for me that year and should have realized how bad things would get afterwards. She didn’t anticipate my breakdown over Aaron’s book, in spite of her years of training. She feels terrible about it. She always has.

I let her think she was a bad friend because it stops her pushing me for details. To be honest, I don’t remember how I felt about Olivia then. I certainly don’t think anything she could have said or done would have changed things. But as long as she feels guilty, she won’t ask me for details about what happened.

Guilt. That’s what’s on her face. It’s guilt.

Oh, *Liv*.

“There was nothing you could have done, Liv. I swear. This time, it’s been...” I’m tearing up, too. “It’s been so...” I don’t know where to begin, so I reach for her word. “Triggering.”

“Oh, my girl,” she says, my hands in hers. “My girl”—and a sob escapes my throat and this, this is what I’ve been afraid of: that the person I am with my best friend isn’t who I need to be now. That I’ll be made weak again, soft again, ready to be beaten to a pulp. Again.

No.

I take a shuddering breath and force myself to joke, “Things don’t look *that* bad, do they?” Olivia knows I’m talking about my cashmere sweater and expensive highlights, the diamond perched on my finger, the flashy town house that belonged to Jude and Senior. She knows my life wasn’t always like this.

“I know, I know,” she says. She lets go of my hands and wipes her face. “But with everything going on with your mum and dad—”

“Here you go, Rosy Posey!” Freddy deposits the child into a high chair and slides into his seat. “Hey, Char, do they do fry-ups in the States?”

I’m still focused on Olivia. “What about my mum and dad?”

“Baby,” Tripp says, “maybe we should—”

“Liv.” I keep my voice even. “Tell me.”

“They’re fine, Char,” Freddy says in his soft, calm Irish lilt. “That’s the main thing.”

“Yes, they’re fine.” Olivia reaches over and smooths Rose’s hair. She isn’t meeting my eyes.

“Liv.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Liv says quickly. She rubs her nose, like she does when she’s nervous. “It’s just, well, the tabloids are going after them a bit. They won’t let me visit, but I call your mum, we talk. And, you know, Felicity is older this time, she’s having some issues with another child in her class...”

“What kind of issues?”

“Um.” Liv picks at her perfectly manicured fingernails. “They didn’t want me to...”

Freddy gives her a look, one that says, *This was not the plan.*

“Just tell me,” I say flatly.

“So I guess another child is, well, bullying her, I suppose? Saying things about you to make her cry? But your parents are on top of it, they’re having the school bring in an extra classroom helper, obviously she isn’t allowed to walk Five by herself anymore...”

“Wait.” I’m struggling to process this, any of it. “The photographers are still following Felicity? I thought it was just the one time—”

“No! Well. I don’t know. Felicity ... won’t always say. That’s the problem, she’s not really talking to anyone, she keeps disappearing with the dog, they’re taking her to a new psychiatrist, someone I referred...” She drifts off.

Freddy says, “I’m sorry, Char. We didn’t want to dump this on you.”

I think, *This is just the beginning.*

And then I disappear again, leaving my body and my friends sitting unhappily around the table as the server rambles on about the brunch specials and the Bellini happy hour.

★ ★ ★

On Sunday, Tripp announces another surprise. He's convinced Jude to watch Rose, and the four of us are going to a fancy Italian restaurant in SoHo. As we're leaving, Jude lays a bony hand on my arm, the first time she's ever touched me in a way that isn't perfunctory, and says, quietly, "The lawyers will know what to do." For some reason—maybe the Ativan I popped while we were getting ready—I believe her.

As we sail down FDR Drive in the cab, I repeat it to myself, like a prayer. *The lawyers will know what to do.* The sun is setting, casting a glow over the spiky buildings. *The lawyers will know what to do.*

"That view!" Olivia breathes. "It's perfect."

Olivia fell in love with New York long before I did, probably the first time she visited. I don't remember much of it—it was years ago, a few months after everything happened—but I remember her wide eyes as we made our way through her New York itinerary, which was basically looking down at the city from different vantage points. She always wanted to live here, Liv. Meanwhile, New York was wasted on me for years.

The lawyers will know what to do.

We pull up to the restaurant. It's one Tripp and I have been to with Jude and Senior, which means it's probably Michelin starred and won't tolerate cameras, thank God, and Tripp will discreetly pay the bill ("check") before Olivia and Freddy can see it and try to contribute. (They work for the NHS, for God's sake.) Tripp always moves through spaces like this with ease, I think distantly as we're escorted to our table. Probably because he's been in them since he was a toddler.

"Thoughts on the first course?" He's squeezing my forearm now, the server looking down at me expectantly. "The bass sounds delicious..."

Another reason I'm grateful for Tripp: He never asks why I slip away. He's just there to help when I come back. The *amount* of times at weddings I've been asked a question and Tripp had to swoop in to answer, saying easily, "That flight is catching up to us, babe, isn't it? On our last trip to Antigua—"

"The bass sounds great," I tell the server.

"Very good, ma'am."

I drink more at dinner than I usually do. I *know* you shouldn't mix alcohol and benzos—I'm not an idiot—but I don't know how else to get through it, the tipsy chatter about Rose and work and sightseeing, broken up by silences when they remember why we're together in the first place. Course after course, bottle after bottle, as Liv and Freddy and Tripp start to relax, talk louder, laugh harder, *bond* in ways a different kind of woman would bask in—they're discussing schools now, zoning, districts, some prep school Tripp wants to send our kids to—and I sit in near-silence with a fixed smile, drinking glass after glass. (The servers top me up whenever I run low. God bless them.)

So it takes me a moment for me to catch on, a freeze-frame before my heart begins to pound, when a hand reaches out and touches my arm on my way back from the ladies' room.

"Charlotte." The voice is low, familiar.

Habit overtakes me—the woman is in her twenties, brunette and shiny, like so many of my staff—and I force a smile, show my teeth. "Yes, hello?"

"My name is Renée." She's speaking quickly, her hand locked on my arm. "I'm a journalist. We spoke briefly on the phone a few weeks ago, and I know, Charlotte, I know you don't want to be—"

"You're from *Vanity Fair*." I'm drunker than I thought, I realize as the hallway blurs. "You wrote that article."

"Yes. Listen to me—this isn't going away. You're smart, Charlotte, you know that. If you're not comfortable with a feature, we can do a Q and A, you can preapprove questions, we don't even have to talk about Catherine —"

"Get *off* me." I slap her hand away, a little blearily. How dare she touch me? I bet she was in the Broadcast stream of her journalism school.

"I've spoken to Stephanie Anderson," she says as I turn away.

"I don't care!" I'm picking my way through the crimson hallway, even as it twists around me.

"She's told me some things," she says, her voice carrying even as I walk away faster, faster. "She's not your biggest fan, is she?"

I swing open the door and stumble past the kitchen and then I'm back at the table, breathless, Tripp's hand on my knee, his voice saying, "You're

shivering, baby, take my jacket,” Freddy jabbering on about environmental policy—they’re on to *environmental policy*?—and my glass, thank God, my wineglass has been filled and I grab it and as the cool sourness slips down my throat, I repeat to myself: *The lawyers will know what to do.*

★ ★ ★

When I wake up, my heart is pounding, my eyes ache, and my head is pulsing to the beat of *You are thirty-two now, you are thirty-two now*. It’s still a long way from morning, the sky black between the sloppily closed curtains, Tripp snoring gently beside me. I stick out my hand in the hope that I’ll have left a cup of water on the bedside table. No. I am not that smart.

I need to go back to sleep or I will die. On the other hand, I need to get some water or I will die.

Groaning softly, I pull on Tripp’s robe and move slowly out of the bedroom. I shuffle to the kitchen, pour myself a glass of water, slurp it down. God, New York water is good. Cleanest in the country, Tripp always says—

“You heard what Tripp said.” Freddy’s voice. “She’s been through worse.”

“That was some *bullshit!*” I can tell Olivia’s had at least two more drinks. “What was, what was that shit he said? She’s more resilient than I think? Like I haven’t known her since we were *five*—”

“I thought you liked him.” Freddy, softer.

“I *do* like him! But he’s got this wrong, Fred, he just doesn’t get it. She’s—not—*fine!*”

Tripp’s study is next to the guest room, just off the kitchen, and I pad quietly into it, lower myself into his old-white-man chair—a monstrosity of wood and leather that Senior left behind when he and Jude decamped to Westchester—and listen. (For God’s sake, nobody has ever overheard themselves being discussed and *left*.)

“I’ve known her a long time, too, honey. I love her, too.” Freddy always gets like this when he’s drunk: solemn, emotional. “She’s grown up.

Of course she's been through a lot. But people change. Just because she's been a bit quiet—"

"You are not listening to me." Like me, Liv graduates to Queen's English when she's frustrated, clean and brittle in comparison to Freddy's soft lilt. "You met her when you were *nineteen*. I have known her practically my whole life. And I am telling you, no matter what bloody Tripp thinks, she is not *fine*. She's so fucking far from fine, I—"

"All right. All right." I picture Freddy holding up his hands. "You're the expert. What do you think, then? Is she having another, I don't know, a breakdown?"

"I don't fucking *know*—"

There's a wail, presumably from Rose, and then they're both talking: Freddy saying, "There, there, sweet, Mummy's fine," and Olivia rambling, "Do you know she never actually told me? What she saw, I mean. All I know is what I read in the papers. I'm her best friend!"

"Shh, shh ... You were so busy, you can't feel guilty about—"

"Oh, fuck *off*, Fred, I'm not guilty, I'm *worried*! Do you remember, do you remember what she was like before she moved to the States? I don't just mean the way she looked, people *loved* her, she was always so open and brave and, and *ridiculous*, this mad little tornado bumping from place to place—"

"Of *course* I remember." Freddy is getting emotional again. "She was the one who told me to ask you out, remember? Shh, Rose, shh..."

As quietly as I can, I open Tripp's top drawer and feel around for painkillers. Tripp gets headaches all the time, pops Advil like they're mints.

"And now she's this, this—Fred, the fucking haircut, the Botox, the way she is with him, it's like she's playacting the role of someone I've never even *met*—"

"Do you think it's *him*?" He means Tripp. Freddy is always ready for a fight after a few drinks and emotional declarations. "What sort of name is *Tripp*, anyway?"

"No, no, this started long before him. Though it does frighten me, doesn't it frighten you, Fred, that she's going to *marry* someone who

doesn't know her, who thinks she wants kids and, and a Land Rover and a fucking Hamptons house when she..." I can't hear the rest of her sentence.

Kids. A Land Rover. A fucking Hamptons house. It sends a jolt of fear down my spine, and that scares me, too. And there's something else rolling in my stomach, not just the fear and not just the wine—a spark. Not good, not bad, but electric. Of being recognized. Of finally being seen. (Except I don't think I was ever a *mad little tornado*.)

Not that I could ever tell her. She'd need to know: *Why? Why? Why?*

"... because it's all *wrong*." Liv sounds close to tears now. "I've never seen her this bad, not even right after. And I've missed it, I've totally missed it. I haven't visited in so long—"

"We just had a baby, love. There you go, Rosy Posey. There you go."

No Advil in the top drawer. None in the middle one, either. God, I must have seen Tripp toss one in his mouth and drop the bottle back in his desk a dozen times. The filing cabinet is deep and filled with papers, but I stick my hand in and feel around for the cool packaging. My palm brushes against something smooth and glossy, nestled in among the receipts and car insurance. I pull it out.

"Arriving out of the blue like this, it's probably making it *worse*." Olivia sniffs. "I promised her parents I would bolster her, that's the word Phil used..."

But I'm no longer listening. I'm looking at the photograph: Tripp, grinning from ear to ear, his hair longer and lighter. There's something exuberant about the way he's standing, his chest puffed out like a bird's, that I've never seen in adult Tripp. His cheek is pressed up against a girl's—a selfie, taken long before the term was invented—and she's sticking her tongue out. I can't tell where they are; their faces take up most of the frame; Tripp's pale Goodman West freckles against the girl's dark complexion.

"Charlie," Tripp says.

He's standing in the doorway of his study. Olivia and Freddy have fallen silent. For the first time since I've known Tripp, I meet his eyes and I feel afraid.

The girl in the photograph is Dee.

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THIRTEEN

NOW

“What is this?” It comes out almost formally.

Tripp says, “It’s a photograph.”

“I can bloody see that. Why is...” I wave the picture, unable to form the sentence. *Why did you know her? Why didn’t you tell me?*

He must not know how Dee and I were connected. Except ... he does, because he must know how Dee died. And he knows I was there. I told him on our second date. Sketched out the parameters of the story in dry, bare-bones terms. Like I always do when I’m asked about it.

Tripp closes the door behind him so Liv and Freddy can’t hear. “I have been trying to tell you,” he says quietly. “I wanted to tell you.”

“You knew her.”

“Yes, I knew her.”

It clicks. That first night. The Marriott ballroom. He’d sat down next to me and sighed loudly. When I hadn’t responded, he’d talked at me—*that looks good; hey, you’re British*—until I gave in.

“You knew who I was,” I say. “When we met.”

“Yes.”

“You never *said* anything!” I’m still stuck on that point. Tripp doesn’t have secrets. Not from me. From the beginning, from that winter night in this town house when he handed me my bourbon and told me he saw us having a future, laying out our life in front of me like tarot cards—Tripp has

been open, honest, supplying information without being asked, telling me what mattered to him so I never had to wonder.

We didn't meet by accident.

I can't process it.

"I wanted to tell you. You have no idea how much." Tripp leans heavily against the wall. "But everything that reminds you of Carroll is so hard on you. I didn't want to be yet another..."

Yet another trigger.

Patronizing *bastard*.

"It was wrong," he concludes, ever the martyr. "I'm really sorry."

I stare down at the photo. His cheek, pressed up against Dee's. Her tongue pointed at the camera. "How did you even meet her? She was two years older than you."

Tripp slides down the wall to sit on the floor. It's a deliberately nonthreatening gesture, one I've never seen from him: *I'm harmless*, it says. *I swear*. It's condescending, and he's being condescending, but he's right: I no longer feel safe with him. It's a familiar feeling, horrifying in its familiarity: *I never could have imagined you like this*.

"We volunteered together," he says. "Sophomore year. Her senior year."

It clicks. Her NYU boyfriend. Except ... "She called you Liam."

"William," he says.

His full name. His real name. People only started calling him Tripp, I remember suddenly, when he began working for his dad. The Third, it means.

"I told you..." He swallows. "I told you her name was Denise."

Oh my God. Dee is Denise. Tripp's ex-girlfriend. The snow bunny. Who died in a car crash. "What the ... *fuck*, Tripp?"

Tripp rubs his eyes roughly. "You remember her dad."

Hunar. Dee mentioned him only a couple times—we knew each other only a few months, in the end—but I read about him after she died, in the scraps of coverage *People* and *Us Weekly* granted her. Dee's mum had died when she was little; Hunar raised her alone. He'd been a doctor in Kolkata, but struggled to get into a residency program in New York, so he worked in

a care home to pay for Dee's education. He was larger than life, Dee said, an extrovert, though I never saw that. Her best friend, she said.

"He didn't like me," Tripp says. "He thought she could do better. And I ... I don't blame him. I was young, dumb. Always partying. My friends, my parents ... Well, you can imagine how my mom was with Dee."

I wince.

"They argued about it," he's saying. "Dee and her dad, I mean. He thought I'd hold her back, said I had all this money and this company to inherit, said I just wanted a housewife." He gives me this *Can you believe it* look and I think of the times he's told me, *You don't have to worry about that*: immigration fees, skiing equipment, my psychiatric debt. Generously. Magnanimously. "We broke up for a while. She blamed him—that's when things got really bad between them. By the time we got back together, they weren't speaking, but she really, really wanted to fix things, that's what gets me..." He exhales. "That when she died, all she wanted was for them to be okay. And they weren't. Because of me."

Does she haunt you, too?

"We did it differently, the second time. Telling people, I mean. No friends, no family, just the two of us. She didn't want her dad to find out, not when things were already so bad between them. It was what she wanted," he adds defensively. "It wasn't that I wasn't proud to be with her. I was."

Dimly, I register that this should hurt.

"She told me about you." Tripp is kneading the back of his neck. "She liked you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I can't process past that point. "I never even met you."

"Yes, you did," Tripp says quietly.

Another black hole. My stomach tumbles.

"Dee introduced me to you at that holiday party. You were with Cate. She seemed ... angry."

Tripp met Cate. I hold up a hand abruptly. "Stop. Please. Give me a second."

He waits.

“Who *did* know?” I ask finally.

“No one. When she died...” He knocks his head, gently, against the wall. “When she died, things got ... it was bad, Charlie. Nobody knew how we, how serious we...” He catches himself. “I felt like nobody could know. Like I’d be betraying her if I ever—”

“Denise, though? And a car crash? Seriously?”

He has the grace to look ashamed. “I had to tell my mom something. She was about ready to have me committed. She thought I was losing my mind.” He rubs his knuckles against his forehead. “I was, a little. But, Charlie ... none of this has to do with you, with you and me.”

Are you kidding?

I don’t even have to say it. He’s still going: “I know I lied to you, in a way, by not telling you. I just, I saw your name on the guest list and I never knew anything real about that night, we had dinner plans and she didn’t show and then I saw the news and ... I needed to talk to someone else who knew her. It felt like I’d made it up by then. Our whole relationship. It made me crazy.”

The tabloids barely mentioned Dee in their coverage. That’s one of the things they’ve yelled about in the Reckoning: That the Indian American Ph.D. candidate with the bright future and brown skin never got the front pages and features the rest of us did. *The last fatality*, they called her, like that was her name, and when they *did* use her name they misspelled it: *Ahluwalia* become *Aluwalan*, *Ahlluwal*, *Ahluen*, like they wanted it to be *Allen* and didn’t bother to pretend otherwise.

Tripp is still talking, the words spilling out over each other. “We had that in common, I thought, those bad years. When I met you ... I was curious, that was it. Then we began seeing each other, and I thought...” He looks up at me, his eyes wide like a boy’s. I can’t tell if it’s deliberate. “I thought you were amazing.”

Those first few weeks dating Tripp, I wasn’t interested. Not really. He was all chocolates and roses, boyish smiles and thoughtful gestures. I needed—not Jordan, exactly (*except Jordan, exactly*, a part of me thought), but someone whose life wasn’t the sunny *before* when I was trapped in the *after*. Then, as the shine wore off, I began to register the trauma smoke

signals: obsessive working, a rigid belief in *right* and *wrong*, years of his life he didn't want to talk about. *You're becoming very special to me, Charlie*, he told me, that night in the town house as he handed me the bourbon. *I feel like I can be honest with you*. He said, *I had a serious girlfriend*. He said, *She died. It was sudden*. And then—then I could see it. Us.

“You'd been through so much,” Tripp is saying. “And you'd ... you'd turned it into this fire. This drive. You knew exactly what you wanted. You didn't need me, you didn't need any of ... this.” (It's true. I didn't give a shit about the money, the status. By the time I met Tripp, I didn't give a shit about a lot of things.) “You were so strong. Are so strong,” he corrects himself.

Falling in love with Tripp was light years from how it felt with Jordan. Like someone draping a warm blanket around your shoulders when it's freezing out. I thought, *This proves I'm not broken*. I thought, *I can be safe here*. Tripp hadn't saved me; I had saved myself—or, rather, Noor and American pharmaceuticals had saved me—but falling in love with Tripp, creating a life with Tripp, it drew a line in the sand. My life was different than it had been pre-Carroll, yes. I was different. But I was still alive.

“I realized I didn't have to be so ... I could get more involved with the business,” he's saying now. “Find purpose. Move forward. Like you had. And ... I wanted to be *with* you. I never wanted to spend a day apart from you. From the moment we met. I really mean that—”

Trauma bonding. Isn't that what they call it? Is that all we've been?

“You lied to me,” I say. “This whole time.”

You let me think you were that way all along.

“I swear to you. I was going to tell you.” Tripp holds his hands up. “I swear. That photo wasn't always in there. You know that. You've been in that drawer before. Remember the day we color-coded our taxes for that drawer?”

I'm floating in and out of my body, hearing only pieces of what he's saying now. “I guess.”

“I went looking for some photos. A few days ago. For, um...” He ducks his head slightly, his hair tumbling into his face. I'm so disassociated,

so far removed from the reality of the moment, that for a moment I think he's Jordan.

"For Richard," he says. "The private investigator."

That snaps me back. "A private *investigator*?"

"Because—the cover-up. What they missed during the investigation, or left out on purpose, I don't know"—he's speaking even faster now—"I'm sure it has to do with Dee. The way she died ... it never made sense. I mean, what are the *chances*—"

"Wait. Slow down." I try to breathe into my sternum, like Noor taught me, but I can't force the air down far enough. "You hired a private investigator? To look into..."

"To look into the *cover-up*!" Tripp is agitated now. "The sources who went to the *Times*, then *The Chronicle*, they *said* there was a cover-up. Remember?"

"How ... how do you know about that?"

"You told me," Tripp says simply.

All these lies. And *this* I told him the truth about.

"Tripp, I don't think—"

"She deserves the truth. Dee does. She deserves better." He's speaking so fast now, I can hardly follow him. "It has nothing to do with she and I, babe, I love you, you know that, but her dad, Dee was his whole life, you remember, I sent him money but—"

"You sent Hunar *money*?"

"I tried! I said I was a friend. He never cashed the check. Maybe he suspected, I don't know. But I want ... I want him to know what really happened to his daughter. Richard, the private investigator, he says it's not just the *Times*, he says Stephanie Anderson's producers are all over it, everyone knows there's something they *deliberately* left out of the report, it's just finding out *what* and *why*—"

He's still spinning out, waving his hands, talking too fast, but I'm even further ahead. I'm picturing one of Steph's lackeys poring over the timeline, the crime scene, the transcripts. Suddenly, it clicks: *Hey, man*, they'll say to the guy at the next desk. *Come take a look at this.*

I can't quite picture what happens next. I don't want to. It all ends up in the same place: my life crumbling, my career crushed, my family broken, for good this time.

And Tripp ... Tripp will know what I did to his girlfriend.

It'll be over, of course. The town house. The debt repayments. The diamond on my finger. But it won't stop there.

You have a lot of lawyers, I said to Jude.

The best in the game, Tripp bragged.

The lawyers will know what to do. To protect me. Or—if Tripp and the Goodman Wests so much as click their fingers—to destroy me.

"I know how hard this has been for you," he's saying. "I understand. I don't want to relive that time either. But I think Stephanie Anderson's film ... and everything that comes with it ... I think it's finally going to bring us closure."

I can't even speak.

"Come here," he says, and pushes himself to his feet. "Come here," he repeats, and I step into his arms and breathe in his smell, Dr. Bronner's and rich-person cologne, and I let him stroke my hair as he tells me that we're in this together, we've been through so much, we're going to find out what they've been hiding from us. "Us," he repeats, and I can tell there's a relief in it, that there's an *us* doing this now.

I lay my head on his chest and I know, finally, what I'm going to do.

★ ★ ★

Steph did an interview with a women's magazine last year, one of those *Spend the Day with Me!* stories with a brand quietly woven in, a vitamin-infused water or some shit. *10 A.M.: I take a five-minute walk around the block with my Litewater™. I use this time to center myself, to remind myself why I do this work and what I'm grateful for.* How you count your blessings smack in the middle of Times Square I don't know, but at ten A.M. on Monday I'm there anyway, perched by the window of a Starbucks opposite KBC, waiting for her.

I left Tripp and Liv and Freddy at the town house, pleading a work emergency. There are no emergencies when your corporation has suspended

your email and forbidden you from contacting your team, but they don't know about that part. (I'm going to tell them. Obviously. I just need more time.) I can breathe better, being on my own. Being miles from Tripp, who slept with his arms wrapped tight around me, who cooked a full English breakfast for everybody and kissed me for so long that Freddy wolf whistled—

There she is.

Steph is dressed in her *This Evening with Stephanie Anderson* best, a plum skirt suit with scarlet-bottomed heels. A couple of guys leaning up against construction snap to attention—they're photographers, I realize suddenly, older guys with those long-lens cameras—and she waves politely as they snap a couple of shots. I slip out of the Starbucks and hover on the other side of the street, twenty or thirty feet away, my baseball cap pulled low. These streets are so choked with tourists, they won't see me.

I keep pace with Steph as she “centers herself,” which looks an awful lot like tossing her hair for the cameras. People turn and point as she sashays past, probably less because she's Stephanie quote-unquote Anderson than because she's clearly Important enough to be followed by paparazzi. They're tourists, they won't watch the show. Maybe that's why she doesn't bother to engage with them, instead finding a reason to twist her head every few feet so that the photographers can get a good shot of her profile. *Click. Click.*

I needed to see her. To make sure I can do this.

There's something so passive about allowing her body to turn on her. The polar opposite of how *active* it all was—the blood, the screams, the knife—up there on the eleventh floor. By comparison, letting Steph's throat close up, allowing Darwinism to run its course ...

Darwinism? I catch myself. For God's sake. I am not this person. I will not bullshit my way through this with supremacist crap. Steph doesn't deserve this. It is not *nature taking its course*. It is straight-up murder.

It's just that it would also, maybe, be the only way.

If the film goes away—if Steph goes away—so does the rest of it. The rabid excitement, permissible this time because *it's been so long*. The steady stream of new stories. The Reckoning. The team of lackeys gorging

themselves on FOIA requests. The news peg for Walter's story. My journey down memory lane with Noor. The men stalking my sister. Renée.

The *Times* exposé—*The Chronicle* exposé, now—on its own, I can deal with. For all my crap about not being a capital-J Journalist, lest someone identify me as someone who might have graduated from a capital-J J-school—*Carroll, really? Were you there when ...*—I've overseen the kind of reporting the capital Js can only dream of. If the *Times* are dragging their feet, if it's taking months to verify this *cover-up*, it's because a) it's big, and b) because it's big, it needs to be checked and rechecked. Sources reinterviewed, transcripts checked, perpetrators and their lawyers asked for comment. Dozens and dozens of people, orbiting around one person, maybe two people—not quietly, either. Walter knows. Jude and Senior, probably, too. I would know.

Whoever's at the center of this story, it isn't me. Not this time.

But the records are public now. And Steph—she's delighted in teasing people, leaving them salivating: detail after detail, each one a news cycle of its own. A trail of bread crumbs, and if Steph saw what I did that night—the minutes I don't remember, the ones I thought nobody bore witness to—that's the biggest morsel of all, isn't it? *You say I wasn't there, but I was*, she said, in her text. *I know what happened*. Maybe she'll grant me another year before she goes public with what she saw; maybe she'll wait until the eve of the film, when people are hungriest and at their most self-righteous. Either way, Steph knows that she'll benefit, more than any other living person, from the truth. She won't be bargained with. I was just her sister's friend, just an acquaintance whose worst moments she happened to stumble upon.

And even if she *does* spare me, the spotlight her film will throw on that night—my lies can't survive it.

I won't survive it.

My phone rings suddenly in my Chanel, and I duck into a side street. There's no chance of Steph seeing me—she's almost back at KBC—but I don't want the photographers to spot me; I can't afford to drop my guard, even for a moment. "Hello?" I say quietly into the receiver.

“Hi, love.” It’s my mum. “So, was it a surprise? Did Liv manage it?” There’s enthusiasm in her voice, but it’s the forced kind. She’s always been a terrible liar, my mum.

“Yeah. Yeah, she did. Mum, I...”

I’m so sorry, I want to say. I won’t let this crush you again.

“Your dad’s here! Felicity, too.” I hear them in the background: Felicity’s soft, “Hey,” my dad’s cheerful, “Hi there, sport, all good over there?” Then it’s my mum again: “Now, look, love. I know Olivia told you what’s been going on. That girl could never keep anything from you, could she, now?”

She’s having one of her good days, I can tell. A day when she washes her hair, sings to herself as she gardens, uses chipper phrases like, “That’s just the way the cookie crumbles, isn’t it?” It’s almost a physical pain, to think of how many more bad days she’s had because of me.

“Now, it’s nothing we can’t handle,” she’s saying. The unspoken line: *We’ve been through worse*. She does that on good days, reminds herself that small annoyances don’t matter in comparison to the loss of Adam. On bad days, there is nothing but the loss of Adam. “Besides, it’s getting better. The photographers have left Fel alone now, haven’t they, love?”

I hear Felicity’s small voice: “They are not following me anymore.”

Anymore.

“And, you know, it’s quite nice to disconnect the phone sometimes, isn’t it?” She laughs, my mum’s rich, deep chuckle. There’s something tired about it, always has been. “Now, we want you to enjoy your time with Liv. Go see a Broadway show, maybe *Wicked* again, we loved that one, didn’t we, Fel?”

I remember that day. It was the first time Tripp met my family. He pulled strings to get box seats, poured my parents vintage wine from his family cellar, practically bought out the candy stand for Felicity. My mum and sister gave me little smiles between songs, my dad an exaggerated wink: *This is good. This is great.*

And suddenly I’m back in my body, hiding out in a side alley in Times Square, thinking about how I’d go about murdering my old classmate.

Fucking hell.

“I should go, Mum,” I say. I just want to get out of here: out of this godforsaken neighborhood, back uptown, back with my friends and Tripp and the person they think I am, a person who would never weigh up the pros and cons of poisoning someone who got in their way.

“Yes, you go. Back to Liv. You give her a big hug from us, now.”

But: The electricity in my blood, up there on the eleventh floor. Just before I blacked out. The desperation, like a trapped animal. *She’s going to kill me.*

But: Cate’s scar, red and angry, from when she fell down the stairs. *From when I pushed her down the stairs.* I sit with the thought for a half second, feel it out. It doesn’t *feel* incorrect.

“We love you, Charlie bear,” my dad is saying.

But: Maybe this is who I’ve been all along.

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FOURTEEN

THEN

EXCERPT FROM AARON KATZ'S THE FALL: THE DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF THE CARROLL TRAGEDY

One Christmas, back when she was a little girl, she visited New York City with her parents.

They saw the Rockettes and the big, big tree and held hands ice-skating. She wore a cherry red coat and patent plimsolls and when a photographer approached them, asking if they'd like a souvenir, her parents kissed her and her sister all over their pink cheeks.

It was the best day of her life, she told a friend years later. She didn't mention that she tried to throw herself from the car when she realized they were going to the train station, going home, leaving all of it behind. She didn't mention that she ran away from her family at Grand Central, disappearing among the tunnels and tourists, and when the police found her, two hours later, her father slapped her across the face. *You scared the hell out of us!*

It would be five years before her mother took her to see a psychiatrist. Obsessions, she said, and depressions, and threats made against her sister, her cousins. The psychiatrist prescribed medication, recommended therapy, but her father refused. *That girl's got the devil in her.*

Maybe it's a coincidence, maybe it isn't, but on the last afternoon of her life, she puts on a big, red jacket and patent Mary Janes, though it's snowing outside in big, bright New York City. She leaves the dorms. She texts her parents: *I'm going ice-skating. I love you!*

NOW

"You need to slow down," Noor is saying.

I flash her my best *I'm fine* smile. "Thanksgiving," I say patiently, "is important. If it wasn't for what happened during Thanksgiving—"

"I understand that. But we've moved through months in just a couple of sessions." Is Noor speaking this slowly on *purpose*? "We haven't even begun to unravel most of what—"

"I need to remember." I check the clock: forty-two minutes left.

"That isn't how trauma works!" Fiery, today, are we, Noor? "I understand you have a goal, Charlie, but *my* goal is to give you the time and the space to process this the way you were denied the first time around..."

A goal. Like I'm fucking *curious*, poking around in the corners of my brain saying, *Ooh, what's in here, then?* These are my *goals*: To know what the fuck happened up there. To know which parts Steph was there for. Bonus points if I can remember whether I pushed my best friend down some stairs. (I'll take the truth about Cate for five hundred, Noor.)

I can't afford to alienate Noor. I know this. And yet.

"For Thanksgiving," I say, cutting her off, "Cate invited us all to Greenwich."

What's she going to do, kick me out?

THEN

Cate's parents picked us up at the station in matching SUVs, hers red and his blue. Greenwich looked like Stars Hollow come to life, but cleaner, greener, and with more Jaguar dealers. It was sleek and festive and I loved it immediately, the way I was meant to love New York. Cate squeezed my hand in the backseat as her mom, Sue, pointed out the holiday lights, the country club, the Tiffany & Co with the teal snowflakes in the window.

"It's all so lovely," I told Sue, and I meant it.

“Thank you, sweetie,” she beamed. “We’re so glad to have you all here with us.”

Jordan was there, too, shyly answering Sue’s questions about Mississippi—“Now, sweetie, is it *very* hot there?”—from the passenger seat. It had been three weeks since our kiss in the dorms, the kiss he seemed to have forgotten entirely. He’d resumed his nice-guy rounds in the journalism school like nothing had happened, bringing us coffee and teasing Cate before disappearing into a pod with Elise or Zach. If he *did* remember the kiss, he was trying to pretend he didn’t. I wasn’t sure which was worse.

“We must not forget, he is from Mississippi,” was Gunnar’s take. “They do things differently there.”

“I mean, *I* don’t remember being in your dorm,” said Cate, cheerfully.

Greenwich for Thanksgiving had been her idea. Just she and Gunnar and I at first—“the BFF club,” as Cate called our trio; Gunnar rolled his eyes at the term, but I liked it—and then Zach, because they were talking about Thanksgiving and it *just happened*, and if Zach was coming then of *course* Jordan had to be invited, too. Not Dee, because Cate and Dee didn’t get along—Cate thought Dee was stuck-up and boring; Dee thought Cate was insane—and not Elise, because Cate had mounted a silent campaign against her over the last three weeks. Elise, according to Cate, had a death grip on Jordan—“Your Jordan,” she’d say indignantly—and Elise, according to Cate, was not to be trusted or even spoken to, if possible. (Elise, for her part, seemed blissfully unaware of her new nemesis.)

Gunnar and I had taken guesses about the Andersons—what kind of people raise a Cate *and* a Steph?—but her mom was adorable, rosy-cheeked and eager to put us at ease. As she swung the SUV into the driveway, she said apologetically, “I hope you don’t find the house too big,” and even in the dark, I could see what she meant. The Andersons’ house was more of a country manor than a house, with at least a dozen rooms and an ivy-covered porch that swept around the property. But inside it was warm and cozy, with a big fire roaring and cream blankets tossed artfully over couches and window seats.

“It’s just so lovely,” I repeated as Sue hung up my jacket.

“You’re too sweet.” She gave me a squeeze. Sue was Cate without the edges, chatty and frothing over with affection. “It feels like a *real* Thanksgiving now that you all are here, doesn’t it, Graham?”

“Yes,” muttered Graham, Cate’s dad, who didn’t seem like much of a talker.

Two Labs bounced down the stairs, followed by a considerably less bouncy Steph. “Scout and Lisa!” cried Cate, at the same time as Steph said icily, “Hi, everyone.”

Steph was *pissed* when Cate told her she’d invited Zach. Which was weird, because Steph relished every opportunity to parade Zach’s puppy-dog crush in front of her sister (“Want these?” she’d ask at Cate’s doorway, brandishing flowers—“Zach sent them, but you know how I feel about sunflowers”). Our whole floor heard the showdown, which began with Steph yelling, “You need to ask before inviting people to our *house!*” and Cate replying, “Dude, you had no problem inviting Zach to your—” and ended with Steph slamming her door so hard, bits of plaster fell on my head. “She’s a drama queen,” was all Cate said when I asked.

Oblivious to the tension radiating from Steph—or maybe just used to it—Sue ushered us upstairs, the Labs at our heels. “Gunnar, sweetie, you’re in here ... Zach next door, here ... and you two, here!” She pointed Jordan and I into a sunroom that boasted a large portrait of the twins—Steph, cherubic and glowing, maybe six or seven years old, picking daisies alongside a bored-looking Cate—and an even larger bed. As in, *one* bed. “Now, you all just take your time settling in, all right?”

Jordan seemed frozen in place. I whipped around to face Cate, who ignored me. “When are cocktails, Mom?” she sang.

“I was thinking, ooh, six thirty? I’ll have Valerie ring the bell.” Sue touched Cate’s cheek and headed back down the stairs, the dogs racing after her.

Jordan mumbled, “I’ll go get the bags,” and bolted.

Cate was grinning like the Joker. “*Cate,*” I growled. “What did you tell your *parents?*”

“Oh, hmm?” Cate put a finger to her lips, like she was trying to remember. “Well, I guess I said ... Oh, yeah, I said you two were a couple?”

Oops!”

“But we’re—” I stopped as Jordan reappeared. “I got your bag,” he said, huffing slightly.

“Great!” My voice was shrill. “And you ... have yours?”

“See you guys for cocktails!” Cate cried, and then she was gone, presumably to the part of the house Sue had called “the twins’ wing.” Jordan, who no doubt thought Cate and I had planned this whole thing, carried our bags into the sunroom with the expression of a man walking the plank.

“So, uh,” he started once we were inside, the door shut behind us, “I guess I’ll sleep on the floor. Or with Zach,” he added desperately, though we’d both seen that Zach’s room barely had enough space for a single bed.

“Gunnar has a double bed,” I offered weakly.

“Great!” Jordan was visibly relieved. “I bet he’ll be okay with it—not ’cause he’s gay, obviously,” he added quickly. “Just ’cause he’s cool. Gunnar, I mean.”

“Sure.” I’d known Jordan wasn’t interested, of course, but it still cracked my heart, how eager he was to get away.

“Hey, uh, before I go.” Jordan pushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “I’ve ... been hoping to talk with you about something. It would probably be better after cocktail hour,” he added as an afterthought. “But I dunno if we’ll get a chance to...”

Oh, *God*. Like this couldn’t get any more uncomfortable. I braced myself to smile and nod along. *Absolutely*, I’d agree. *We’re better as friends*.

“Uh, so.” Jordan was locked in a staring contest with the portrait. “I was really drunk that night I came to your room. I’m sorry I showed up like that.” He cleared his throat. “That painting of Steph and Cate, it’s creepy, right? Like *The Shining*?”

“Yes.” I just wanted it to be over. “And, really, it’s fine. We don’t have to—”

“It was inappropriate of me.” It came out stiff, like he’d practiced it. “To show up in your room while you were sleeping and ... uh. Really not cool.”

“All good,” I said testily.

“Uh, great.” He tapped his lime green sneaker against the carpet. “The thing is ... if you wa-wanted to. We could maybe, um, get some food?”

“Now?” We’d had bagels at Grand Central.

“No!” He looked panicked. “Well, sure, now? If you’re hungry?”

I was getting the weirdest feeling about this. “I don’t really understand, Jordan,” I said honestly.

“Oh. Cool.” He let his hair fall into his face and then pushed it away, a nervous tic I hadn’t seen since our first week at Carroll. “Thing is ... I really regret what happened in the dorms.”

I *knew* I was right the first time.

“But if you wa-wanted to ... maybe we could, like, hang out? When I haven’t just done shots out of Zach’s shotski?”

“As ... friends?”

“If you want!” He was looking more and more frazzled. “But if you wanted to ... maybe see ... Like, a date?” He rubbed his nose. “Sorry. Okay. I wanted to ask you on a date. If you wanted. But I really am sorry about the way everything went down, that wasn’t how I planned it,” he added desperately.

“What about Elise?” It was all I could think to say.

“Elise?” He looked confused.

“I thought...” I drifted off. “Like, you’re together so much.”

“Elise and I are friends,” Jordan said firmly. “Just friends. She was the first friend I made here, after Zach.” He paused. “Hey, you don’t have to make an excuse or anything, we’re cool. You and me, I mean. It’s all good.” He hoisted his bag onto his shoulder. “I’ll go get set up with Gunnar, I’ll see you at, ah, cocktail hour...”

“Jordan.” It was one of the most awkward moments of my life and I was so, so happy. “I’d really like to go on a date with you.”

“Really? You would?”

“Yeah.” I was trying not to grin like an idiot. “Yeah, I would.”

★ ★ ★

I spent Thanksgiving dinner fizzing and twitching like a newly lit firework, trying to calm myself with wine and the knowledge that a date didn't mean anything, it was just a date. It didn't work. By the time we were done with dinner and heading to the basement of someone named Ashley, I was still bubbling over with excitement—*he likes me; he wants to go on a date*—and well on my way to being drunk.

Ashley's "basement" turned out to be enormous, at least six rooms and a full-sized gym, and most of Cate and Steph's high school class was in attendance. It was loud and dimly lit, and the floor was already sticky with beer. "Whoa," Jordan breathed.

"Cool place," Zach said loudly. He tried to sling an arm around Steph, who shrugged him off. "I need a drink," she muttered, and disappeared into the crowd.

"*Gracie!*" Cate practically leapt into the arms of a nearby California blonde. "Oh my God, you're here, you're here!" She was swaying tipsily, one hand on either side of the girl's face. Then she was whisking the girl away: "*We need to catch up...*"

Jordan gave me his half smile. It made me dizzy. "I'll grab you a drink."

"Oh my *God*, it's Cate's friends from Carroll," someone slurred. "Hey there, Cate's friends!"

The girl was visibly drunk and a little sweaty, her hair dyed somewhere between pink and purple. She was tipping to the side, and I instinctively reached out a hand to steady her. "Thanks," she said, her breath hot on my face. "You're pretty, who're you?"

"I'm Charlie," I said stiffly.

"*Charlie!* I knew I recognized you," she crowed. "Cate is, like, *always* posting about you, it's like she's obsessed, right?"

Gunnar narrowed his eyes at her.

"I gotta pee," she slurred in my ear. "You wanna come with me?"

"Um—"

She pushed a drink into my hand. "Drink this! I totally shouldn't."

Helplessly, I took a sip. It wasn't bad, something tropical with overtones of vodka. "Come *on*," she said, grabbing my hand. "I'm Darcy,

by the way.” She tripped twice on the way to the bathroom, but didn’t let go of my hand. “So you’re, like, Cate’s best friend,” she slurred as she closed the door.

“I guess.” Awkwardly, I sat on the lip of the sunken tub. “So, um, y’all went to school together?” *Y’all*. I’d picked that one up from Jordan.

“Sure did. First grade through to senior year. Her and Steph, both of them.” She hiked up her skirt. “Well, not Cate senior year, obviously.”

“That’s the last year of high school?” I took a long sip of the drink. I needed it, trapped in there with a purple-haired drunk stranger.

“For most of us.” She snorted to herself. “Hey, hey, here’s something I’ve wondered. How did she get into Carroll? Did her parents, like, donate a library or something? Or donate Steph?” She snorted again, still peeing.

“How did any of us get into Carroll?” I tried to joke.

She gave me a weird look. “Probs easier if you didn’t roofie someone, babe.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t *know* about that?” She flushed the toilet.

“Know about what?”

She met my eyes in the mirror as she washed her hands. “Well, like, you should probably know about it. For your own *safety*.” She was enjoying this, I could tell.

“Know about what?” I repeated.

“There was an *incident* junior year. With Cate. And some other girls, but Cate was the ringleader. Everyone knew it was all her.” She shut off the tap. “She got kicked out. Would’ve been worse, but her dad is, like, best friends with the police chief, so...”

“Seriously?” Cate never mentioned she got kicked out of school.

“Yeah, it was *bad*. Cate’s parents had to pay the medical bills. I heard she never even apologized to the girl.” Darcy swayed slightly. “She’s ... I don’t want to say *dangerous*. But definitely, like, toxic.”

Cate, toxic? I wanted to laugh, but not as much as I wanted to leave. “Sure, yeah. Well, thanks for telling me...”

“The girl was her *friend*.” Darcy wagged a finger at me. “Like, one of her best friends. Like I said. You should be careful!”

I didn't buy it. Besides, Darcy seemed nuts. "Thanks," I said uncomfortably.

She opened the door and stumbled out. I left, too, making sure to head in the other direction. What was *that*? Cate would never roofie someone. God, if anyone was going to be roofied, it'd be Cate, who'd drink anything, at any moment—

"Char-lie!" She was gesturing to me from the kitchen counter. "Dude, we're playing beer pong!" Cate was jumping up and down, her hair flying around her face. "Gunnar and me, we're beating the shit out of Jordan and Zach!"

That first party at Zach's—I was more drunk than I should have been, the city blurring as Dee fired questions at Cate. Jet lag, I decided after. I'd barely eaten all day, except for the pizza. Besides, Cate was in an even worse state than I was. Besides, Cate would never *roofie* me.

"We're taking it easy on you, Anderson," Jordan was saying.

I shook my head slightly, dislodged the thought. There was no way.

"Do not take this the wrong way, Charlie," Gunnar was saying. "But you are joining their team, right?"

"You can't join ours!" Cate threw her arms around me, her face flushed. "No offense, but we're winning?"

"Excuse *me*," I said in my poshest voice.

"Yeah, Charlie, join *their* team, *please*," put in Zach. I narrowed my eyes at him over Cate's shoulder. It was funny when Gunnar and Cate joked about my spatial reasoning, or lack thereof, not bloody Zach—

"Why don't you referee, Charlie," Jordan said kindly.

NOW

"It isn't that I thought, *Okay, she roofied me*," I say now. "But I was on my guard, after that. There were all these things Cate did ... I used to think, *Well, that's just Cate*. Before my conversation with Darcy. But afterwards..."

Noor waits.

"I thought," I say tentatively, "they were red flags."

"Like what?"

“Like...” I lick my dry lips. It feels like a betrayal, even now. “She was all over me. All the time. She’d sleep in my bed sometimes, even though her room was right down the hall, and she was always hugging me, holding my hand...”

“What else?” Noor prompts me.

“Well, she was ... protective of me. Towards Elise, especially, around that time.” I swallow, hard. “She *hated* her. She didn’t believe that Elise and Jordan were just friends. And she was weird about Zach and Steph, too, and after Thanksgiving I began to think...”

Noor nods encouragingly.

“I thought, *There’s something wrong here.*”

THEN

We ended up in the sunroom, of course, back at the Andersons’ house. Jordan and me. Kissing like teenagers, except as a teenager I’d never felt that way kissing someone. It took everything in me—and the wine rolling in my belly—to stop myself from leaping up from the bed and punching the air. *Jordan wants to go on a date. Jordan likes me.*

“Hey,” Jordan said softly as he kissed me.

“Hey.” I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Are you sure you—”

“Quit it.” It came out sharper than I’d intended, and Jordan pulled back. “No, I mean, I just—I like you,” I said quickly. “I’ve liked you for ages.”

Even in the dim light, I could see his half smile. “Me, too.” He leaned in again, but it was dark and we were drunk and his teeth came down hard against mine. “Oh, shit,” he said breathlessly. “Shit, I’m sorry!”

He looked so thrown, I couldn’t help but giggle. “Quit laughing at me,” he said, but he was grinning again now. “I’m embarrassed!”

“You’re so weird.” I was still giggling.

“I *know*.”

“Can we try that again?”

“I dunno, Charlie, can we?” He was laughing now, too.

“Just don’t knock out any teeth, all right?”

“Hey, I can’t make any promises.” Still laughing, he leaned down and kissed me. We kissed for a moment, and then we were laughing again. “Quit it, quit it,” he said into my mouth.

“*You* quit it.” I kissed him back, wrapped my fingers around his neck. Then I pulled back. “Hey, that portrait, is it—”

“Thank God you said it.” Jordan flopped back on the bed and took my hand. “It’s like Steph is watching me, except it’s, like, creepy-little-girl Steph—”

“She said *what?*” Zach’s voice cut in from the next room, loud and aggressive.

We froze. A voice said something: high, nasal. *Steph.*

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Zach sounded angry now. “And you believe her? That’s some *bullshit...*”

Jordan sat up straight against the headboard.

“Don’t give me that crap again,” Zach snarled. Steph said something, but he cut her off. “She’s obsessed with me, you know that, right? Right?” Something crashed.

In one swift movement, Jordan was in the hallway. “Hey,” he said, his voice clear and calm. “Anderson, you good?”

Footsteps, almost running—Steph’s, I guessed, back to the twins’ wing. Zach’s voice: “Fuck you, Jordan.” Two doors slamming, one after the other.

Jordan came back inside and said, “Zach is ... he can be—”

“You don’t have to defend him.”

“Yeah. I know.” His eyes darted around, like he thought Zach could hear him. “Hey, I should go, it’s late.” He came over and kissed me quickly on the lips. “This was really...”

“Painful,” I deadpanned.

“For me, too,” he said, and kissed me again. “See you tomorrow.”

I waited until I’d heard his footsteps pad all the way into Gunnar’s room, and then I wriggled my fingers and toes and squealed like when I was six and had won the egg and spoon race on sports day. *He likes me. We’re going on a date—*

My shoulder hit something hard, and I reached for my phone—Dee was going to be so proud—except it wasn’t my phone, it was Jordan’s, and

there was a text.

Hey, you:-) How's your Thanksgiving going?

She'd attached a photo. No nudity—her dad was in Congress, she'd never risk a PR nightmare—but even sexier, somehow, was the hint of it as she leaned forward in a green bralette. Elise's heart-shaped face was soft and coy, framed by those platinum curls like a sultry Goldilocks, and my first thought, idiotically, was *She's so pretty*.

Something cracked through me in that moment, lightning in my limbs. I wanted, suddenly, to scratch out her doe eyes, to grab her by the hair and leave her howling. No. More than that. I wanted to swipe at her face until her indulgent expression was gone. I wanted *her* gone, one word echoing in my brain: *mine, mine, mine*.

I had never felt that way, not ever, and I didn't have the sense to see it for what it was: a warning.

I really wanted to hurt her.

There. I said it.

NOW

Noor is holding my hand. Why is Noor holding my hand?

“Charlie. Charlie.” Her voice is still soft, but urgent now. “It's Noor.”

Obviously, I think blearily, and then I realize my head is on the floor, that all of me is, and *no, no, not again*—“What happened?”

“You fainted. You were hyperventilating. While you were speaking.” Noor looks genuinely shaken. “I *said* we shouldn't be—”

“Before that! Before I passed out!”

“You were telling me about...” Noor exhales. “About finding a text on Jordan's phone. From Elise. You felt ... upset.”

No black hole. Thank God.

Also: *upset*. I wasn't *upset*. I wasn't *angry*. I was frothing, crackling, every atom in my body hypercharged and ready. I was young and stupid enough to think that that was what *love* meant.

“Do we have time left?” I demand. “I think I—”

“No, no time left. Look, Charlie”—Noor helps me sit up—“we can’t keep going at this pace. This, it’s your body’s way of telling you...”

I tune her out. Get up slowly. Knees, elbows, back, neck. Everything feels fine. “Can we meet tomorrow?”

“I’m not comfortable with the direction of—”

“Please. We can slow down.” *Like hell we will.* “I just ... I need this. I feel like I’m...” *Getting closer.* “Processing. Finally.”

Noor relents. “I have an opening on Tuesday.” She backs away and into her armchair. “You gave me quite a scare, Charlie.”

“Tuesday,” I repeat. “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

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FIFTEEN

NOW

The meeting with the lawyers takes place at Goodman West headquarters, the top-floor boardroom. I recognize the look on Jude's and Senior's faces from when I've seen it on their son's: focused, unflinching. The lawyers, six of them, sit on the other side of the table. Their eyes are pink and watery, their ties slightly loose, like they've been up half the night, but they're brisk and efficient as they tell me what my options are.

There are facts about my life that do not belong to me, they say. For example: That I was there. That I was their friend. That I was from London but stayed in New York, where I became an editor in chief and got engaged to a publishing heir. These facts are considered in the public interest. They were in our *New York Times* wedding announcement, in my *Forbes* profile, in Gunnar's article.

One of the partners, Philip, a heavysset man who kissed Jude on the cheek and pumped Senior's hand when we came in, pushes a printout of "The Year That Wasn't" towards us.

"This," he says, "is our biggest problem."

Gunnar's article talks about me, Philip explains. About everyone Gunnar knew at Carroll. It uses our real names; it describes our involvement and our reactions—

"I know, I've read it," Tripp interrupts. "Charlie, have you?"

I nod. I can't say anything.

Steph's production company has begun the process of formally optioning "The Year That Wasn't," Philip tells us. Which would mean the facts in that article about my life are yet another thing that no longer belong to me.

"Unless Mr. Korkohen lied," one of the lawyers says hopefully. "If he lied, we have something."

I shake my head. Everything he wrote was true.

If I'd accepted his story when he sent it to me, if I'd run it in *C, The Chronicle* would own the rights to it. I could have stopped it from being optioned.

For the first time, I wonder if Gunnar pitching me his article was a kindness.

Philip continues: While Steph is free to use the facts about my life that are in the public record, she can't fictionalize my story or my character in a way that could be considered malicious or harmful to my reputation. If she does that, then we have grounds for a lawsuit—

"But by then it'll be too late," I interrupt.

"Charlotte, let him finish," says Jude.

Philip steamrolls ahead. They have A Plan, he says. They'll request the script as soon as it's done, look for lines or descriptions that could be considered "injurious" to my character or my career. Once we know how they plan to portray me, we'll find ways to object. And object. And object. "A mountain of complaints," another of the lawyers says eagerly. "Eventually, they'll back down. Cut most of your scenes. It simply won't be worth it."

I shoot back: But what if we can't find "injurious" moments in the script? What if everything they put in it is true? What if they don't make the cuts? What if we can't stop them?

Philip says, "At the very least, we should be able to whittle your role down to a minimum."

"That seems adequate," Jude says.

"And the name?" Senior asks in his deep voice. At first, I think he means my name.

"You plan to be married next summer?" Philip asks Tripp.

“Yes,” Tripp says. “July.”

“You and your fiancée have a decision to make,” Philip tells Tripp. He doesn’t look at me. “They’re trying to get the film out for the tenth anniversary. Next December. If you were to be married, well, let’s say, the following July...” He looks at Jude and Senior meaningfully.

“They wouldn’t use Goodman West,” Senior says.

“No,” Philip says. “She’d still be Colbert.”

Jude exhales.

Tripp says, “That feels like an extreme—”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Senior says sharply.

“This is important for them to know, Dad,” Tripp fires back. He takes my hand, holds it on top of the table. “Charlie and I are getting married in July. That’s when she’ll become a Goodman West.”

“Not now, Tripp.” There’s an edge to Senior’s voice now.

“She’ll be a Goodman West when the film comes out,” Tripp says to the lawyers. Until the other night, I’d never seen him like this—fiery, frantic, his dark eyes blazing. The man I fell in love with was even-tempered, impossible to faze, and I can tell by their faces that that’s the son Jude and Senior expected at this meeting. “Her name is nonnegotiable,” he’s saying. “I want to be clear on that point.”

Charlotte Goodman West. It sounds like a fresh start.

“We could use more time to plan the wedding,” Jude puts in. “Charlotte hasn’t even got her dress—”

“No.” But Tripp is looking at his father, not Jude. “I said no.”

Senior is livid, I can tell. Like his son, he prides himself on being amiable, unflappable, especially in public. Unlike his son, Senior has gravitas—shoulders like a linebacker’s, a deep, deliberate way of speaking—that makes most people cower, myself included. I’ve never seen Tripp talk back to Senior before. I’ve never seen *anyone* talk back to Senior.

My hand is still laid out on the table, Tripp’s fingers clasped around mine, and I try to pull it away, but Tripp holds on tight.

“She’ll be Charlotte Goodman West,” Tripp says, a thread of insolence in his voice. “She will be part of this family.”

Silence.

“That’s all we need for now,” Senior says to the lawyers after a moment. “Thank you, Phil, for your—”

“But there’s nothing you can do?” I ask Philip. My voice is high, shrill. “To stop the film?”

Philip looks at Senior, then Jude. Finally, he turns to me, the least important person in the room. “We will do everything we can.”

★ ★ ★

Tripp wants to go out for lunch. Just him and me, he says. There are things we need to “discuss.” Liv and Freddy are still in the city, I think at the Children’s Museum or something, but he says this is more important. He wants to talk about our “options.” Our “next steps.” He wants to go down to City Hall before July, maybe even before Christmas, to make it official, to show everybody that he and I are a team and that I—

I can’t.

I say it out loud: “I can’t.”

I should have known. That’s what I keep thinking. The idea that Tripp and I met by chance, that we fell in love like normal people, that our relationship was based on shared values rather than trauma—God, I’m so naïve, aren’t I? To have believed there existed a line between the life I had, my *mad little tornado* existence, and who Charlotte Goodman West was going to be. To have believed in a future with Tripp—a future, full stop—that was safely on the other side, an expanse of land after years spent drowning.

“I can’t,” I say again. “I have to go to the office.”

His face crumples like a child’s.

I brush my mouth against his and walk away, heading north, the way I would if I were going to *The Chronicle*. As far as Tripp knows, I’m knee-deep in our November issue, racing to close it by midweek. I’m still putting off telling him the truth about work, knowing what he’ll say: *Oh, babe, I’m sorry*—brow furrowed in concern, arms closing tightly around me—and then, after a day or two, *Are you sure you want to go back? With everything going on; with the way they’ve treated you ...*

He'd never say it. *You don't have to work.* But he'd want me to think about it: warm bundles in my arms, leaky breasts that would ruin meetings, tiny feet slapping against the walnut floors of the town house: *Mommy! Daddy!*

He thinks she wants kids, Liv said, *and a Land Rover and a fucking Hamptons house ...*

I hold back a shiver. I can't lose the magazine. Not to Tripp, not to our fictional children, and certainly not to Stephanie fucking Anderson.

But ... the magazine can't lose me, either.

The *Forbes* profile: *With its sharp commentary and tongue-in-cheek shoots, C is credited with bringing a fresh audience to The Chronicle empire. C is the paper's younger, cooler sister, a vacation from its dry retelling of events. And: The arbiter of the unique relationship between C and its readers: Charlotte Colbert, C's thirty-two-year-old editor in chief.*

And that lede, the one I wanted to blow up and frame in the salon—Tripp said it would be “too much”—*The jewel in The Chronicle's crown isn't its robust political coverage or career-ending exposés. It's C, the paper's Sunday supplement.*

My jewel.

Walter's crown.

By eleven A.M., I'm outside Walter's office. I fire questions at Walter's secretary, Marla, about her two-year-old grandson and her wayward beagle. I'm in by eleven fifteen.

“Charlotte?” Walter is surprised to see me. His eyes travel down my navy dress, the curve of my ass. He collects himself. “Aren't you—”

“An impromptu visit.” I sit down without being asked, raise my elbows to the table. *A power move,* my magazine would call it.

Walter leans back. “What can I do for you.”

“First, I have to ask that everything we discuss remains in complete confidence.” I'm piquing his interest, making him think we're on the same team. (Why do we pay a career coach to write our column? I could do it in my sleep.)

“All right.” Walter's expression is unreadable.

“It’s a complicated issue. A ... personal one.” I let my façade drop for a moment. For this to work, I need to strike the right balance between “damsel in distress” and “terrifyingly competent.” “I won’t lie to you, Walter, it’s been a challenging—”

“Yes, I’m aware. That’s why you’re on leave.”

It doesn’t touch me. I’m like a bullet, inching towards its target. Thinking of nothing else. “I’ll be candid with you. There are circumstances that were never reported. About ... about Scarlet Christmas. Circumstances that involve me.”

He waits.

“If they were revealed,” I say, “it would be extremely damaging for C.”

“Hmm.”

“The release of this movie will almost certainly invite new scrutiny. Even before the *Times*’ sources came to us”—I can’t skip it, that dig about the *Times*—“I was concerned about what might be discovered.” I have never said this out loud to anyone, not even Noor. “About me.”

“You’re worried about”—Walter clicks his pen against the table—“allegations?”

Worried? I worry about global warming, Felicity, the roach infestation in our laundry room. This isn’t *worry*. “I’m concerned about the repercussions of what might be revealed, yes. Nothing criminal,” I add quickly. This isn’t strictly true. “But for C, and for myself, it would mean a lot of bad press. Maybe even ... my resignation.”

That gets his attention. Walter has lapped up the glory of the new and improved C. He relishes in the shiny new advertisers I’ve brought in: his lunches with Gucci, the Rolex he received for Christmas. “I see.”

“If I were forced to resign,” I hammer on, “C would not function.”

Walter raises an eyebrow. *Bastard*.

“I’ve spoken to my legal team. I’ve spoken to my fiancé.” Walter knows who Tripp is, of course. Our bestseller list is riddled with GW books. “We have a defamation lawsuit on our hands, if this film goes ahead. So we agree”—I know the *we* is heavier with the suggestion that an army of white men are behind it—“that it would be best for everyone if *The Chronicle* and I stand together on this.”

Walter clicks his pen again. “What do you have in mind?”

I’ve got him. “We take action. This is, after all, a piece of media that seeks to defame C’s editor in chief.” I lean forward. “We kill the story. After that—we tap our connections. The studios. Our sister outlets. We threaten injunctions, press for boycotts. Their relationships with *The Chronicle*, they mean more to them than some—”

“Charlotte.”

“There’s so much we can do. Nobody wants to piss us off. Every person who might star in the film, they’ll want coverage at some point. Every advertiser—”

“Charlotte.” Walter raises a plump hand. “Stop just a sec.”

I do.

“You know Tony,” he says. I shake my head. “Tony Liu, in investigations? We poached him from the *Post*? Well, regardless, he’s taking the lead on our story about your Scarlet Christmas. You know, the piss-poor job they did on the investigation...”

It seems some information was withheld from the public, he’d said.

“... so Tony’s been working closely with Stephanie Anderson and her people. You know she was the first person to find the victims?”

He’s asking me, I realize.

“Yes,” I manage.

“Right. Of course you do. Now, Tony spent six years at KBC, he’s friendly with Anderson. Janet comes to me yesterday, says there’s more to the story than Tony thought, says Anderson’s been speaking off the record —”

“Speaking off the record,” I hear myself repeat.

“Yes. Yes. Mind you, I don’t know much, Janet doesn’t know, Tony’s keeping his cards close to his chest. But you know, Charlotte”—and Walter has the audacity to shrug—“you know how it goes, if it’s not us, Anderson will talk to someone else. It’s going to run, and if it’s as good as Tony thinks, frankly, I want to be the one who runs it.”

I can’t speak.

“Now, we have plenty of time to work out the details, how we run the story in a way you’re happy with. But for now, you’re on leave. It’s

important, frankly, that you're on leave while we're speaking to these sources, while Tony's talking to Anderson. Legally, I mean." He nods at the Pulitzers framed on his wall. Nineteen of them. I was so proud of that, once. "For now, let's talk about these ... circumstances. How they might affect C..."

But something else is jangling around my head. *Anderson's been speaking off the record ...*

More to the story than Tony thought ...

Steph has never wanted me involved with this movie.

Set the record straight. That's what Steph keeps saying in her interviews. *We want to set the record straight.*

What if it's ...

I can hardly think it.

We were told you will be a main character, Jude said.

What if Steph's movie is about *me*? Setting the record straight about what *I* did?

I push the chair back, stand up. The room is spinning. "I need to go."

"I can't help you if you don't—"

Help me help you. God, these men.

"Let's loop back on this," I squeak, like a corporate automaton. "I have to go."

★ ★ ★

"Hey, babe." Someone is leaning over me, smoothing back my hair. "Char, it's me. It's just me."

My eyes are dry, my body heavy. I'm sprawled across the duvet in our bedroom, my mouth damp against a patch of drool, the too-tight seams of my dress digging into my hips.

"There you go." Olivia's voice is stern and warm at once, the same one she uses with Rose. "I brought you a cup of tea."

I remember coming back to the town house. Olivia and Freddy and Rose were still out. Tripp must have gone to the office. I took a Xanax. No. Two.

"Tripp told us what happened," Liv is saying.

I gaze up at her, like a child waiting to be told what to do.

“I *knew* something else was going on.” She’s still stroking my hair. “You thought you could stop the movie. Tripp said you were so upset when the lawyers said they couldn’t. Oh, Char. You’re worried about your mum and dad.”

I turn my forehead into her palm and don’t say anything.

“I know you think you have to protect them. But they’re stronger than you think.”

No, they’re not.

“Look at me. Char.” Olivia tilts my chin up towards her. “We are going to figure this out. You and me. Okay?”

Maybe it’s because she’s caught me when I’m still dazed from sleep—maybe it’s the Xanax—but I look up at her, the brown eyes filled with concern I saw when I was seven and I fell off my bike, when I was seventeen and Finn Thompson broke up with me—and I burst into tears.

Liv gets into bed with me and holds me tight, her arms wrapped around my shoulders, her hair tickling my chin. “Shh, shh,” she says into my shoulder. “You’re okay, babe. You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

I’m telling you, she said to Freddy, no matter what bloody Tripp thinks, she is not fine. She’s so fucking far from fine, I—

I cry harder, cry until my throat is sore and snot is dripping, and there’s a relief in it, in letting go with the one person I haven’t been able to keep at arm’s length.

It’s like she’s playacting the role of someone I’ve never even met—

“You’re okay, babe,” she’s saying. “I’ve got you. You’re okay.”

“I’m *not!*”

She doesn’t even flinch, just keeps stroking my hair. “I know you’re not.”

“They...” I take a long, shaky breath. It doesn’t work. I’m crying again. “They’re working with Steph, *The Chronicle*, they won’t let me in my own *office*—”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they put me on *leave!*” I wipe roughly at my face. “I’ve been lying to you, I’m sorry, Tripp doesn’t know, I just—I can’t...”

“That must have been devastating.” Liv is using her Therapist Voice, measured and empathetic, and I don’t give a shit. It works. “Why do you think you—”

“It *was* devastating! And Liv, I need, I need to *stop* her, and I c-can’t, I can’t, I’ve tried...”

“Stephanie, you mean?”

“Yes! And the thing is...” I can barely speak, my throat clogged with tears and panic, “Liv, I lied. To the police. I-I blacked out and then everyone was dead and I think...” I make myself say it. “I think I killed people and that’s why I blacked it out.”

Calmly, like we’re talking about the weather, Liv says, “Why do you think that, babe?”

So I tell her. I tell her about Champagne and Shackles, my sparking anger towards Cate, her “fall” down the stairs. How that was the first black hole in my memory, the first time someone got hurt. I tell her about the second girl who “fell” on Christmas Eve, this time from the eleventh floor, and how I told the police I saw her jump. I tell her what Noor said: *Your brain is trying to protect you. By not letting you remember.*

I tell her about my relief over the findings of the investigation, realizing they’d believed me, how years passed before anyone figured out their report was bogus. I tell her how I begged Steph not to make the film, knowing that with the records public and amateur sleuths cluttering the internet, I’d be found out. I tell her about Steph’s press tour, a trail of bread crumbs before the big reveal, about Steph’s text: *I know what you did.* I tell her that I don’t know if my parents can survive the truth, that with me in prison, Felicity would have nobody left—

“So we need to deal with this ghastly anchor woman,” Liv interrupts. “Stephanie. And her movie. We need to get you out of it.”

That’s her takeaway?

“Liv,” I say carefully, “I don’t think you’re safe with me.”

She laughs. She *laughs*. “Charlie, I’ve known you since we were three feet tall. Not a bloody chance you’d hurt anyone.” She disentangles herself, gets up. “But I have an idea. Give me one second, okay?”

Bemused, exhausted, I do.

She returns with some papers, lays them out on the bed. “Tripp brought this back with him.” The lawyers’ printout of “The Year That Wasn’t.” “He said that Stephanie, was planning to buy the rights to it? Option it, is that the term? Whatever it is. Because it has all this stuff about you.” She reads from it: “I left the dorms that same day. I didn’t go back. I should have known Charlie would be by herself—”

“Please stop,” I say, trying to bat away the pages. “Please...”

“No, Char, listen. It has all this information about you. It says you were weirdly emotionless and it talks about you and Cate and how you—”

“*Stop it,*” I plead.

“But you and Gunnar were friends! I remember it. You talked about him all the time. He was your best friend, after Cate. I remember because I was jealous. Isn’t that silly?”

I fight the urge to jam my fingers in my ears.

“You *loved* him. He loved you. It’s all in here.” She jabs at the papers. “I was reading it, and I was thinking: He cares about her. He *really* cares about her. That doesn’t disappear. He wouldn’t want you to be like”—she gestures at me—“this.”

I manage a shrug.

“So maybe you can’t stop her movie. But what if Gunnar didn’t let them use his article? What if he changed his mind about it? Maybe he realized the whole thing was a bad idea?” She’s waving her hands around, full Olivia-with-a-plan mode. “So picture this, right, Gunnar won’t let them use the stuff about you in his article, Tripp’s lawyers are hammering away, trying to get your role cut...”

It’s not a bad idea. Not perfect. But not bad.

“The movie happens. Whatever. But you’re hardly in it. That would help, right?” Her voice is so eager. “That would make you feel better?”

“Yes.” I struggle to a sitting position. *Hardly in the movie*. Like I was hardly even there. Like I’m hardly someone worth being interested in. “Yes,” I repeat.

“That’s more like it.” Olivia pats my hand. “So here’s the plan.” My mum and dad like to joke that it’s Olivia’s favorite line, has been since we were children: *So here’s the plan*. “You’re going to drink your tea and take a

shower. I'll fix you some food. Then you're going to"—she fingers the sleeve of my dress—"put on something normal, something that doesn't make you look fifty. Then you're going to go see Gunnar."

★ ★ ★

I take a long, hot shower. Liv is waiting with a big, fluffy towel, and she wraps it around me like I'm a child. She makes comforting, clucking noises—*that's right, there you go*—as she leads me to the vanity and begins brushing out my wet hair. "We're going to figure this out," she says again as she scratches the bristles against my scalp. I lean back against her and—just for a moment—I let myself feel soft. Safe.

Rap-tap-tap. Tripp, knocking on the door to his own bedroom.

"Come in," Olivia calls, still brushing my hair.

Tripp comes in, drops a kiss on my damp head. "Are you feeling better, babe?"

"Yes," I say honestly.

Because Liv is right. All of this starts and ends with Gunnar. He's written the most about that night, shared more information than any other living member of our little troupe. He's the key. And unlike Steph, Gunnar was my friend. Gunnar will listen to me.

"We have a plan," Liv tells him.

"Do you, now." Tripp smiles down at me. "I have some good news, myself."

"Really?" Did the lawyers come up with something?

"Really." Tripp has his game face back on, eyes twinkling. "I made some calls. My parents got it wrong, I think. They're a different generation, they have different ideas about things..."

New lawyers. Better ones. *Thank God.* "I'm sorry about this morning," I babble. "I was just so—"

"I know, baby. I know." Tripp smiles warmly at me in the mirror. "You've been under so much pressure. But it's going to be all right."

Liv is beaming down at me: *See? See.*

"We're grown-ups," Tripp is saying. "We need to handle it like grown-ups. No lawyers. Just open, honest communication. That's one of the things

I've learned from you, Charlie."

"Aw," Olivia says happily.

No lawyers—?

"Stephanie agreed to come by. To talk this out in person. Just us. It's not the way my parents would have handled things, but..."

Stephanie agreed to—

"Take your time. It turns out we know many of the same people. She's very amenable, you know, to working together. I don't know why we didn't —"

Roughly, I push myself to my feet. "Steph—Steph is *here*?"

Tripp nods proudly. "She's in the salon."

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SIXTEEN

NOW

Steph is perched prettily on the chaise longue, one tan leg slung over the other. Steph is coming towards me, bumping her cheek hard against mine —“Charlie, it’s been too long”—and I’m trying not to cower, not to say *Not now* and back away, because I haven’t been able to armor up, to slip out of my T-shirt and leggings and blow-dry my hair and straighten my neck, to pretend that I’m a worthy adversary.

“Hi,” I say quietly, and I can sense her satisfaction, the understanding that she’s caught me while I’m soft and damp and pliable.

“Hello,” Liv says, springing into action at my side. “I’m Olivia. Charlie’s best friend.”

If Steph thinks *Funny, that used to be my sister*, she doesn’t let it show. “Good to meet you, Olivia,” she says, lowering herself back onto the chaise. Tripp sits down, too, and after a moment Liv and I follow. “I’m so glad we’re doing this,” Steph says, leaning towards me. “It’s been, hmm, eight years? Nine?”

“Something like that.” Steph has me caught fast, like a butterfly on paper. I didn’t come equipped for this fight, and she has more than enough to pin me with the second I say *I saw you five days ago, you maniac*.

“More wine, Stephanie?” Tripp reaches for her crystal wineglass—it belonged to his grandmother, another heirloom left behind by his parents

when they decamped to Westchester—and inches in more wine, a practiced, seamless gesture. Steph nods and accepts the glass, sniffing beatifically.

“Puligny-Montrachet,” Tripp says.

“Mm. I thought so.”

They have a shared language, Steph and Tripp. The kind that comes with old money. Steph’s buttery highlights and Birkin are a bigger tell than Tripp’s fitted suits and impeccable manners, but if you know what to look for, you can tell that the Andersons and the Goodman Wests raised their kids with the same blend of discipline, expectation, and, well, money. I shouldn’t have been surprised that Tripp “made some calls” and got her here in minutes. People like Tripp and Steph always treat others like them like dear family friends.

“As I was saying, Stephanie”—Tripp puts his arm around me, the bumpkin of the group with my dripping hair and bare face—“Charlotte and my parents are concerned about how she’ll be presented in your film. She’ll be a Goodman West by then, and you know how the press has been about —”

“Of course. Of course.” Stephanie nods emphatically. “I can assure you, both of you, that my goal with this film is simple. To set the record straight.” That fucking line again. “We’re taking steps to ensure that the utmost discretion, the *utmost* respect, is paid to the subjects of this film. Both those who are still here”—she nods at me—“and those who are not.” She bows her head in tribute.

“Stephanie, if I may”—Tripp’s tone is gentle—“it all feels a little *public*. We’re private people, Charlie and I—”

“I have been making this as public as is necessary,” Steph says flatly, “for the truth to come out. We have a saying at the show: nothing stays buried. Not if you push hard enough. And we need to push. *I* need to push. To find out what really happened.” She glances at me, just for a moment.

“What really happened,” Tripp repeats with interest.

I hold my breath.

“What do you mean?” Liv asks briskly.

Steph opens her mouth, but before she can speak, Tripp says, “The timeline.”

Shit.

“It doesn’t add up. The timeline. I’ve always thought that.” Tripp is speaking so quickly, he can hardly get the words out. “Their key cards, Charlie and Cate’s, they were swiped onto the floor at eight twenty-eight, that’s what the report said, but the—the accident, with Dee ... it wasn’t until eight fifty-two, they caught it on the security camera”—he winces, the pain raw on his face—“and that’s, that’s too long, isn’t it? It couldn’t have taken...” He drifts off.

“Yes,” Stephanie says after a moment. “Yes. It doesn’t make sense.”

Tripp continues, “I have to be honest with you, Stephanie—”

I know, suddenly, what’s coming. “Darling,” I say urgently.

Steph locks eyes with him and says nothing. This is something we learned at Carroll: Don’t speak unless you have to. Let them fill the gaps.

“*Darling,*” I say again, at the same time Tripp says, “Dhiya Ahluwalia was my girlfriend.” My *God*, nine years of silence and now he’s telling anyone who waltzes in? “I ... She was there because of me, I think. She needed to stop by the school and I was texting her, rushing her ... She was late for dinner, she was always late, I was saying *hurry up*, I...”

Did he tell me this already? I can’t remember. It’s possible I wasn’t listening.

“Tripp,” Steph says, her voice soft, “I am so very sorry for your loss.”

It’s also possible I didn’t say that.

“I promise you,” she says to him in the same tone, with an undertone of firmness now, “we will get to the bottom of all of this.”

Tripp nods. He’s looking at Steph like she hung the moon. Like she has all the answers. The last time I saw him this vulnerable, he was holding out his grandmother’s ring box.

“I always thought,” he says, “it was too much of a coincidence...”

Steph twists her perfect features into an expression of confusion.

“Why was she there? Right there?” Tripp’s voice is husky now. “It can’t have been an accident. Surely.”

“We all have a lot of questions,” Steph agrees.

“I’d like to help,” Tripp rambles on. “I want to know what happened. What was covered up. Her family deserves to know. *I*”—and now he

sounds certain again, certain and angry—“deserve to know.”

“Yes.” Steph is just egging him on now. “You do. They do. Of course —”

“Charlie,” Liv says. She’s staring at me. “What do *you* think?”

What do *I* think? I don’t even know where I am. I’m drifting somewhere over the furniture in the salon, my fingertips and toes tingling and also ten feet away, my faraway tongue thick in my throat and unable to move.

Am I breathing? Am I even here?

“Honey?” Tripp, his touch hot on my forearm.

I wait to pass out, because I know *why* I’m drifting—I’m not breathing into my gut, I’m hardly getting air, the oxygen isn’t reaching my brain—and I’m ready for it, I’m almost grateful for it.

But I don’t pass out.

“I ... I think”—and I remember, suddenly, the little red shoes that belonged to the Wicked Witch of the East in *The Wizard of Oz*, trapped under Dorothy’s house; this feeling is like having to wake up from the dead, like having to push off someone’s home—“I ... don’t feel well...”

“Have you eaten today?” Tripp, reaching up to touch my face.

“I was about to make her something.” Liv, defensively.

“I should go.” Steph.

I allow Liv to lead me out of the salon and into the bedroom—I can hear Tripp, in the hallway, saying something to Steph about a call, a meeting, a dinner, there’s a nice spot near his office, but his voice is distant and fading—and Liv pulls the duvet up and helps me in. She doesn’t say anything. I wonder if she’s second-guessing herself. *Not a bloody chance you’d hurt anyone.*

She must be able to tell what I’m thinking, because she says—though with slightly less conviction than earlier—“You didn’t hurt anyone, Char. I know it.”

I don’t bother to answer. I am the Wicked Witch, seconds before the house landed on her. Before everything she deserved hit her square in the face.

I turn away from Liv, pull the duvet up over my shoulders. She kisses the top of my head. Then she sighs. Then she leaves.

★ ★ ★

When I was little, I had a magic trick. I would lay my head on the pillow and close my eyes, and I would think of a time—*four o'clock, four o'clock*—and promise myself that was when I'd wake up. And it worked. Not all the time, but often enough to convince me that it was a special kind of power, one that would vanish if I ever told anybody.

I'm a grown-up now. I can't set an alarm for five, lest my fiancé wake up and resume our quote-unquote *discussion* about *next steps*, but I do think to myself, just in case: *five o'clock, five o'clock*, as I fall off the cliff of consciousness.

When I open my eyes, the clock reads four forty-five. Tripp is snoring lightly, one hand pushed up against my arm.

It fucking worked.

Then I remember: Steph was at the town house. Steph pulled Tripp into her spell. Steph will end my life as I know it, whether it's a thread pulled that will lead to an unraveling, or, worse, a full-fledged cinematic exposé. The lawyers can't help me. *The Chronicle* can't help me. The lawyers will be the first to leap down my throat when Tripp finds out what I did to his girlfriend; *The Chronicle* will blare across its front page anything Steph leaves out. My sister is being stalked like prey, my parents pushed far beyond what their health and emotional stability can handle.

Gunnar loved you, Liv said. You loved him.

That partner, Philip, he *said* the article was our biggest problem. That there's too much of me in it, too many facts about Charlotte Colbert that Gunnar threw out into the world and now can sell to Steph fucking Anderson.

I grasp for my phone in the dark and tap out an email. *Gunnar, it's Charlotte. I need to talk to you today. My number is below.*

An email leaps into my inbox. My breath catches. But it's just Gunnar's out of office: *Thank you for your email. I am conducting research in D.C. I may be slow to reply to messages.*

I open a new tab.
I rent a car.

★ ★ ★

I always keep a packed bag by the door, like an expectant parent, though what I'm expecting is a last-minute work trip. It has everything I need: bronzer, Advil, clean bras, Klonopin. It's getting colder, the promise of snow hovering ominously in the air, so I grab a jacket on my way out.

I don't leave notes. Nobody can read my handwriting, anyway. I send Liv a text: *Gone to D.C. to see Gunnar. Don't tell Tripp where I am. Let me know when you land. I love you.* Another to Tripp, who, mercifully, keeps his phone on silent: *Going upstate for the day. Need to get some fresh air.* I make sure to hint at a hike, or at least a hearty walk. Tripp believes in that sort of thing.

From a rest stop in New Jersey, just as the sun is coming up, I send another email: *Gunnar, I'm on my way to D.C. Please call when you get this.* Then I call Julie and tell her to look in the C database for Gunnar Korhonen's cell number. (She seems confused. I guess because it's six thirty and I'm meant to be on leave. I did write "24/7 availability" in her job description.)

Tripp calls. I send him to voicemail.

Julie calls back. Gunnar's publicist works closely with our books desk. She passes on two numbers for Gunnar: his work and his personal cell. "While we're talking," she says, "I have a few messages for you from Renée Cam—"

"No." I cut her off. "Tell her no. Whatever she wants, it's a no."

"She keeps—"

"I said no." I hang up and fire off an email to Renée: *Stop contacting me. I told you at the restaurant, I'm not interested.*

Then I text Gunnar: *This is Charlie Colbert. I need to see you today. I'm on my way to D.C.*

★ ★ ★

I'm at a gas station just outside Philadelphia when he texts back: *Hello, Charlie. Unfortunately I'm busy today. Have a good trip.*

I hold up a hand to the cashier and write: *It's an emergency. Otherwise I wouldn't ask. Please. I need to see you today.*

A pause.

Please, I write again.

All right. I will cancel some interviews.

After a moment, another text: *I have a studio here. Let me finish some work and you can come by.*

Thank you, I write back.

He texts me an address. He tells me to meet him there in three hours.

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SEVENTEEN

NOW

“Hi,” I say into the car speaker. “I’m sorry I can’t be there.”

It’s true. I wanted this to be an in-person session. But if I stop driving now, I’ll never make it to Gunnar in time.

“We can reschedule...” Noor’s voice floats around the tiny Fiat. I reach for the volume and turn her down. “When will you be back in the city?”

“No. I’m ready now.” Before Noor can begin squawking about *safe spaces* and *taking it slow*, I plow ahead: “There was a holiday party. In the dorms. The night before. It was Dee’s idea—”

“Charlie, I’m going to have to—”

“Things had been weird,” I say, “since Thanksgiving.”

THEN

Cate never believed him. “Just friends?” she clucked. “Just *friends*? No. Do you see me sending half-naked photos to *my* friends?”

“They really are friends,” I told her, with all the confidence of a twenty-three-year-old who had determined that her boyfriend—and we were using *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* by then, newly and gloriously—wouldn’t lie to her.

Elise needs a friend like Jordan, I almost said. But I’d promised him I wouldn’t. After Thanksgiving, after two days spent freezing him out while Cate practically somersaulted with fury, Jordan told me the truth: Elise was tunneling through grief. Her boyfriend, Matt, had overdosed a few weeks

before she started at Carroll. They'd found his body in a motel room in Atlantic City. Jordan wanted to be there for her. Sure, Elise got drunk, she sent weird messages, but it was all part of it. What she was going through.

Thank God, thank God, I'd thought, and in my relief I'd sworn not to say anything, not even to Cate. Elise preferred everyone at Carroll to think she was eccentric, a touch standoffish. In reality, she was processing grief, guilt, and a cocktail of benzos and SSRIs that got her through the day. "So you see," Jordan said, "she needs a friend like me."

Someone stable. Honest. Kind. A Good Samaritan, if you will.

I liked Jordan even more, thinking of him that way. I liked Elise more, knowing she was a victim. That Jordan and I were equals, but Elise needed to be held up.

"Charlie, baby girl," Cate said, scratching at the mark on her forehead—her skin was knitting back together now and itching like crazy—"those two are *not* just friends."

If I'd told her. If I'd just *told* her.

★ ★ ★

Dee's holiday party. Two days before Christmas. The Holiday Party for the Left Behind, Gunnar called it, because the other graduate students had already piled out for the holidays. But our semester one projects were due—physically, in our advisors' cubbyholes—on Christmas Eve. So we stayed. So Dee threw a party.

Did I ask her if Liam was coming? I must have. When we weren't in the pods working on my project, Dee was assigning me party-related tasks: posting flyers around the doors, talking the guy at the tree stand into giving us a half-dead fir. (Zach and Jordan carried it back to the dorms, Zach looking hopefully for Steph all the way.) Surely I asked about Dee's boyfriend. But all I remember—and I spent months, years, trying to excavate memories of Dee—is jabbering on about Jordan. *Should I get him a Christmas present? Do you think he'll go back to Mississippi?*

Dee handled it well. Listening, smiling, the odd nod. She must have thought I was dumb as shit, a clueless child with hearts in her eyes for someone she'd only known a few months. But I had to talk to her about it,

because I couldn't talk to Cate. Cate had been in a shitty mood since Thanksgiving, obsessing over her project and snapping at everyone, even me. And I didn't want to talk to Gunnar. He was too much of a realist—at times, I thought, a cynic. “It is chemicals,” he said once. “Like when you take cocaine. Same brain activity. It will pass.” Then he winked at me and said, “How is the sex, though?”—but I was annoyed, at him and at Cate, and I wouldn't answer.

The Holiday Party for the Left Behind, in the end, was a hit. Dee covered the lounge in tea lights and tinsel, strung fairy lights everywhere, converted the pool table into a slightly wobbly bar. By the time Cate and I got downstairs, a little light-headed from the “tequila spritzers” Cate had concocted from tequila and tap water, the lounge was crowded, the air hot and thick with drunk bodies.

“Over here, Charlie, Cate,” I heard Jordan call from the bar. His face was flushed as he pulled me in for a kiss. “You look beautiful.”

“You look good, too.” He really did. Jordan wasn't a skinny tie and pressed trousers kind of guy, like most of this crowd. Instead, he wore dark jeans with shiny brogues and another of his print button-downs. This one was dotted with embroidered—I squinted—tigers.

“Do you want, like, a *drink*?” Cate hollered, even though she was standing next to us. Cate was once again in a shitty mood, in spite of—or maybe because of—said tequila spritzers.

“Yes, please. Whatever they have.” I reached out and fingered one of the little tigers. “I like this.”

“I like *you*,” Jordan said.

“God, vomit much?” Cate stamped over to the makeshift bar and returned with two Solo cups. “You look decent, Jordan.”

“Thank you, Cate.”

Elise wandered past us, a vision in a magenta sheath that only Barbie and Elise could pull off, long hair cascading down her back. Was her hair ... *sparkling*?

“Hair glitter?” Cate murmured. “Well, there's a choice.”

“Stop it,” I muttered. Then, louder: “I'll be right back.” I leaned up and kissed Jordan, hard and long enough for Cate to make retching noises.

“What was that for?” Jordan asked, smiling at me.

“Just ’cause.” I tried to say it coquettishly, the way Elise would have.

In the bathroom, I finger-combed my hair as best I could and wiped dregs of mascara from the corners of my eyes. I wasn’t often self-conscious back then, but being with Jordan had stirred something in me. I didn’t want him to think I was a mess. I didn’t want him to realize he could do better.

Stop it, I told myself. You trust him.

(Another way I’ve changed: I only trust myself now.)

Cate stomped into the bathroom after me. “God, will you stop?” Sighing, she barreled into one of the cubicles. “You know,” she said, her voice echoing, “I never took you for one of those girls.”

“I’m not.” I didn’t pretend not to know what she meant. Girls who change when they get boyfriends. Girls who drop their friends to exist in a little universe of two.

“Mm-hmm.” She came out of the cubicle and washed her hands, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “You just keep telling yourself that, baby girl.”

“Hey.” I was starting to feel injured. “We *just* had drinks. Just the two of us.”

“You want a medal?” She turned towards the door.

I followed her out. Zach and Steph were striding down the linoleum hallway—no, Steph was striding down the hallway; Zach was following her. “Come *on*,” he was saying. “Don’t be like that...”

Steph stopped just short of the bathroom door. “Oh, good,” she said, her voice soaked in sarcasm. “My sister.”

“What did *I* do?” Cate stopped, too, indignant.

“I *told* you not to invite him for Thanksgiving—”

“She was just being nice.” Zach didn’t bother to look Cate’s way. “You could try it, you know, Steph—”

“*Stephanie!*” Exasperated, Steph stormed into the bathroom, leaving the three of us hovering in the hallway.

“Another victim of Medusa,” I tried after Zach had loped away. It was one of our jokes about Steph, that her gaze turned people to stone. *I freeze up when she looks at me*, I’d told Cate.

“Say what you want about my sister”—Cate emphasized *sister* as she click-clacked down the hall—“but she’d never let some guy throw her out of whack. My sister”—and there was a note of resigned pride in her voice now—“knows exactly who she is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I tried to match her pace. “I know who I am, Cate. Just because I have a boyfriend—”

“A boyfriend who is *definitely* involved with another girl—”

“Charlie!” It was Dee, aglow and headed in our direction, some guy with freckles trailing after her. “Hi, Cate. You guys, this is my—”

“Liam,” the guy said awkwardly.

“Hi there, Liam.” Cate didn’t bother to slow down.

“Wait *up*,” I said, trying to keep up with her. “Hey, Liam, sorry, Liam, I’ll come find you guys later—”

“They have kind of a weird relationship,” I heard Dee say to Liam.

“Go find your boyfriend,” Cate snapped at me. “That is, if he’s not all over Elise?”

“Why are you *being* like this?” I stopped walking. I think I actually stamped my foot, like a five-year-old.

“Because you’re being—*God!*” Cate stopped, too, but only because her phone was ringing in her purse. “*What?*” she spat into it. “Jesus, really? Fine. Fine. This party sucks anyway.” She headed for the elevator.

“Where are you *going?*”

“Upstairs. Gunnar wants one of my Red Bulls.” Gunnar was still in his dorm, finishing up his semester one project.

“Are you coming back?”

“I don’t know?” Cate was jabbing at the elevator button. “Not much point, is there? Besides, Gunnar needs me, it’s called being a good *friend* —”

“I’m coming with you,” I said stubbornly. “I’m his friend, too.”

“Whatever.”

NOW

“Which was how you ended up on the eleventh floor.” Noor says it almost proudly, like she’s solved a puzzle.

I blink. I'm driving on autopilot down Pulaski Highway, the cars blurring on both sides. "What? No." Is she even *listening*? "That was the journalism school. The night of the holiday party, we were in the dorms. This was the night *before*."

"Right. Of course." Noor sounds embarrassed. As she should be. "So you went upstairs, and..."

"And nothing. Gunnar told us to go back to the party. Cate stayed with him." She'd looped her arms around his neck. Looked up at me, as if to say *We don't need you*. "I went back downstairs. We didn't stay long, it was weird after that. Jordan slept over in my room. We were up half the night talking, and"—it sounds so juvenile now, probably because it was—"it was when I realized I loved him."

"Did you tell him that?"

"No. God, we'd been dating for, like, a month. Anyway, we woke up and ... it was Christmas Eve. It was snowing. I thought it was so romantic."

Perfect, is what I'd thought that morning. Lying in Jordan's arms. Watching the snow fall outside. *This is perfect*.

"And Cate?"

"She apologized." She'd waited for Jordan to leave, then knocked on my door. *Sorry*, she'd said, though there was defensiveness in it. *I was a bitch*.

It's fine, I'd said. *Let's get some food*.

"And then?" Noor asks.

"And then..." I don't even realize I've bitten the inside of my cheek until I taste blood. "Our semester one projects were due. By midnight. Cate and Gunnar and I ... we went and got a bottle of champagne. Moët. Because it was Christmas Eve. We brought it with us to the cubbies."

THEN

"Ready?" I asked. "One ... two..."

"You're making it *worse*!"

"This was your idea, Cate," Gunnar pointed out.

We were standing by the staff cubbies, the Moët ready and waiting. But every time we got close to slipping our semester one projects into our

advisors' cubbies, Cate made a noise like a seal in pain.

"It's just one assignment." I made my voice as soothing as I could.

"It's half the grade!"

"It is difficult to fail a graduate program." Gunnar was also trying to be soothing. "As long as you are handing in assignments, even if they are not—ah!"

(I'd kicked him.)

★ ★ ★

Before he'd left that morning, Jordan had said, "What do you wanna do for New Year?"

"We need to get through today first." It was contagious, this wailing and carrying on like banshees—even though, thanks to Dee, I'd finished my semester one project days ago; even though, thanks to Jordan, I'd never been happier. "But, I don't know. Cate's going to Greenwich. She said we should come, but..." I was thinking about the night before.

"We could stay here." Jordan was watching the snow fall out the window. "Just the two of us." We had plans for the next day, Christmas Day, with Zach and Gunnar, but nothing for New Year's Eve. "Cozy."

"Cheesy," I said, because I didn't want to say *I love you, I love you*.

"As long as I'm with you," he said. "I dunno if I care." He swiveled his head to look at me, quickly, like he was checking it was okay to say it.

Warmth swelled and bloomed in my chest. "Me, too."

He looked up from his phone and said: "Elise is alone for Christmas. Her dad had to stay in Louisiana. Maybe we should..."

I didn't want to spend Christmas with Elise. Shiny, sweet Elise, perfectly dressed and coiffed Elise, Elise who made me feel like a troll. I wanted to wear fleece pajamas and cuddle with my boyfriend and watch Christmas movies on Zach's fifty-five-inch television. I reached for the first adult relationship excuse I could think of, something I'd seen people say on TV: "It just doesn't feel ... appropriate."

Jordan said, "No problem."

★ ★ ★

I'd wanted Dee to be there when I handed in my project. Which was dumb, in hindsight—it was a mini-thesis, not a cure for cancer—and Dee surely knew that, but she acquiesced anyway. “I have dinner with Liam,” she said, “but he won't mind if I'm a little late. He's into the restaurant thing more than I am, anyway.”

“We have Moët,” I told her proudly.

“I'll be there,” she said. “I promise.”

★ ★ ★

I was used to London snow. Thin, crunchy, short-lived. The blanket of snow that fell over New York that day was like a dream: fluffy, sparkling, and—at least for those first few hours, with most New Yorkers out of the city—untouched. Cate, Gunnar, Jordan, and I bundled up and went to Washington Square Park, where we made snow angels and snow castles and bought piping hot coffee and donuts from a snowed-in food truck.

I'd lived in New York four months by then—longer, I thought witheringly, than any of the Instagram savants who visited for three days and posted odes to *the city where anything can happen!*—but I still wasn't sure if I liked it. The towering buildings from the movies were filled with beige carpets and nondescript doors, I'd learned, like a down-on-its-luck Holiday Inn. The muggy August heat had been replaced by a cold that crept under my skin. New Yorkers felt cruel and cynical with their sharp questions and eye rolls and the way they looked at me when I got too close, like *Don't you dare*. But that morning, when the city was silent and glistening under two feet of snow, for a moment, I got it.

(Honestly, I don't know if I would ever have *got it*. If it hadn't been for what happened. New York, I've learned, reveals itself to you when you're at your lowest. You have to be wrestling through the day for the city to recognize you as one of its own.)

We went back to the dorms. Jordan went back to Zach's. Gunnar, Cate, and I took long, hot showers and watched *It's a Wonderful Life*. Cate made us mac and cheese in her prohibited slow cooker. Then we bundled up once more, used Cate's printer to print each of our semester one projects, and set off for the journalism school.

It wasn't a pretty building, the journalism school. (It looks better these days. When they tore up the pod floor, they took the opportunity to renovate the façade and redo the lobby.) But it looked impressively Gothic that night, its reams of ivy and turrets steeped in snow. Someone had shoveled the front steps and sidewalk, creating a makeshift path for us to crunch through. It felt like wandering through a cloud.

It was snowing so hard, it took the paramedics twice as long to get to us as it should have. (That was in the report.)

It was snowing so hard that if nobody had shoveled that sidewalk, their bodies would have landed on nineteen inches of snow. That wasn't in the report, but I've wondered about it. The physics of it. If they would have flown through the snow. If they could have been saved.

You'd have thought they'd have screamed. At least one of them. But—and in the snow-settled silence, it was like I could hear everything—there was only the sound of bones striking the sidewalk. That *crack*.

NOW

I pull off the road.

I hang up on Noor.

I can't say this part out loud.

THEN

I felt it in the palms of my hands. That *crack*.

The long groan of the latch. The window swinging open into the night, like it was surprised. I'd known about that latch, the one with the DO NOT OPEN sticker. I'd heard it groan, seen it fall open with the big window. I'd opened it before, during that sweltering study session with Dee.

★ ★ ★

The cold air rushing into the room. Like the open window was the mouth of a dragon, breathing frost and ice into the small space.

The feeling. Like going down in a burning plane. A fish gasping on a deck. My body was throbbing with it, every one of my nerve endings on fire with the knowledge that they were dead, that I was going to die, too. I *knew* it, and it was the most animal I'd ever felt.

She said, “Don’t.”
She said, “Charlie.”
She said, “Please...”

NOW

Noor was right. The memory was there all along.
The groan of the latch as the window swung open.
The frigid air. Rushing in. Filling the small space.
“Don’t, Charlie, please...”
The *crack* of bones.
The silence.
So that’s what happened.
I fucking knew it.

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EIGHTEEN

NOW

“Ma’am?”

I’m staring at myself in the mirror behind the reception desk. I’ve lost weight, my jawline sharp and taut. My clavicle pokes out unhappily from under my blazer, and there are circles under my eyes I haven’t bothered to fix.

I look like shit.

Good.

“Ma’am?” Gunnar’s doorman repeats.

This isn’t like my meeting with Steph. Gunnar won’t be swayed by professional arguments. He’ll need to think, *This will destroy her*. He’ll need to think—like Olivia said—*I loved her*.

“Gunnar Korhonen,” I say. “19F.”

The doorman checks my ID with a grunt. “Elevator to your right.”

I smudge my mascara a little more in the mirror. It makes me look like my old self. “I’ll take the stairs. Thanks.”

“O-kay.” The doorman stretches out the last syllable. “Happy holidays.”

For God’s sake. I hate when people say that.

I have to take off my heels after the third floor. It’s disgusting, my bare feet against the ground, but I don’t have a choice. By the time I get to

Gunnar's floor, sweat is dripping down the small of my back. I bend over, trying to draw air into my lungs.

"Hello, Charlie."

Stupidly, the sound makes me jump.

Gunnar is standing in the doorway of one of the apartments. I've seen him at a handful of events over the past decade, but even so, I'm struck at how little he's changed. He's swapped his billowy shirts for black Steve Jobs turtlenecks and his hair is a more natural shade of blond, but his expression is the same: calm, focused.

"Hi, Gunnar." I'm still clutching my heels in my hand.

"I suppose you should come in."

He turns away. I squeeze my swollen feet back into my Manolos and limp after him into a huge, loft-style space with glass windows and plants hanging from the ceiling. He's standing grimly behind the kitchen island, like he wants to keep space between us.

"I did not know you spent time in D.C.," he says.

"I don't, really." Under Gunnar's gaze, I feel vulnerable, stripped of my C self. "I ... I came to see you."

"I have been in New York for years."

"I know."

Slowly, deliberately, Gunnar pours wine into two glasses and hands one to me. "Cheers," I say. "To ... to old friends." My tongue is heavy in my mouth.

"Hmm." Gunnar sips his wine. "You can sit down."

I do. He does, too.

"Why are you here, Charlie?"

"I ... I need to ask you a favor." I don't bother to hide it in my voice. How desperate I am. How pathetic.

"A favor." He stares at me. "Charlie wants a favor," he repeats, almost to himself.

I keep going. I can't stop now. "It's about the film Steph is making. Reliving it ... it's been horrible. The articles, the photographers. I can't handle it. I'm ... I'm afraid of what I might do." It's a cheap shot, that one,

but I'm desperate. Now that I know that I killed people—that Steph saw me kill people—this is my last chance. “If her film comes out—”

“When it comes out.” Gunnar is unmoved. “They have started—what do they call it?—*pre-prod.*”

“But if you didn't sign over the rights to your article, if you told them...” He's narrowing his eyes at me. I've gone about this all wrong, I realize.

“My article,” he says. “The article you said was tacky? What was it...” He pretends to think. “Arrogant. Selfish. Exploitative. Your words, no?”

“Gunnar, it was so soon—”

“Let me, ah, get this straight. You abandon us.” His eyes bore into mine. “You do not bother to say goodbye.”

“I—”

“You claim I am exploitative. You ignore me for many years. You *insist* you visit me, you ask me to give up money, prestige. For what, Charlie? For you?”

“You're right! You're right.” He's right. “But things, things happened up there, Gunnar, things you don't know...”

“It does not matter. It is over.” He leans back in the chair. “Everything is signed. You are too late.”

“Call her. Steph. Please.” My voice is just a croak now. “Tell her you take it back. You're, you're not comfortable, you don't think—”

“For you, Charlie?” He laughs, a short bark. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you, you—”

“I said no.” He stands up. “You should leave now.”

“You don't have a fucking *choice!*” I leap up, heat burning through my chest, and throw out my left hand with its gumball diamond. “Tripp Goodman fucking West, you know who that is, don't you? The guy who owns your publisher? I'm marrying him, Gunnar. I swear to you, if you don't do this—”

“You are threatening me?”

“Yes, I'm fucking threatening you! I'm about to be Charlotte Goodman West, do you understand that? I know you do, you know all about power, isn't that what all your fucking *books* are about?” I lean in towards him,

breathing hard. “That is, if you still get to write books. You don’t want to fuck with me, Gunnar, I *promise* you that!”

He turns away from me and crosses the room. I’m certain he’s going to order me to leave, maybe even call the police, but instead he bends his forehead to the window. Closes his eyes.

“What happened to you, Charlie?”

I don’t know how to answer.

“A different person.” He turns back to me, his mouth taut. “I tell the others you are a different person. This is why we find you so”—his eyes dart around, searching for the word—“unrecognizable.”

“You know what happened,” I say weakly.

“No. Something else.” He shakes his head. “You could have told us. Whatever it was. The BFF club. Do you remember?”

I have to get out of here.

“We missed you. For years.”

I stumble towards the door. Before he can say anything else.

“Why did you not talk to us?”

I dart into the stairway and race down the stairs. Like I’m being chased.

Charlotte,

Thank you for your email. I won't contact you again.

*I'm afraid I don't know what you mean about a restaurant.
I've never had the pleasure of meeting you in person.*

Renée Campos

OceanofPDF.com

NINETEEN

NOW

All through Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, I run through my options. Turn myself in. (It would kill my mum.) Beg Steph to back down. (Steph isn't someone who backs down.) Move back to London. (They'll just arrest me in London.) Convince the Goodman Wests to buy something—Steph's production company, the rights to Gunnar's article, Aaron's book, whatever helps. (Would it even help?)

But I keep coming back to it, the only thing that would stop this.

I can't. I'm not capable.

Except I am, aren't I?

Somewhere in New Jersey, I pull over and check my phone. I'm losing it, I must be, because Renée from *Vanity Fair* is saying we've never met, even though I can still feel the grip of her thin fingers on my forearm. Liv has texted: *We've landed. Love you. Call me when you can.* And Tripp has sent a half-dozen messages: *Are you coming back tonight? Hello? Can you please call me?*

I ignore him. If the shiny blonde wasn't Renée, who was she? An undercover police officer? A different reporter? A figment of my imagination? Was I more drunk than I thought? Was it the Ativan?

Tripp, again: *You need to see this.*

For God's sake.

He sends another text, this one with a link to a British tabloid. The kind that's only good for wrapping up fish and chips, as my dad would say.

*VIDEO: CHARLOTTE COLBERT'S SISTER PUNCHES
PHOTOGRAPHER!*

Scarlet Christmas survivor Charlotte Colbert hasn't spoken out about Stephanie Anderson's upcoming film about the tragedy ... but her sister has. In exclusive video obtained by LTV ... Felicity Colbert shouts, "She didn't do anything bad!" when asked about her editor in chief sister, 32, before striking photographer Daniel Wright, 46 (inset) in the Colberts' leafy Richmond neighborhood ... Wright tells LTV he plans to press charges against the 18-year-old ...

No. No. No. A still of the video shows Felicity's reddened face, her mouth a wide O, her favorite purple backpack on her shoulders.

I hurl the phone at the backseat and slam the horn, again and again.
Fuck! Fuck!

What did they say about me, to get her to react like that? Have they been doing this all these weeks, following her and Five around our neighborhood, shoving cameras in her face? I'm sobbing, shoulders heaving, forehead pressed to the wheel. Why didn't she tell my parents? Was she trying to protect them, too? Oh, God, when they see this ...

Oh, Felicity, Felicity ...

I know it then, with a heavy certainty: It will get worse.

I straighten in my seat. Wipe my nose.

I know what I need to do.

★ ★ ★

"This is Stephanie Anderson," she says.

"It's Charlotte. Charlie."

Silence.

“I want to apologize. For how I behaved in your office.” I let my voice wobble a touch. “I’ve found it ... difficult. To relive that night. I’ve tried to put it behind me.”

“Of course.” She still sounds guarded. “Thank you for your apology. Now isn’t a good time, but Tripp and I have spoken about setting up a—”

“You said you saw something,” I interrupt. “That night. In your text.”

You say I wasn’t there, she wrote. But I was. I know what happened.

“Yes. I did.” She sounds almost nervous now, and that’s what convinces me.

Steph knows what I’m capable of. She always has.

“I see.” My hands, pale and bony with their long fingers wrapped around the steering wheel, look foreign. My body feels far away, but I’m calm, my breaths coming slow and even.

What choice do I have? Gunnar is right. It’s happening. Unless I *do* something.

“I’m on board,” I tell her.

“What?”

“The film. I’m on board. Last night—you made some great points.” Steph was always weak in the face of flattery. “You’re right. You’ve been right all along. It’s time to set the record straight.”

“We’ve already—”

“Pre-prod. I know. And I know, you want it out for the ten-year. I can help. I want ... I want to be part of this.”

Another pause. “In what capacity?”

“I can help. With the script. I was there. I know things ... that nobody else knows. I can help make sure it’s...” I swallow hard. “Accurate.”

“You remember everything.” It’s a question.

“I remember everything.”

Silence.

“We should meet,” Steph says abruptly.

It’s like I’ve passed a test. “I can come back to KBC—”

“No. No, let’s meet at my apartment. Tomorrow morning?”

I’m flummoxed by how perfectly this has fallen into place. Surprised, too. I thought it would be hard to get Steph alone, knowing what she knows.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes, that sounds good.”

“I’m in Brooklyn Heights,” Steph says. “I’ll send you the address.”

★ ★ ★

I thought the problem would be getting to Steph. The real problem, it turns out, is that I don’t know shit about nut allergies. I consider pulling off the highway and finding a small-town library with a computer, googling something that can’t be traced back to me, but this isn’t fucking *CSI*. Besides, it’s self-explanatory, isn’t it, a nut allergy? All I need is nuts.

But it feels laughable, going to a bodega and buying Reese’s Pieces—

My cell rings and makes me jump. It’s my mum again. Calling about Felicity, I’m sure. I turn it off and tuck it into the side door. I can’t afford to be distracted.

Baking. I could bake.

I’ve never been that sort of woman, the kind that offers up corn muffins in lieu of words. But Steph doesn’t know that about me. Steph and I never knew much about each other, not really. Which will help, I think.

By the time I get back to the town house, it’s close to midnight. Tripp is fast asleep, facedown on the silk pillowcase, and I crawl in beside him. At some point during the night, he pulls me close, his chin sharp against my shoulder blade. I let him, because this is the last time. Not the last time we’ll do this—I’ll be in this embrace every night of my life—but the last time before everything changes, again. That’s one of the things I remember most clearly: Wishing I’d let myself *feel* more. I spent years thinking about that last night in the dorms with Jordan after the holiday party, my body folded into his while he snored gently. That delicious contentment. The weight of almost nothing dragging me down. I grieved that, I think, more than anything.

★ ★ ★

The next morning, I *bake*. I crack eggs, whip batter, squash bananas. I crush a handful of peanuts into powder and stir them in. I dip one finger in the mixture and taste it, like I’m wondering whether it needs more, I don’t know, sugar? What are banana muffins supposed to taste like? I don’t

snack. I haven't in years. I eat because I'm hungry, I eat because I need to, and then I stop.

But the muffins come out looking good. Even I have to admit that. Golden brown, smooth as anything. We have a cake stand, I discover, an engagement present from somebody who clearly doesn't know us very well, and I pop the muffins onto the stand and cover them with the glass dome.

"You're *baking*?"

Tripp looks aghast, as if he'd caught me cheating.

"What are you still doing here?" I ask. It's nearly eleven.

"I slept in a little. I was tired. From last night." Tripp's expression drops into what I think of as his martyr face. "I took Liv and Freddy and the baby to JFK."

"Thanks." I turn away from him. "I should get ready. I have a meeting."

Tripp follows me into the walk-in closet. "Did you take the morning off?" Before I can respond, he asks: "Where did you end up yesterday?"

"Yesterday?"

"The hike?"

"Oh. Yeah." I strip off my sweats and shirt. "Cold Spring."

Tripp is staring at my body. Not bloody *now*, Tripp—

"You've lost weight."

"Wedding diet." I'm not that kind of woman, either, but it suits me today, acting like somebody else. Somebody who bakes muffins and fasts for her wedding. In the spirit of being a different kind of woman, I reach for a double-breasted pinstripe blazer, black skirt, pumps. I've never done the *Mad Men* thing before, but it feels right. Maybe I'll top it off with red lipstick.

"Did you speak to Felicity?" he asks. "Is she all right?"

My phone is still off, tucked away in Tripp's study so I can't be traced. "Not yet."

"Well, I'm having lunch with the terrible two today." It's our nickname for his two brothers. "What'll it be this time, do you think?"

The *idea* of Tripp drinking a crisp white with Trent and Toby while I have to do this—it's infuriating. But he's still going: "I'm sure Trent is

angling for more shares...”

“I swear to God, Tripp!”

He looks injured. “What?”

“Can you just leave me alone? Please?” It’s been years since I’ve been mean, sincerely mean, to someone I love—not since Jordan, at the end—but I can’t help it.

“Jesus, all right, I’m going, I’m going. I’ll see you later?” The needy edge to Tripp’s voice makes me feel a little ill.

“See you later.” I turn away from him. Usually we kiss goodbye, but that’s something else I can’t stomach today,

After Tripp leaves, I take two shots of his bourbon. The bottle costs more than our television, but it makes me gag. I throw in a Klonopin with the second shot, because I still feel too much like myself, even in my pinstripe-and-red-lipstick getup.

Then I pick up the cake stand and call a car.

TWENTY

NOW

The snow starts before we've even left the Upper East Side. It's light and slow-moving, barely a step up from rain—nothing like the fat, fast snowflakes of that day—but it's the first snowfall of the season, and it has that same magical, silencing quality.

It's a relief, you know. To not fight back the memory.

I should have left this place. Afterwards. Gone back to London, or maybe somewhere new, Melbourne or Paris. Started over. Sent Jordan and Gunnar a friendly email—*Let me know if you ever visit, would love to catch up*—and never followed up. But by the time I thought of it, New York had already sharpened my edges, left me brisk and blunt and elbowing my way upwards. I had been forged in fire, like all New Yorkers, and like all New Yorkers, I knew that I wouldn't fit in anywhere else. I was too brusque for Melbourne, too crude for Paris, too assertive for London. I liked it that way. So much of who I thought I was had fallen away, but to be a New Yorker—I could still have that.

It strikes me as the only thing I wouldn't take back. The way I fell in love, fell in line, with this city.

I rest my head against the windowpane and watch the snow fall, and I let the memory swallow me whole.

THEN

“Let’s try this again,” I said to Cate and Gunnar. I’d wanted Dee to be there when I handed in my project—I was kind of pissed she wasn’t, actually—but we couldn’t stand there all night. “One ... two...”

“Argh,” Cate said mournfully.

“... three!”

Gunnar and I pushed our bundle of pages into the cubbies. Cate held on to hers, her bottom lip sticking out like a child’s. I took her project and placed it firmly in Professor Kowalski’s cubby.

“I’m getting that out!” She reached for it.

“Cate!” Gunnar waved the Moët, like you’d distract a toddler with a toy. “It is time!” He held the bottle out to me. “Do the honor?”

“If you want to lose an eye,” I replied automatically.

“A good point.” Gunnar began to fumble with the cork. “Here is to...”

“The BFF club,” I said quickly, before Cate could get distracted again.

“To us.” Gunnar twisted off the top of the champagne. It popped exuberantly, then started drizzling bubbles. “Oh,” he said in alarm as the liquid seeped over his fingers.

“We have to drink fast!” Suddenly Cate was all business. “Or we’ll waste it!”

The champagne was already dribbling onto the floor. (Dee would have brought something to pour it into, I thought.) “I’ll go get cups—”

“We don’t have *time* for cups!” Cate grabbed the bottle and took a long swig. “Ooh! That *is* good?”

Gunnar took it from her and drank. “Woo!” he crowed. “We have made it!”

“Uh-huh.” I took the bottle.

Cate glanced back at Professor Kowalski’s cubby. “Guys—”

“No!” I pressed the Moët into her hand. “Have some more!”

“We should go,” Gunnar chimed in. “Enough of this place. We are done!”

“For now,” Cate grumbled, but she let herself be led away from the cubbies.

★ ★ ★

We were tipsily picking our way down the snow-dusted front steps, Cate clinging to Gunnar's arm, when my phone vibrated inside my jacket. Jordan: *Are you still here? I'm in a pod.*

I stopped walking long enough to tap out: *Just leaving, all ok?*

"Hurry up, please," Gunnar grumbled. The snow and wind were picking up now, the white flakes falling hard and fast. "I am freezing!"

Jordan wrote back immediately: *Stuck on my intro. Do you think you could read it over real quick?*

That he wanted my opinion, *mine*, made me warm with pride. "I might head back in for a second..." I had to speak up over the whirr of the wind. "Jordan's worried about his intro—"

"Oh, *I* see how it is." I should have known that would set Cate off. "Never mind the BFF club, *Jordan's* worried about—"

"Shut up. Come with me." I gestured inside. "It'll take two minutes. We can get food after."

"Alas!" Gunnar held a gloved hand up to his heart. "I am boycotting this building until the new year. This is my solemn vow." He bowed his head slightly.

Cate giggled, her breath fogging up in the cold.

"Also, I am hungry," he added. "Also, I am certain I will see you in one hour when Cate makes us put on a united front to watch *Real Housewives*."

"Amen," Cate said.

"Goodbye for now." Gunnar waved and crunched away, his green scarf catching the wind. He'd taken the bottle with him, I noticed.

"Make it quick," Cate grouched as we headed back up the front steps. In Gunnar's absence she'd taken my arm, and for a moment I let myself believe things were still good between us. "Lie and say his intro is great, *just* like you did with mine—"

"Yours was fine," I protested over the sound of the wind.

"You're a shitty liar, Colbert."

We took the elevator up to the eleventh floor, the pod floor.

TWENTY-ONE

NOW

Steph's lobby looks like the North Pole exploded. Four Christmas trees, each about twelve feet tall. Tiny lights strung everywhere and blinking frantically. Glitzy boxes piled high in each corner, all gold foil and silver ribbons.

I hate this time of year. The rabid excitement, mounting by the day—*it's coming, it's coming!* All that delight over a countdown to the worst day of my life. If I still snacked, I'd buy myself a chocolate advent calendar and make it official.

"She's ready for you, Miss Colbert," the doorman says. He's wearing a jaunty Santa hat and a wide smile. I bet Steph tips well this time of year. She's smart, Steph, she knows who to keep on her side. "Penthouse."

I look around. "Where are the stairs?"

His smile fades. "It's twenty-two floors, ma'am."

"Got it. Where are they?"

The guy shakes his head. *Rusty*, his pin says. "Penthouse level, you gotta use the elevator. Building rules."

Christ. "I hear you, Rusty," I try, "but I'd really prefer to—"

He reaches for the phone. "I'll have her come on down..."

"No!" I can't risk this going wrong. "It's fine, it's fine." I'm saying it to myself more than to Rusty. *This is the least of it, Charlie*. "It's fine," I repeat, backing away. "Thanks."

The guy at the elevator bank ushers me into a waiting car and hits the “PH” button. Then he steps out, tipping his Santa hat to me, and the doors are closing before I have a chance to panic. The elevator judders—I grasp for the gold handrail with my free hand, my palms sweaty already—and then the little arrow starts to move as the elevator does: 1, 2, 3, 4 ...

I don’t want to do this.

I’m so angry that I have to do this.

6, 7, 8, 9 ...

It’s not too late, I remind myself. Steph can still save herself. “I’ve changed my mind,” she could say. I could grab the cake stand. Snatch the muffin from her hand, if I had to. “Silly me,” I would breathe, “silly me, I followed a family recipe, I forgot all about...”

But even as I fantasize about it, I know: Steph won’t change her mind.

It’s a new feeling. *Premeditation*. The last time, it was the opposite. The last time, I was a dumb kid, a *mad little tornado*, blowing from room to room until I found myself in one from which there was no escape.

You could have escaped, I remind myself. I’m not a dumb kid, not anymore. *You chose to kill them*.

The gold arrow, sliding to the right: 12, 13, 14, 15 ...

I look down at the cake stand. *You chose to kill Steph, too*. Somehow, in my head, it’s already past tense.

19, 20, 21, 22.

The doors slide open, and I’m in Steph’s apartment. Apartment—it’s not the right word. It’s an open-plan palace, sleek and minimalist and so very Steph: onyx tables, cream carpets, blood-red and turquoise art pieces on the walls. And Steph herself, in the middle of it all, perched on the sectional in a crisp white button-down and jeans.

“Charlie,” she says, beckoning for me to join her on the sectional. Her face is soft and free of makeup, and I’m reminded of the way I held my face for Gunnar. “Thank you so much for coming.”

She pulls a cushion into her lap as I set the cake stand on her coffee table. There’s a practiced vulnerability in her movements, like she already knows why I’m here and is hoping to change my mind. But that isn’t possible, unless Steph has a death wish.

“Thanks for inviting me,” I say automatically. “I brought muffins.”

“So sweet of you.” Her voice is warm, the one she uses on the show for children and crime victims. *She’s trying to trick you*, I remind myself. Steph does nothing by accident.

But trick me into what? Steph holds all the cards. She knows that now. She knows I killed people and lied about it. She knows—she must—that I’m terrified of the dust she’s been kicking up around my crimes. That when it settles, the truth will be exposed.

It’s disorienting, her warmth.

She’s trying to disorient me.

“She deserved it, you know,” she says gently.

I’m taken aback by her unexpected kindness. “I know,” I say after a moment. “But Dee didn’t.”

She bobs her head in agreement.

“I didn’t remember it. Until a few days ago.” I don’t know why I’m trying to justify myself to her. But it’s important, somehow, that the only person who knows the truth knows all of it. “I have a therapist, Noor, she made me...” I clear my throat. “Well, she didn’t make me. I—I wanted to remember.” *Because of you.*

She nods again, this time with interest. “You really didn’t remember?”

It’s almost a relief. To tell the truth. “You know, it’s funny. I suspected. That’s why I lied, right away, to the police. It was almost ... a knee-jerk reaction. But it was a black hole. That’s what my therapist and I called it. I only remembered that she, she”—I stumble on the words—“she hurt them, and I was sliding down the wall. That feeling. Desperation. That was it. I woke up, and you were there.”

“Yes.” There’s no judgment in her face, and for a moment, for the first time, I almost like her.

Be careful, Charlie. This is what she wants.

“Why a film?” I’m trying to keep her talking, I suppose, but—honestly, I just want to know. “After all these years. You don’t need the money. I thought maybe you wanted to soften your image—”

Steph snorts, and her mask slips for a moment. “Soften my image? Charlie, I’m one of two female anchors on primetime. I need to be twice as

tough as anyone else. One tear on live television—there goes my career. For fuck’s sake. Use your brain.”

Is she *deliberately* making this easier on me?

“I heard the rumors in the spring,” she says, rearranging her features into empathy. “That’s when I decided to do it. The film. It was the right thing to do,” she says before I can respond. “Even though it turned out the rumors were about him. Not us. Which wasn’t hard to figure out, in the end. The whistleblowers, that’s what they call themselves—they weren’t subtle about it. All men, of course, harping on about *not keeping quiet any longer*. Not now that he’s running for governor.”

I knew he was running for governor, of course. I’ve followed his career for years. The Hands Off Our Guns initiative, the March For Life keynotes. Every time I see his name, my stomach clenches. “So he—he bribed the people involved in the investigation?”

“Bribery. Intimidation. Whatever.” She actually shrugs. “They did a good job, if you think about it. All these years, and everyone still chalks it up to *a psychotic break*. As if there weren’t signs. As if”—and there’s a flash of pain in her eyes—“she couldn’t have been stopped. She could have been stopped, you know.”

“I know.”

“Anyway.” She tosses her hair back. She keeps doing this, making a show of vulnerability and then slipping up with a gesture. “I remembered, obviously, even if you didn’t.” She wrinkles her nose slightly, as if to emphasize the *if*. “I knew that when the *Times* article came out—*The Chronicle* article, now, isn’t it?—it would upend the whole narrative. Because the story they were all told, this girl who woke up one day and cracked—it was wrong. And then they’d be like, well, what else is wrong?”

I’m half following her logic. “Sure.”

“Do you know how long I’ve been doing the show?” She’s dropped all semblance of softness now. “Five years, Charlie. I *know* how this shit works. If you’re not telling the story in *your* way, with *your* facts, somebody else will tell it in *their* way. And you and I, and the others, we become collateral damage in someone else’s narrative.” She sniffs. “I wasn’t fucking going to let that happen, was I?”

I'm trying to unpack her words—Steph's been trying to *protect* me? Protect all of us?—but I'm struggling to follow. “But ... a film?”

“Well, it couldn't be a *documentary*, could it?” She's looking at me like I'm insane. “The thing with movies is, you can slap ‘based on a true story’ on it, easy. But everyone who sees the movie, they think that's exactly how it happened. Boom. No more questions. Especially if the people who were *there* are promoting it.” She looks at me proudly, like, *see?*

“Well,” I say. “Yeah. I mean, sure.” She's acting like I'm a coconspirator, like we're on the same side, and I wonder, fleetingly, if this might end happily after all. “The thing, is, though, you don't *know* that. That someone else would ... hijack the narrative.” I'm struggling to even picture what that would look like. “It might just go away. It did before. We could all just ... go back to normal.”

“Don't be naïve.”

I change tack. “It makes sense, your plan.” *You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.* A saying of my mum's. “It's just ... My family, they've already been through a lot.” Am I going to play this card? You're damn right I am. “My brother, Adam, he died when he was a baby. And the British media, they're—”

“My family,” Steph interjects, “has been through a lot as well, Charlie.”

“Yes. Of course. I just...” *Try something else, try something else.* “What if you just ... left me out? You did say that it wouldn't *really* be based on a true story...”

Steph is shaking her head. “It wouldn't work. People want to know about you, babe.” I flinch at the *babe*. “I get asked about you in every interview. You've never spoken about it, you look like that”—she indicates my face—“you're about to become an heiress, for God's sake. You run a *fashion magazine*. If you wanted to lay low, you should have gone into insurance.” She almost smiles. “Married a bartender, I don't know.”

I steal a glance at the muffins, perched atop the marble coffee table. If I can just figure out how to change her mind, if I can just—“What if I went to the police?” I say suddenly. “Told them the truth?”

Even as I'm saying it, I know I couldn't. My parents are too old, too worn down already. It would kill them, and then what would happen to

Felicity?

“They’d never believe you,” Steph says. Her green eyes have hardened. “After all your lies? I’m giving you a way out, too, Charlie. Don’t you see that?”

“Yes, but—”

“I don’t think,” she says, her voice steel, “that you want to fuck with me.” She nods at the muffins. “I didn’t know you baked,” she says, sugar-sweet again.

I pick up the glass dome with one hand, take a muffin with the other. *I’m not forcing her to do anything*, I tell myself. *I’m just eating*. I take a bite. The crumbs sit heavily on my tongue, and I force myself to swallow. “I should go,” I say.

I’m not doing anything. I’m just leaving them with her.

“I meant it, you know,” she says suddenly. “About the police.”

“I know.” I stand up. “I won’t go to the police.” It’s the truth.

“Good. Good.” She gets up. “Before you go. I’ll leave Tripp alone. If you want. He isn’t necessary.”

I’m still struggling to follow. “What do you mean?”

She cocks her head. *You really are an idiot*. “His publishing house. I thought, maybe a book deal. To go hand in hand with the movie. Really drive the story home, you know? He loved it, we’re meant to have lunch on Thursday—”

“Right.” *I need to get out of here.*

“But I can back off,” she says generously. “Like I said. It’s not necessary. He’s your fiancé, after all.”

Dimly, I register that she’s trying to offer me an olive branch. “Great,” I make out. “Thanks.”

“Tiffany’s?”

“What?”

She lifts the delicate glass dome of the cake stand. Holds it out. “This. Is it Tiffany’s? I like it.”

“Oh. Um...” Dumbly, I take it from her hands and turn it over. “I ... I don’t know. It was a gift. For our engagement...”

What happens next, I can’t explain.

It plays out in my head before it happens, a kind of premonition. Not a premonition, a memory. The champagne flute, slipping and shattering. The wedding gown, streaked with blood and ruined. I watch, from outside my body, as it happens again.

The glass dome slides from my grip.

It strikes the marble table.

It shatters, hard and loud.

“Fuck!” Steph cries, but I’m already reaching for a shard, the thickest I can find, thicker and sharper than the one in Nantucket, I’m closing my fingers around it—

“What the fuck!” Steph takes a step away from me, her hands high against her chest.

She thinks I’m going to hurt her.

I came to hurt her.

I release my fist, my fingers screaming in protest, and drop the reddish shard of glass onto the onyx table. Blood, fast and furious, is already trickling down my wrist and striking the onyx marble. The muffins are ruined, a veritable baked-goods crime scene—I would laugh, if I wasn’t so truly *surprised*—some lying on their side, others on the marble, all of them dotted with shards of glass and, in some cases, blood.

She’ll never eat them now.

The numb, detached feeling is gone. Relief breaks over me. I was wrong. I *can’t* kill someone. It’s like Liv said. *Not a bloody chance.*

Except ... I did.

“Your *hand!*” Steph is saying. She reaches for it—*fuck*, that hurts—and turns it over, almost tenderly now that she knows that I’m not here to hurt her, I’m just crazy, she’s saying something about stitches, a nearby ER ...

Then my blood is dripping onto the wrist of her white silk button-down, and she isn’t pulling away.

Cate.

She was wearing white. A white silk shirt. Sleeveless, slightly crumpled, under a black cardigan. The blood spread quickly and it didn’t stop. I don’t remember her face in that moment, if she was screaming. If she

said anything to me. All I remember is the blood, the way it swallowed the silk of her shirt and kept going.

Still holding my torn-up hand in hers, still speaking, Steph looks up at me, her green eyes so much like her sister's.

I run.

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TWENTY-TWO

NOW

The carpet of the elevator is a gentle dove gray, dotted now by splashes of crimson.

21, 20, 19, 18, goes the arrow.

I failed.

I failed.

17, 16, 15, 14 ...

I couldn't—

I can't—

13, 12, 11—

11—

11 ...

The elevator stops.

The elevator stops.

I tell myself the doors will open, but they don't, they aren't.

I can't.

I sink to the floor. My body feels like it's about to seize, every neuron pulsing.

I can't.

I'm back there, in that tiny room. Sliding down the wall.

I never left. I never left.

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TWENTY-THREE

THEN

We found Jordan hunched over a computer in one of the pods. For a moment, I watched him through the pane in the door. He was adorable, pushing his sandy hair back from his face, yawning like a cat—

“Creep, much?” Cate pushed open the door.

“Hey, you guys.” Jordan gave us a tired half smile.

Cate pulled up a chair next to him. “Here’s how it’s gonna go. We help you with your intro, then you come get good and drunk with your *girlfriend*”—she stressed the word—“and me. But not too drunk, ’cause I have to get the train home tomorrow?” She paused, considering. “But still, like, *very* drunk—”

“It’s this part, here.” Jordan turned the screen towards her. “The first quote. It feels flat, right?”

“Mm-kay. Let’s see what we can do.” Cate leaned towards the screen. “Yeah, I don’t think you should start a sentence with ‘but.’ Maybe ... ‘albeit.’”

“That could work,” Jordan said politely.

Cate continued to read. “What does ‘jocular’ mean?”

“Joking around,” I said from the back of the room.

“It sounds pretentious,” Cate told Jordan.

“Shit.” He rubbed his eyes.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I tried.

Jordan looked at Cate. “I know,” she said. “You know what she’s like.”
“Like what?” I was starting to feel irritable.

“Like, it doesn’t come as easy for the rest of us?” Cate rolled her eyes at Jordan, like, *typical*.

I wanted to say, *You started your project eight days ago*. I wanted to say, *Dee and I have been working on mine for two months*. My dad always said, *Take a deep breath, before you say anything you can’t take back*.

“Maybe we should take a break,” I gritted out.

Cate said, “He hasn’t *finished*, Charlie—” Then she yelped. “Holy *shit!*”

I caught a glimpse of white-blond hair through the pane of the door, and then it swung open and Elise was there. She was soaking wet, her curls dripping beads of snow onto the carpet, her eyelashes stuck together and her skin flat white, and she was more beautiful than I’d ever seen her, more beautiful even than at the holiday party.

“Hi, y’all,” she said.

“Oh my God, you *scared* me!” Cate held a hand to her chest.

“Just me, just me!” Elise closed the door behind her and brushed a hand over her wet face. Her eyes were wide and bright, like she’d been out celebrating handing in her project, and there was something raw about the way she looked, something between a wet child and a mermaid. “What’s going on here?”

“I was just finishing up.” Jordan turned back to the screen.

“You must be cold,” I said quietly.

“Let me see?” Elise elbowed Cate to the side, a little more roughly than needed—Cate wrinkled her nose as droplets fell from Elise’s cherry red puffer into her lap—and peered over Jordan’s shoulder.

“Well, *ex-cuse* me?” Cate shot me a look: *Can you believe her?*

I shrugged and looked away. I was tired of Cate’s attitude towards Elise. She didn’t know about Matt, Elise’s boyfriend, about the motel in Atlantic City, but even so—

“No, no, this part, it’s gotta come later,” Elise was saying to Jordan. “Maybe in the section about the, the 2009 play?”

She’d already *read* it?

“Thanks,” Jordan said. His voice was clipped, like he just wanted all of us to leave already.

“But it’s almost there!” Elise smiled wide in his direction, her face just inches from his. “You could move up that line about the deputy coach...”

What line about the deputy coach? I’d read it, but it was about baseball and I’d kind of tuned out—

“Uh-huh, yeah.” Jordan nodded. “Thanks, but I—”

“Oh, I got it!” Elise squealed. “How ’bout we get rid of the whole intro and start fresh? You could start with your quote about the pitcher.” Still leaning over him, still dripping, she covered his hand with hers. “We got this...”

This was too much for Cate. “Dude, his girlfriend is, like, *right there?*” she spluttered.

“It’s fine,” I said quickly.

“What is your *problem?*” Elise narrowed her eyes at Cate.

“Oh, I am so not the one with the problem.”

“Hey, guys, hey.” Jordan’s tone was sharp. “It’s all good, Elise is just trying to help—”

Cate shook her head. “Don’t defend her shit.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Elise’s voice was shrill.

Jordan said, “Look, y’all gotta calm down,” at the same time that I said, “Cate, come on, Elise isn’t—”

“Would y’all just leave already?” Elise pointed at the door. Her hand was shaking, I noticed. “Jordan and I, we gotta talk.”

“We are *not* the ones who should be leaving.” Cate got to her feet, her arms folded across her chest.

Elise took a step towards her. There was a spot of color in her cheeks now. “I *said*, I gotta talk to him. Are y’all gonna leave or what?”

“We’re going, we’re going.” I pulled on Cate’s arm. Something about the four of us in that hot, cramped space made me nervous. “You can talk, it’s fine—”

“Will you stop saying it’s *fine?*” Cate hissed. “That bitch has been trying to steal your boyfriend forever!”

“Cate!” For the first time since I’d known him, Jordan sounded angry.

Elise said, “The hell did you just call me?”

Instinctively, I took a step back. “Look, we’re all on edge,” I said as calmly as I could, “and it’s been a rough few weeks—”

“Oh, I think you’ve been just fine, Charlie.” Elise’s voice was icy.

“Hey, hey,” Jordan said.

“What d’you think is going to happen, huh?” Cate asked her. There was a note of delight in her voice, like she’d been revving up for this fight for a while. I should have told her about Elise’s loss, I realized suddenly. Cate was a ticking time bomb. “He’s going to tell you he wants you and not Charlie? ’Cause let me tell you—”

“You. Don’t. Know. Shit.” Elise bites off each word.

“I think I do, dude. That *photo* you sent on Thanksgiving? I mean, God!” Cate was jeering, there was no other word for it, and then she leaned forward and tugged lightly on one of Elise’s damp curls. “You can’t just go around tossing that dumb hair and expecting—”

Elise’s hand came up and for a second, I thought she was grabbing Cate by the waist, some kind of jujitsu move before she threw her to the ground, and I was leaping forward to try and pull them apart, thinking, *For God’s sake, Cate*, Jordan was out of his chair, too—

And then I saw the blood.

It was just a spot at first and then it was growing, the red vivid against the white of her shirt, and Cate’s hand covered it for a moment but it was spreading fast, too fast, and she raised her hand and looked at the blood on her palm, just looked at it, and then she bent at the waist, staggered a step back, fell back against the wall, and I was frozen, I didn’t understand how she got hurt, I ...

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” Jordan was saying, he was scrabbling for his phone, crouching down beside her, “Cate, Cate, oh my God...”

“*Get away from her!*”

Jordan was crying, holding Cate’s hand, and I felt like I was very, very far away and I moved back one step, two steps, right up against the wall, staring at the crimson blooming across Cate’s lower chest, I couldn’t, I didn’t ...

“I said to *get away from her!*” Elise cried, and she was waving something, it was small and glinting in the light, I was sinking to the floor, I was drowning ...

Jordan was still crouched over Cate and he was hitting buttons on his phone and Elise screamed, “Put that *down!*”

“I n-n-n-eed...” Jordan was hyperventilating. “We need—an a-a-am-ambulance—”

“You’ve been *lying* to me!”

“An a-a-am-ambulance...” Jordan keeled over, gasping for breath, and I backed up against the wall as much as I could, like I could disappear, if I could just ...

“You never meant any of it.” Elise was crying now, too. “You, you...”

Don’t hurt him, I thought, and I meant to say it, but my brain wasn’t firing properly and I didn’t and then Elise leaned over Jordan and I thought she was getting him to his feet and away from Cate but then I saw it, I saw it that time, the knife went into his back once, twice, and it wasn’t real, it couldn’t be real, and Jordan made a noise like an animal ...

“You *lied!*” Elise was screaming, and Jordan collapsed on his front and my legs were giving out ...

“Oh my God,” someone was yelling, “oh my God,” and from the floor I saw them, two boys, barreling into Elise like bowling balls. “Oh my God,” they kept saying, even as they tried to grab the knife, then grunting, another moan, and they were grabbing at themselves, still saying it, “oh my God,” and I was trying to back up against the wall, trying to disappear, trying to never have been there at all ...

But Jordan and Cate were lying on the floor next to each other and *I had to be with them* and I thrust myself forward on my hands and knees and I tried to cover their wounds, her stomach, his back, but there was too much blood, I retched, she still had the knife in her hand and I knew it was going to be me and I was still kneeling against Jordan and I lowered my head to his body, he was still moving, jerking, and I waited for it to pierce me, I waited for my turn ...

And then, nothing.

Texts from Elise Morrison Winter to Jordan Ford, December 23

9:05: Where did you go?

9:08: You said you wouldnt kiss her in front of me

9:11: Are you with her now?

9:11: Dont answer that. Have a good night

11:02: The party ended up being really fun:)

11:02: Im still up if you want to come say good night

11:25: Its rude to ignore people

11:26: Im literally just down the hall

11:27: The least you can do is come talk to me

11:27: Is this how you treat all your friends??

11:35: Forget it I'm going to sleep

12:20: Oh I had a great idea for your project and now I cant sleep lol

12:20: We should work on it asap since the deadline is today

12:20: Im already up and too excited to sleep haha

12:22: Will you pick up the phone real quick?

12:46: Ok then fail. Whatever

12:46: Good night.

2:10: Did you know Zach is passed out outside Stephs room

2:10: I feel weird leaving him there

2:10: Guess you abandoned all your friends for her tonight

2:24: If Im being honest Jordan before you started dating her you wouldn't have just left me or Zach alone like this. Youre not that sort of guy

2:24: Or maybe you are now idk

2:56: Im trying to say you changed Jordan and Im saying that as a friend

2:56: Obviously you know about my feelings but you also know Im being honest with you

3:11: A lot of people change when they get in relationships but you said you cared about me and I believed you

3:12: That was my mistake

3:13: And Zachs mistake and your other friends who you turned your back on

3:13: Except for Cate. Even though she hates me for no reason

3:13: Lol I know why she hates me. she sees what you and me have and she's like a fucking pit bull about Charlie

3:14: Whatever Im going to sleep

4:04: I wish people like you didnt let me down because its getting harder to think there are any good people out there and you seemed like one

4:04: Like you havent even invited me to Christmas even though you know Im by myself

4:05: Wonder how many girls you have fooled before

4:05: Does Charlie know what youre really like

4:05: Like I wont tell her but someone should

6:00: Im still up if you want to come by and talk before you go

Texts from Jordan Ford to Elise Morrison Winter, December 24

10:05: I know I said we should be friends but I don't think it's a good idea

10:05: It just doesn't feel appropriate

10:06: Please don't text me again

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TWENTY-FOUR

NOW

When they open the elevator doors, I'm on my knees, retching, begging, I don't know for what.

Steph is there, staring at me, holding a phone to her ear, and the doorman is there in his Santa hat and he guides me to a chair in the lobby and they're talking at me, Steph, the super, the doorman, an elderly woman who keeps offering to call 911—

She steps into the lobby.

She sees me.

She's blond now, wisps of hair poking out from a snow-covered beanie, and her face is shadowed where it used to be plump, her acne scars almost completely faded now, but she's still Cate, my Cate, green eyes shining in the glow of the Christmas lights.

I force myself to my feet, something catching in my throat—*Cate*, just the single word, *Cate*—and she holds out her arms and I collapse into them and she smells exactly the same and I'm gasping for breath, barely making out the words *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry*.

"I know," she says, and her hand comes up to cup the back of my head. "I know."

THEN

It took a while for them to realize I wasn't injured. I had so much blood on me. They wanted me to lie down but I couldn't, I had to be on my guard for

when Elise came back. That's what I kept saying: *Where is she? Where is she?*

I knew in my bones that Cate and Jordan were dead, that she had killed them and that as soon as I sat down in one of their stupid chairs she would come back and kill me, too.

They told me Cate and Jordan were alive and I didn't believe them.

They told me Elise was dead and I didn't believe them.

I told them to fuck off, actually.

NOW

She disentangles her body from mine, gently, and she leads me outside and into the backseat of a car. "Wait right here," she says and I do, I wait right there, until she returns with pillows and blankets and bottled water and antiseptic and spreads them out in the backseat and wraps gauze around my hand and does up my seat belt like a child.

I don't ask where we're going. I have never been so tired.

I slip away in the cloud of pillows and blankets. Cate keeps driving, doesn't say anything, just drives. For minutes, hours, I don't know. I just want to sleep.

THEN

They gave me scrubs to change into and a nurse helped me peel off my jeans and sweater and underwear. I didn't have my coat. I'd left it in the pod.

I told her I wanted to take a shower and she said I couldn't, not yet.

They put me in a bed even though I *told* them I was fine and three men came and asked me questions. There was a doctor who kept interrupting to say I was in shock and they should come back tomorrow and they argued, they said they needed to know *as soon as possible*.

They asked me what happened and I said Elise killed them. They asked me to confirm her last name. They left me alone for a bit and then they came back in and asked me to confirm it again.

"I told you, Morrison fucking Winter," I said, "and you need to go and find her *right now!*"

"Ms. Morrison Winter is dead," one of them said.

“No, she’s not,” I told them. “She’s coming for me.”

NOW

I come to when I realize the car has stopped moving. It takes all the energy I have to open my eyes. In the driver’s seat, Cate is reading something on her phone and eating an Egg McMuffin.

“Where...” I croak. “Where are we going?”

She turns around. “Hey,” she says gently. “You woke up. Do you still like the nuggets?”

I shake my head.

“Figured I’d take you home,” she says.

For a moment I think she means the dorms.

“Is that okay?” she asks.

I nod. She starts up the car again, and I sink back into the cloud.

THEN

They gave me something to help me sleep and then they kept waking me up to shine a tiny torch in my eye so of course I didn’t sleep, they kept saying Elise was dead but how did they *know*? I had dreams, the same thing over and over. Elise waving the knife, me jumping in the way. Blood, so much of it.

The nice nurse who had helped me undress told me in her soothing Irish lilt that I had to eat some porridge and so I ate some porridge.

She kept asking who she should call and I couldn’t say Cate or Jordan and I couldn’t say my parents because I wasn’t *hurt* and a call from a hospital in America about their daughter would be their worst fear come true, so I started ignoring her.

One of the men from the day before came back after breakfast and warned me that there were journalists outside and I shouldn’t talk to them, that it might compromise their investigation.

I didn’t understand *why* there would be journalists and he said, “We have six victims, three deaths, and one of them is the daughter of a very fine senator.”

“But Cate and Jordan aren’t dead?” I asked for the thousandth time, because I still didn’t believe them.

“No,” he said. “Ms. Anderson will be fine. Her parents are here. Mr. Ford is in a more serious condition. It seems he lost a lot of blood.”

“Can I be with him?” I asked.

“He’s in the ICU,” the man said. “Family only.”

NOW

I wake up again when he climbs into the passenger seat. He’s still wearing his turtleneck from yesterday, rumped now and dotted with what looks like cat hair, and he isn’t smiling, but he doesn’t look angry, either.

“Hello again,” he says. “How is your hand?”

“Are we...” I’m struggling to process. “Are we in D.C.?”

“He came back to the city last night,” Cate says. “He was worried about you.”

“You were not replying to my texts,” Gunnar says.

I blink at him. He looks tired.

“I am sorry,” he says. “I knew something was wrong.”

“We always knew,” Cate says.

THEN

I still don’t know why they didn’t discharge me sooner. I guess because I wouldn’t tell them who to call. Maybe they wanted me in one place so they could ask me more questions.

Eventually, they let me have a shower. The soap dispenser was jammed and so I scrubbed at the flecks of blood with my nails until my skin was red and raw and the Irish nurse was calling, “You all right, my darling?”

Afterwards, Cate’s parents came to see me, their faces puffy and pale. They told me, again, that Cate was alive. “It could have been so much worse,” her dad said, and her mom cried and held my hand and said, “There was nothing you could have done, sweetie.”

The boys who tried to help us had been hurt, they said. Michael and Salvatore, two Digital Media students we barely knew, they’d tried to save us. Heroes, Cate’s parents called them.

Michael hadn’t made it, they said.

Jordan’s parents were on their way. He’d had a blood transfusion. It was touch and go for a while, they said, but he was holding on.

They left and I sat and counted on my fingers the things I knew:
Cate was alive.
Jordan was alive, just.
Elise was dead.
Michael was dead.
Three deaths, the officer had said.

NOW

They take me back to the Upper East Side, me in the backseat dozing like a toddler, Cate and Gunnar murmuring quietly up front. The snow is coming down faster now, coating our front steps and patch of lawn, but the town house's bay windows are blank and dark. Tripp isn't home.

Cate turns off the ignition.

"Do you..." My voice is reedy. "Do you want to come inside?"

★ ★ ★

I don't offer to get them tea, water, wine. I don't even invite them to sit down. I wait until they've hung up their jackets, and then I start: "I lied to you."

We're standing in the living room in a tight triangle, staring at one another, like we're teenagers trying to raise the dead.

Cate nods, her eyes soft still.

"Shall we—" Gunnar starts.

"About all of it." My throat is hoarse—I must have been screaming, back in the elevator—but I force out the words. "I lied to you, and the police, about what I did, and Steph—Steph found out."

They can't forgive me. Everyone who can forgive me is dead.

I need to tell them anyway.

"Let me explain," I choke out. "What happened."

TWENTY-FIVE

THEN

I had never been to a police station before. Of course I hadn't. I was an upper middle-class kid from London, pale white and privileged in ways I hadn't even figured out. I didn't get a lawyer. I didn't even call my parents. When they discharged me, I went back to the dorms and showered again for what felt like hours, and then I fumbled for the card one of the men had given me—"Come to the station at your earliest convenience"—and I flagged down a cab and read out the address.

Looking back now, I can't believe it. How stupid I was.

You have to understand, back then, I trusted the police. Again, I was lily-white and spoke in Queen's English. Again, I was hopelessly naïve. I wanted to know what had happened. Who was dead. I still believed what the nice policeman who'd visited my private school in Year Two had told us: *We are here to help you. To protect you.*

You'd have thought that the event that bisected my life into *before* and *after* was the moment she attacked them. And it was, in a way. But even more so, it was the hours I spent in the police station. I walked in there in a fog. I needed them to make what happened make sense. And when I walked out, heavy with the knowledge of what I had learned, the only thing I needed was to be sure that nobody could uncover my lies.

★ ★ ★

“Thank you for coming in,” one of the policemen said. I can’t remember his name, now. I’m not sure I knew it then. He had a wispy beard and eyebrows sticking up in different directions and I thought he would offer me coffee, like in the movies, but he didn’t.

“We’ve spoken to Catherine,” he said. “She confirmed that Ms. Morrison Winter attacked her and Mr. Ford. Then Mr. Ricci and Mr. O’Neill.”

“She knew,” I blurted out.

“Who?” he asked.

“Cate. She knew Elise liked Jordan. My boyfriend.”

“Right, right.” He looked at his notes. “When we spoke at the hospital, you said you couldn’t recall the aftermath of the ... attack.”

“The ambulance came,” I told them. “Steph was there.”

I remembered bits and pieces of the *after*. Not being half carried out of the school, but other parts. The blue and white lights. The frigid air on my skin. Steph, holding her sister, screaming at me. Other people, pressing their hands to the blood, saying *What happened, what happened, what happened*.

“Where was Ms. Morrison Winter?” the policeman asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “You said she was dead.”

“When dispatchers arrived at the school,” he said, “they found Ms. Morrison Winter first. With Ms ... Ms. Ahluwalia.” He said the word quickly, like he couldn’t wrap his tongue around the syllables. *Ah-lu-lia*.

“Who?”

He looked at his notebook again. “Dhiya. Dhiya Ahlu ... walia.”

“Dee,” I said. It didn’t surprise me, that Dee had found Elise. That she’d been exactly where she needed to be. Knowing Dee, she’d probably tried CPR. Dee didn’t believe in lost causes.

“You knew her?”

I didn’t even register the past tense. “She’s a friend of mine.”

“I apologize,” the officer said. He didn’t sound sorry. “I didn’t know. I would have told you sooner.” He didn’t even pause for breath: “Dhiya Ah-lu—Dee. Dee died last night.”

I didn’t believe it. These men didn’t seem to know what they were talking about. “Dee wasn’t in the pod,” I explained. “She was at dinner with

her boyfriend.”

“She was pronounced dead at the scene,” the officer said.

I didn’t understand.

“Both of them probably died instantly,” he said.

I stared at him.

“The force of the fall,” he said. “Ms. Morrison Winter’s fall from the eleventh floor.”

★ ★ ★

I’ve wondered, you know. Why I lied. I could have told them the truth. That I blacked out, and when I came to, Elise was gone. The window wide open.

But as soon as they said it, I knew.

I didn’t remember it. Pushing her, I mean. I still don’t. My brain was trying to protect me, like Noor said. But the second they said it—*fall from the eleventh floor*—I felt it again: every part of my body lighting up, more animal than I’d ever felt, my skin almost bursting open because she’d killed Jordan and Cate, my Jordan, my Cate—and I knew.

Later, I’d tell myself that it was all in my head. Post-traumatic stress. Survivor’s guilt. Whatever. I’d gotten good, by then, at deciding on a narrative and sticking to it. It was a flash, a hallucination, a trauma response. There was no reason, not really, to think that I’d killed anyone. My only honest-to-God memory after I’d blacked out was the stillness, the air cold and thin, how nothing moved, until suddenly Steph was there and screaming, rocking her sister and screaming: *What happened? Elise? She jumped? She jumped from the window? Charlie, answer me! Charlie!*

Still, I would have told them the truth, I think. Right then and there. If it hadn’t been for Dee. *I might have pushed Elise*, I would have said. *I might have opened the window, and pushed her, and blacked out*. I was the kind of kid who liked to tell the truth. Besides, I could have justified it. To myself. To them. It was self-defense. Maybe someone else could have grabbed the knife, used some elaborate Krav Maga move, I don’t know, I wish I was the kind of person who had that kind of confidence in their own body but I, I can barely catch a ball.

But I'd thought, with naked horror, of Dee. Trudging through the snow to get into the building. To find me. Earlier, when they'd given me back my coat, my phone in the pocket, I'd found her texts. *I'm really sorry*, she wrote. *I'm so late*, she wrote. *I'm so proud of you. I'm coming right now.* Later, the coroner would confirm it: they died right away, Dee's neck breaking the instant Elise struck her.

As for me, I walked out of that building—or, according to the photos, was walked out, a paramedic hooked under each arm—without a scratch on me.

* * *

I couldn't say it right away. Besides, they'd changed tack, showing me printouts of what they'd found on Jordan's phone. Thousands of texts from Elise, collected in a folder as thick as my fist. Calls, so many of them—most of them missed, some of them picked up. There was an app, hidden away in a "Misc." folder, that tracked him via GPS. "Do you think he knew this was there?" they asked me gravely, and I almost laughed, because it turned out I knew nothing about Jordan, nothing.

The last texts they showed me were from the night of the Christmas party. *You said you wouldn't kiss her in front of me*, she'd written. But he hadn't kissed me. I'd kissed him, lasciviously and at length, and only because I'd felt her watching.

"This was hours before the ... attack," one of the detectives said.

I tried to remember if that was true. "I guess."

"We're looking at these"—he tapped his pen against the printout of Jordan's last messages, the *It just doesn't feel appropriate* he'd paraphrased from me, the *Please don't text me again*—"as a trigger. We don't yet know what Ms. Morrison Winter was doing during the day, but there was cocaine and prescription drugs in her system when she died, and—"

"She jumped," I said. "I remember now."

All three of them snapped to attention.

"I was lying on the floor," I said, "and she opened the window and she jumped."

For a moment, I thought, *They'll never believe me.*

Instead, one of them said, “We’ll need you to sign an affidavit.”

* * *

Steph came to see me in my dorm that evening. I was sure she was going to say she’d seen me push Elise. I let her in anyway. I wondered if it would come as a relief. I wondered how long I’d go to prison. Whether I’d be extradited. Whether there would be a trial.

Instead, she said, “My parents are sending Cate away.”

“What?”

“Some treatment facility. You know, for the trauma.” She sat down, gingerly, on my bed. “But she’s fine. Lots of stitches, but fine. I thought you’d want to know.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“When I came in there...” She looked me straight in the eye. “I thought my sister was dead.”

“So did I.”

“I can’t believe that psycho killed herself.”

I took a shaky breath. “Me neither.”

“They’re calling it a murder-suicide. The police.” She picked at a thread on the duvet. “You know, it’s funny. I thought *Zach* was the one to watch out for. That’s why I faked being into him. So she wouldn’t be. Didn’t want that asshole ruining her year. I can deal with his crap, but my sister...” She snorted. “I, like, barely even *noticed* that girl.”

“Me neither,” I lied.

We sat in silence for a moment, and then I said, “Did you hear it?”

Steph gave me a *You’re an idiot* look. “The pods are soundproofed.” For the Broadcast students, I remembered dimly. “I was on my way to the kitchen. Thank God I got there when I did. It was *horrible*.” She gives me a hard look, as though to impress it upon me. “All that blood. And the window was wide open. *She* was gone by then, obviously, and you were on the floor with your eyes closed...”

“Yeah.” I got to my feet. “I should get some rest.”

“I bet.” She got up, too. “Well, I’ll be here. If you need anything. An update on Cate or ... whatever.”

“Thanks,” I said woodenly.

★ ★ ★

Jordan was in the hospital for three weeks. I tried to introduce myself to his family, his trembling mom and hysterical sisters, but they barely registered the word “girlfriend.” Even after the worst was over, even after he’d been moved out of the ICU, they glared at me—was I imagining it, the glaring?—when I showed up to his room, clutching my stupid flowers from the bodega. “Oh, it’s *Charlie*,” one of his sisters would say to the other, nodding in my direction, and I’d wave like an idiot, mumble, “Hi, um, how is he?”

They watched me the whole time I was there, as Jordan slept and I stood stiffly at the foot of his bed, trying not to cry. (Because who was I to cry, really? This was his *family*, his flesh and blood, I imagined them thinking.) I asked, once, if they wanted to play a round of cards—that’s what they were usually doing when I got there, playing cards—but one of his sisters said, “Uh, we just finished,” and the other one said, “*Samantha*,” and swatted her, but in a playful *You’re so bad* way, and I smiled awkwardly and made an excuse to leave. I never stayed more than ten minutes. Fifteen, max.

I needed Cate with me. But she wasn’t responding to my texts and calls, and Steph said she could be in the facility for weeks. Gunnar was the first to realize that we were a *story*, and he was gone from the dorms by the time the first photographer showed up. He texted me every piece of coverage he could find, headline after headline about Elise and *what happened*, complete with quotes from “anonymous classmates,” and I lay in bed and read the articles hungrily, one after the other.

I couldn’t wrap my head around Dee being dead, no matter how many times I read it. I mean, I was *there*. I didn’t see her in the pod, or when they bundled me into the ambulance, and none of the articles mentioned her by name—“the classmate,” they called her, or “the last fatality.” I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was still in her dorm, hunched over her desk. Maybe it would have helped to have gone to her room, to have seen for myself that she wasn’t, but I never did. When I did have to walk past her

dorm, I practically clung to the opposite wall, like an elderly person holding a railing.

They'd emptied out, by then, the dorms. Classes had been put on hiatus indefinitely. I had nowhere to go, nothing to do. I hated being in my room, the cramped, ugly space that only felt like home when Jordan or Cate was there, but I couldn't bear to run into anyone and face their oozing sympathy, so I started ordering in all my meals, paying extra so they'd bring it up to my dorm. For the most part, I lay in bed reading on my phone the articles Gunnar sent me, except when I put on a baseball cap, like I thought I was some kind of celebrity, and snuck out to the hospital to see Jordan. But that made me feel worse, so I started visiting every two days, every three days, and by the time Jordan was awake and talking I was hardly there at all.

Those first few weeks after it happened ... I'd never experienced anything like it. I wasn't angry, or guilt-ridden, or even sad—that all came later—but I had the odd, vague sense that I was no longer real. That I was a lingering ghost pretending to still be human. I didn't experience anything like I once had: I didn't want anything, crave anything, feel glad or sad of anything. I lay in my bed, enveloped in what felt like a thick fog, and existed, or pretended to exist, but I knew even then that some part of me was left in that room, in that stupid pod, and I knew it was my fault I'd never get it back.

★ ★ ★

In another world, I would have confessed. I wasn't good with secrets, not even when I was a teenager. I didn't like the feeling of it. A year in, maybe two, maybe around the time Aaron's book came out, I would have cracked. By then, I knew the weight of this particular secret wasn't going anywhere. *I lied*, I would have said. *I didn't see her jump. I don't know what happened. I don't know if I killed them both.* Even if I ended up in a six-by-four cell, even if everybody thought I was a monster, I would have felt lighter. Capable of redemption.

But every time I let myself think about it, the extraordinary heaviness that would be lifted if I told somebody, I thought of my parents and Felicity. How that weight would shift onto them, instead.

My parents knew tragedy. They understood that life wasn't fair. I never knew a time when my mom didn't move warily, like she was bracing for something else to snap her clean in half. The things Elise did slotted into their worldview neatly enough. She was sick. She didn't know what she was doing. Thank God Charlie was one of the lucky ones.

They were proud of me, of course. But it was more than that. My parents had three children, and only one of us got to go out into the world and live among the bright lights of New York City. Get our name printed all over a real magazine.

Nothing I would ever do would make it okay, what our family had endured.

But I helped.

My parents always thought I was *good*, like my brother Adam, who never lived long enough to be anything else, like my sister Felicity, who was sunshine incarnate. I could never let them know the truth: that I had grown up in a shower of love, and yet had become a monster.

Because it didn't matter, I'd decided by then. The moments I'd lost to the black hole. Whichever way I looked at it, that night was my fault.

TWENTY-SIX

NOW

“When Steph found out,” I grind out, “I—I...”

Cate is holding my hand, the one that isn’t bandaged. We’ve moved to the couch in the salon, me in the middle, Gunnar and Cate on either side. “Breathe,” she says quietly.

“I went to Steph’s apartment.” I pull my hand away, force out the words. “And I brought—”

“Charlie?” Tripp’s voice, floating in from the foyer. “Babe?”

Shit.

“We’re in here!” Cate calls.

Tripp strolls into the salon, his coat folded over his arm. “Hello there,” he says, smiling warmly at our guests, like it’s an ordinary Wednesday. (Except it is, to Tripp, isn’t it? Tripp thinks I went to work, met with Walter, took the Q home. My God.) “Catherine, right?” he’s saying. “And Gunnar?”

It takes me a moment—*how does he...?*—but of course, of course Tripp swallowed the information about that night as desperately as I did.

“That’s right.” Cate gets up to give him a hug. Like she and Gunnar and I are old friends who lost touch. Like we’re *reconnecting*. “So good to finally meet you.”

“You too, you too.” If Tripp is surprised that I have friends over—that I have friends at all, bar Olivia—he doesn’t let it show. “Can I get you some wine?”

“Thanks, but we should be going.” Cate pats Gunnar’s shoulder. “This one needs to get home to his husband. And I need to get back to my cat.”

“I’ve always wanted a cat,” Tripp says wistfully.

It’s like I’m dreaming.

“Before we go.” Cate pulls out a ragged receipt from her purse and scribbles something on it. She hands it to me. I see Tripp’s gaze land on my hand, still wrapped clumsily in gauze. “My phone number.”

Don’t go, I want to say.

Instead, I say, “Thanks.”

The two of them wave and shuffle down our front steps, their movements careful on the light layer of snow. Tripp and I watch them from the foyer, Tripp absently pressing his lips to my head. “So nice,” he’s saying, “that you’re back in touch. What happened to your—”

“They were my best friends at Carroll,” I say, watching Cate swipe playfully at Gunnar as they get into her snow-dusted Ford.

“I know, baby.”

Of course he knows. Every photo of Cate and I that leaked—Champagne and Shackles, late nights in the pods, Fridays at greasy dive bars—was a testament to our closeness: Cate’s lips on my cheek, Cate’s arms laced around me. It makes me ache now, that I ever let her easy affection get between us. That I saw something sinister in it.

“Do you think,” Tripp is saying now, “they could help us?”

“Help us with what?” I’m still dazed from earlier, my brain wrung dry.

“Cate, she’s Stephanie’s sister,” Tripp says, almost to himself. “If she knew anything, I’m sure Stephanie would...”

I want to know what happened, he said to Steph. What was covered up.

Cate and Gunnar, they understood. When I explained. At least, they seemed to.

I deserve to know, Tripp said.

He does.

“I need to talk to you about something,” I say.

“Sure, baby.” Tripp closes the front door behind us. “Let’s open a nice —”

There's no logic, no foresight. I just can't hold on to it any longer. "I lied to you. I lied to everyone. What I said happened during"—I make myself say it—"Scarlet Christmas, it wasn't real. It was all my fault, and—"

"Baby. Baby. Take a breath." Tripp takes my nonbandaged hand. We're still standing in the foyer, the edges of the palm tree brushing my neck. "I know. I mean, I don't *know*, but I knew something was going on with you. You can tell me anything. We're a team. We'll always be a—"

"I killed them!"

Tripp snorts. He actually *snorts*. "Charlie—no. I'm sorry, I don't mean to make light of it, and I know you feel responsible, but just because you were dating that boy who—"

"No. *No*. You have to *listen*. I told the police I saw Elise jump. I didn't see her jump!"

Tripp makes soothing sounds with his tongue, like I'm a child. "Charlie, you were—"

"Listen to me! I *killed* her!"

That stops him.

"That's why I lied. Okay? She didn't jump, I killed her and, and Dee died because of me, I always suspected but I just couldn't remember and then Noor and I did this trauma processing thing and I—"

Tripp holds up his free hand. "Wait. Okay? Just wait."

I do.

"What do you mean," he says, "you killed her?" He moves away, slightly, almost imperceptibly. "Elise Morrison Winter? She didn't kill herself?"

"No! She attacked them, and then I, I pushed her out of..." My voice fades out.

Tripp is shaking his head. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would you do that?" Suddenly, his gaze clears. "Did she attack you?"

"I don't *know*," I say miserably. "I just remember the sound the window made when I opened it, it groaned, sort of, and I remember it got really cold and she said, Elise, she said, 'Don't, Charlie, please.'"

Gently, firmly, he untangles my fingers from his. "Did you mean to hurt her? Dee, I mean."

“No! She was my friend! I loved her,” I babble, even though that’s a lie, too, because I didn’t love Dee, I just liked her a lot, wanted to be her a little bit, like an older camp counselor. “I didn’t see her text, I had no idea she was on her way, I—”

“She was on her way?” His expression is unreadable. “To ... see you?”

It comes back to me. *I never knew anything real about that night*, he’d said. When he told me about her. *We had dinner plans and she didn’t show and then I saw the news ...*

There’s no point in lying, not anymore. “She ... she wanted to congratulate me—”

“That’s why you didn’t stay in touch with Stephanie and Catherine and the others?” He takes another step away. “They knew what you did?”

“No. Nobody knew. I was ... traumatized.” It sounds stupid, even to me. Traumatized, when I’m the one who caused the trauma. “I couldn’t be around them—”

“This is why you’ve been so crazy,” he says, almost to himself. The word *crazy* makes me flinch. “You’re afraid that people will find out.”

“Yes. I mean ... yes.”

“Would it be such a horrible thing? If they did?” His cheeks are a patchy red now. “Since you’re so *traumatized*. Wouldn’t it free up your conscience?”

I have never, ever heard Tripp speak like this. “My parents,” I say softly.

“Right. Your parents.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“You lied, too,” I try. “Remember? You never told me about Dee, how you—”

“I was honoring her *wishes!*” Tripp is closer to shouting than I’ve ever seen. “I was trying to protect you! Protect us! You ... What you’re telling me, it’s more than a ... an oversight. It’s—God, Charlie, it’s manslaughter! At minimum!”

“I know—”

“Do you know how long I spent *thinking* about it? How Dee came to be there. Why nobody saw her die! I played it through in my head over and

over—do you know what that’s *like*? I drove myself crazy going over it, thinking, my God, insane things, like some fucking *conspiracy theorist*...” He spits out the words. “And all along. You knew.”

I bow my head. “I’m sorry.”

Another beat of silence, this one longer.

“I’m going to leave,” Tripp says finally. “Not leave *you*. But I need some time. I’m going to stay with my parents. You can stay here.”

Somehow, it comes as a shock. “You’re leaving me?” I repeat idiotically.

“I just said I wasn’t.” Tripp turns away. “But this ... It’s a fucking lot, Charlie.”

“I know—”

“It was easier,” he says, “when I thought that girl killed her.”

I can’t say anything to that.

Tripp walks slowly to the bedroom. Pulls his L.L.Bean weekender from the top shelf. Starts filling it: underwear, socks, shirts still on their hangers. I sit, gingerly, on the edge of the bed, the bed that doesn’t feel like mine any longer.

“The exterminator is coming this week,” Tripp says tonelessly, tossing a tie into the bag. “Friday. I’ll email you the timing.” His gaze drifts back to my hand. “There’s antiseptic in the guest bathroom.”

For some reason, it’s this that gets me. “Please don’t leave,” I croak. “You said we’re a team, you said—”

He holds up his hands. “I can’t do this right now.” Then he starts packing again, more quickly this time.

It feels wrong, all wrong. “This is your house!”

“Where else are you going to go,” he says. It’s not a question. “It’s not like you have any—” He stops himself. It’s a bridge too far, that one.

“Let me be the one to leave. Please.” I grab my own L.L.Bean weekender—it was a gift from Tripp for our third anniversary, I think, the his-and-hers set; I’ve never appreciated that about Tripp, how he wants me to share in the things he loves—and start throwing clothes in at random. “Please.” I can’t bear the idea of being left here, in this house that’s so

terribly *Tripp*, with no Tripp. I can't bear this house, full stop. "I can't stay here. I don't want to."

Mercifully, he steps away from his bag. "Fine. Fine." He runs a hand through his hair. "Look, don't rush. Take your time. Stay here tonight, if you want. I'll sleep in the guest room. Did you change the sheets after Liv and Freddy—" He catches himself. "Never mind. I don't care." He grabs a pair of gym shorts and backs out of the room. "I'll ... we'll talk. I just need..." He shakes his head.

"I know," I say.

He shakes his head again, and then he's gone. I keep throwing clothes, any clothes, in the bag. I have to go. I don't care if I forget things. I'll buy new things—

But Tripp's right. Where *will* I go?

Except I know. Of course I know.

I wait until Tripp is in the guest room, the door shut firmly behind him, and then I go into the hallway and pick up the landline. I tap in the number Cate wrote on the battered receipt. I wait for her to pick up.

TWENTY-SEVEN

NOW

For the first couple of days after Cate takes me back to her Cobble Hill apartment, I just sleep.

Her cat, Whisper, quickly learns that I'm the most sedentary heated thing in the apartment, and she sets up home in the curve of my sleeping body. I wake up in Cate's light-filled guest room with my arm slung over Whisper, fall asleep to the steady thrum of her snoring.

Cate brings me soup and milky tea like I'm an eighteenth-century invalid. (She also brings catnip to lure Whisper back to her, but Whisper won't budge.) She says I can stay as long as I like, that she'll drive me back to Tripp's when I'm ready, but I feel pink and raw and stripped of several layers of skin, nothing like the woman Tripp loves, loved, I don't know, and so I keep saying not yet, not today, I need more time.

I also keep saying, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

"Thanks," she says, "but please quit it?"

"Okay," I say, and I rest my palm on Whisper's pink belly and go back to sleep.

★ ★ ★

She's different now, Cate, but she's also the same.

Back then, she was all bravado and bluster. Now, there's an easy confidence about her, a sense of contentment as she bustles around her

apartment, talking to the plants and to Whisper. You almost wouldn't know she was Steph's twin, Steph with her razor-sharp cheekbones and glossy dark hair, Cate with her curves and messy blond bun. They have the same luminous green eyes, but where Steph's are hard and focused, Cate's are warm and bracketed by laugh lines.

(The thing that makes her laugh the most? Dark jokes about the time she got stabbed. I'm getting used to it. Mostly.)

She doesn't seem angry, at least not that I can tell. She doesn't seem surprised, either. New Cate is mellow where the old one was dramatic, accepting where she used to be anxious. "I had come to terms with your being lost to us," she says. "So finding you in Steph's lobby, of all places? It was kind of an awesome surprise."

"An awesome surprise?" I say. "Attempted murder?"

She just rolls her eyes. (Cate laughed when I told her about the muffins. *Laughed*. "You?" she spluttered. "Who do you think you are, James Bond? Didn't the doorman see you? Besides, you think you would have been able to just watch her *die*? You'd have found her EpiPen and said it was an accident.")

By now, the old Cate would have sat me down and demanded a play-by-play of the last nine years. But she's more relaxed these days, more willing to let things go unsaid. We do talk, but only for a few minutes every day, usually when she's cooking dinner or soaking in the bath (New Cate doesn't see the point in boundaries any more than Old Cate did). "What did you do today, Sleeping Beauty?" she'll call. "Hung out with Whisper," I'll say. Or "Slept some more."

"Jealous," she'll say. Or "You want pepper on this?"

But she's still Cate, and I can sense her itching to ask.

THEN

By mid-January, there was a lot of talk about "restoring normalcy" and "establishing routine." Parts of the journalism school were declared open for business again—not the pod floor, obviously; they decided to knock down the walls and turn it into a library—and classes started up again, this time in the business and medical schools. Jordan was discharged, Dee's

room was cleared out, Cate moved back into the dorms. It was just like it used to be, and for some reason that made it worse.

I was looking forward to classes starting. Not because I thought everything would go back to normal—I wasn't stupid—but because it would give me something to do, somewhere to go. People to talk to, maybe even about things that weren't Scarlet Christmas (by then, that's what everyone called it). But on that first day in late January, sitting in the auditorium listening to the dean talk about "moving forward," Cate on one side and Jordan on the other, I realized: It was worse than losing something. Having to fake like it was still there, I mean.

(Which was stupid, I thought. Look at Cate. Look at Jordan. Look at Dee's family, at Michael's. What right did I have, to feel like I'd lost anything? I caused this. I paraded my boyfriend in front of a girl who was losing it. I let my best friend push her to her breaking point. I forced the girl out of an eleventh-floor window. Another girl died because of me. And I had the audacity to feel sorry for myself?)

It felt laughable, to be back talking about sources and pitches. But I expected that. What I didn't expect, what felt worst of all, was that I no longer knew how to be with Cate and Jordan. Cate, because she was Cate, barely noticed—"Cheer up," she'd scold me, and then go right back to chattering—but I could tell that Jordan didn't know how to be around me, either. He'd lost some of his openness, his oddball confidence, and I was only at the beginning of figuring out what I'd lost, and we kept trying to get back that rapport, that silly, sweet chemistry we used to have, and we couldn't.

It might have helped if we'd talked about it. But we didn't, not really. Which was absurd, because it was all anyone else could talk about. People stared at us as we wandered around campus, people we'd never even met. "Hello!" Cate said blithely, waving like the Queen. "Yes, it's me!" But Jordan ducked his head and lowered his gaze. "Shh," he implored Cate.

The weird thing was, we were having a lot of sex. It wasn't bad; it was better than the sex we were having before, actually. But it made me feel ... dirty. Not because the sex was particularly dirty, but because it reminded me of how I'd felt as I'd blacked out: primal, electric. And because I knew why

we kept doing it anyway, doing it even though Jordan's doctors had specifically said not to: sex was the only way we could reach each other. Before, it was an add-on to our relationship, a bonus to all the talking and cuddling and laughing. Now, it was the only way we could connect that didn't feel stiff and forced and, I don't know, passive-aggressive.

That was the part I *really* couldn't believe. That we were both so angry at each other.

Well. It was more of a theory, that Jordan was angry with me. He wasn't mean or rude—he was Jordan, for God's sake—but there was a kind of tension between us. He wouldn't look me in the eye. At first I thought he was just nervous, but as the weeks went by I realized it was something more. Once, he blurted out, "Why didn't you visit me in the hospital?" And I tried to tell him I *did*, and he said, "One or two visits don't count, Charlie." And I didn't want to make excuses or blame his family, so I just shrugged. In the Before Times, that was something I would have faced head-on: *Are you angry with me? How can I make this up to you?* But I didn't ask, and he didn't say anything else about it, any of it, and we spent our time together watching TV in silence, like an old married couple who should have divorced years ago.

The main reason I didn't ask those questions—and this, this was the part I was most ashamed of—was because I was angry with *him*.

That kind of anger, it was new to me. I'd never understood people who struggled with "anger management," who let one feeling control their lives. Now I knew: It controls *you*. It lives inside of you. It screams to be let out, whether you're sitting quietly in class or watching a movie. Sometimes, looking in the mirror, I would twist my face into a silent, feral scream, just to have somewhere to *put* that feeling—and it terrified me, the visual confirmation of just how messed up I was.

Because what the hell did *I* have to be angry about? It was my fault, all of it. Jordan was a victim. Every news report said that. Cate, too, was a victim, someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Dee, Michael, Salvatore, they were all victims. Even Elise was, though I was the only person who knew that.

And yet, when I was with the two of them, and even when I wasn't, I was raging: *Jordan, you should have told me. Jordan, you shouldn't have let it happen.*

And *Cate, you shouldn't have provoked her. You shouldn't have lit the match. Yeah, you didn't know there was gasoline—but you still lit the fucking match.*

Jordan, you should have said there was gasoline.

NOW

We're together when the news breaks. Sitting on Cate's couch, Whisper lodged between us. "Oh, shit," Cate says grimly, looking at her phone, and she changes the channel to KBC.

"And today," a man in a raincoat is saying, "we have allegations that threaten to torpedo the career of former Louisiana senator and gubernatorial candidate Briggs Morrison Winter..."

The camera pans out and I freeze, my fingers closing around a patch of Whisper's fur. The reporter is standing outside Carroll's journalism school, the decades-old ivy slinking up the building behind him. It's raining gently, he's pulling on his hood—"The allegations, which come courtesy of *The Chronicle* reporter Tony Liu, center on the infamous incident known as Scarlet Christmas, which took place almost a decade ago"—he gestures up at the building—"when Ms. Morrison Winter grabbed a knife from the kitchen of the eleventh floor, known to students as 'the pod floor'"—

"Cate," I say in panic as I begin to leave my body.

"What? Oh, shit." Seeing my face, Cate hits mute. "Hey. Charlie. Breathe, okay? In. Out. Come on, you can do better than that. That's right. Just breathe."

I do. I try.

She reaches over Whisper and takes my hand. "Hold on to me," she says bossily, un-muting the channel.

"... ending a decade's worth of questions about why Ms. Morrison Winter, who was twenty-four at the time of the killings, snapped in the middle of her graduate degree. Numerous members of Mr. Morrison Winter's office, including his former chief of staff, are claiming that the

then-senator bribed, intimidated, or otherwise forced the hand of local and federal authorities in regard to his daughter's criminal and psychiatric history..."

Cate's free hand snakes around Whisper, who yowls in protest and leaps off the couch.

"... described as 'clear red flags' by Liu, including four arrests for misdemeanor stalking and two more for aggravated assault in the eighteen months before Ms. Morrison Winter enrolled at Carroll University. Staffers interviewed by Liu describe a lengthy campaign to conceal evidence that the former senator forced the Metairie police department to drop charges against his daughter, in addition to what Liu describes as 'willfully ignoring' psychiatric recommendations. Mr. Morrison Winter, a beloved career politician considered a front-runner in Louisiana's upcoming gubernatorial election, now stands accused of not only interfering in a federal investigation..."

The camera flips away from the journalism school, thank God, and plays a feed of Elise's dad forcing his way through a cluster of cameras. "Please, please," he's saying, and if it wasn't for all he'd done, I'd almost feel sorry for him.

Not the lying, mind you. That part, I get.

THEN

"There are people," Briggs Morrison Winter said, "who would see me stand down for good. Who would say, How can you serve your community, knowing what your daughter has taken away?" He allowed for a beat of silence. "To those people, I say: I know, more than ever, now, who I am. What I can and cannot accomplish. I could not"—and he teared up, an authentic-seeming moment that might have meant something to me in the Before Times—"have predicted that my daughter, my baby girl, the light of my and her mother's lives, would, in her grief, be struck down by psychosis." He was talking about Elise's boyfriend, the one who died in the Atlantic City motel. "That she would do things that remain ... unfathomable." A single tear slid down his craggy face, visible even on my low-definition laptop screen. "What I *can* do is continue my life's work.

Though I will no longer be your senator, I will continue to fight for you. I will continue to make sure that even in the face of mental illness, that darkest of dark places, you and your family will be protected. You will be safe.”

Guns. He meant guns.

Elise’s actions, as it turned out, were the making of him. Politically, I mean. No longer a by-the-book senator—but a *grieving father*. No longer a member of the D.C. elite—but a man *humbly seeking to prevent more suffering*. Briggs never laid it out, of course—that had there been a good guy with a gun at Carroll, most everyone would still be alive—but it was a gut-punch, that latent message: *There is nothing I wouldn’t sacrifice for your safety*. There were polls that showed that Americans felt the gravity of that stance, that Briggs’s politics on gun ownership no longer felt political. After all, he was no longer a politician: in Briggs’ second life, he was an NRA spokesperson, an advisor to a conservative president, a Fox News darling. And there was another message, too, hidden in every monologue about arming teachers and protecting Americans: *Who are you to deny a grieving father his life’s work?*

Michael’s parents tried. They went on CNN, on Steph’s show, on Tucker bloody Carlson. *More guns mean more violence*, they pointed out. *This man is capitalizing on our tragedy, on the murder of our son, to push an agenda that will end more lives*. But it was so ugly, Tucker’s pointed questions, the death threats, the conspiracy theories. They went away, eventually, and the newspapers were free to pick up their gleeful coverage of Elise.

They were fascinated by her. Not just because she was Briggs’s daughter, not just because she was beautiful, but because it’s rare, apparently, for women to go on “killing sprees.” (Which isn’t the phrase I’d have used, and I was *there*, but nobody asked me.) There was endless footage for them to print and play on loop: the on-camera work Elise did as an intern; pictures with her dad at his events; everything on her Facebook page, which lived for days before Briggs’s office got it shut down. Most often, they used a head shot from one of her internships: Elise smiling at the

camera, her head tipped back in a way that felt coquettish: *Don't you want to know what I'm thinking?*

They hardly mentioned Dee. When they did, they pulled phrases from her obituary—*Dhiya Ahluwalia, diligent student, loving daughter*—and tossed them into their articles almost smugly, like they were reminding the reader what *mattered*. Dee, who would never see twenty-seven; Dee, who was the sole nonwhite Ph.D. candidate in her program; Dee, who was never described as anything other than *loyal* and *hardworking*, as though she was a beloved family pet. Before the investigation, before Steph's *setting the record straight*, their excuse for keeping our story alive was always Dee, Dee who *deserved justice*.

Dee deserved to be here. And she wasn't. That, I thought, was all there was to it.

NOW

"Do you think," Cate calls from the bathroom, a few hours later, "it would have made a difference?"

I don't have to ask what she means. "No," I say, just loud enough that she can hear me. Cate likes to talk during what she calls her "nightly soak," her voice bouncing off the tiles of the bathroom, while I'm in my bedroom—Cate's guest room—next door.

"How come?" I hear the sound of water swishing.

I swallow. I'm still getting used to talking about it. "Well, I guess it would have made a difference. With the press. It wouldn't have been, sad hot girl snaps out of nowhere. It would have been..." I think about it. "Dumb white guy ignores all the signs. Gets a bunch of people killed."

Cate chuckles. "You think that would've flown under the radar? Do they not teach history in England?"

I smile in spite of myself. "At least the attention would have been on him. Not us."

"Yeah." *Swish*, goes the water. "I think ... it would have helped me." She sounds thoughtful. "Having somewhere to put my anger. You know?"

"You were angry?" I say before I can catch myself. God, *of course* she was angry. I was just too young and too self-involved to see it.

“Oh, yeah.” Silence, for a moment. “I wasn’t the biggest fan of, you know, myself. Even before. It felt like the ultimate ... comeuppance, I guess? Running my mouth until someone shut me up.” She laughs, but it’s hollow. “I told the story so many times. For AA, you know. It was my turning point, they make you talk about those. And eventually someone said, *Why do you tell it like you were complicit?* But there was nobody else to blame. Nobody alive, anyway.” *Swish*. “Briggs, he would have been a good target.”

I force myself to consider it. “For me ... it wouldn’t have made a difference. How I felt. Knowing I killed people, whatever the reason...” I can’t see Cate’s face. It makes talking about it easier. “Nothing would have helped.” *Nothing will ever help*.

“Well...” The water swishes some more.

“I know. Self-defense. But it was still my fault.” I bite down on the inside of my cheek until I taste blood. “Elise did what she did because Jordan withdrew. Because of me. And the night before, the holiday party, I kissed him because she was watching...” It’s so heavy, even now. “And I ignored you. When you said there was something weird between them. That there was something off about her.” I missed other signs, too: Elise pacing outside my bedroom, trying to track Jordan via GPS; Elise’s ex-boyfriend, mysteriously found dead from an addiction nobody knew about. “I didn’t have to do it. She only killed one person, in the end, have you ever thought about that? Just Michael. I killed two people.”

Silence.

“There’s something else.” I focus on the acidic taste of the blood. “At Champagne and Shackles ... You thought you fell down the stairs and I swear, I thought that, too, all this time, but now I know what I did to Elise, I think I...” I swallow. “Pushed you.”

I hear the sound of water slapping water, a noise as Cate steps out of the tub. There’s a rustling, and then she’s standing there in her bathrobe. Staring at me.

Words zigzag through my head. *I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

“I can leave,” I say instead.

“Oh, babe.” Still standing, she wraps me in her arms. Droplets from her wet hair trickle down my neck. “I fell down those stairs all by myself, you idiot. Do you even remember how much I used to drink? Oh, Charlie.”

I want to sob into her thick, damp robe like a child, but I can’t. She needs to understand. “I know you don’t want to think I’d hurt you, but I did the same thing to Elise, the *exact* same—”

“Shh, shh.” Cate can’t be listening, because she’s still stroking my hair. “You remember it?” she asks suddenly. “Pushing Elise?”

“Yeah.” I *will not* cry. Cate is the victim here, not me. “It’s all kind of a blur, but I ... I know what happened.” There was nobody else who could have opened that window. Nobody else who could have killed her. Besides, her last words: *Don’t, Charlie, please ...*

“Nine years,” Cate says, her voice astonished.

“I know.”

“Listen to me, Charlie.” She pulls back. “You didn’t kill them. Elise and Dee. You didn’t.”

I duck my head. “I know. Self-defense. I get it. It’s just—”

“No. You did not push Elise.” Her voice is as clear as a bell. “Steph did.”

★ ★ ★

At first, Cate thought she must have dreamed it. The police had told her Elise had jumped, that I’d seen her do it. She remembered a flicker, an image—Steph kneeling, her hand on the latch—but Cate had lost so much blood, and everyone kept saying Elise had leapt to her death: Cate’s family, the press, the police, even me.

Years passed. Cate didn’t think about it all that much. She’d had so many weird dreams in the hospital, they blurred together. The image, that moment, it all but disappeared.

That is, until Steph started talking about the movie.

At first Cate couldn’t figure it out, why Steph suddenly wanted to turn the worst day of their life into a full-blown circus. Steph had never shown much interest in talking about it, not just to Cate, but to anyone: a couple of interviews with Aaron, a brief mention on the show, that was it. But now

she wouldn't stop rambling about *setting the record straight*, and she had this shiny, slightly crazed look in her eyes. Cate wondered if she was self-medicating, Adderall or something.

Then the notes from the studio came in. *We love it*, they said, *but we can't show her jumping*. They were nervous about dramatizing a suicide: it would bump up the rating to R, potentially require a trigger warning.

Steph said, We're not cutting it.

The studio pushed back. *We'll get backlash*, they said. *Suicide contagion, impressionable youth. Not that the impressionable youth will see it, not if it's saddled with an R rating*.

Steph threatened to find another studio.

Compromises were offered. *What if the camera panned away from her at the right moment? What if the open window is the final shot? What if we, what if—*

Steph said, Either we show her jumping, no bullshit, no workarounds, or I find a studio that's on board with my vision.

Cate couldn't figure it out. It wasn't like Steph, to be pedantic about a detail. She was precise, sure, demanding, definitely, but she was a problem solver, a pragmatist, always had been. The studio she was working with was the best and the biggest in the game. That was why Steph had courted them in the first place. If they passed on the project, the other big studios would get skittish. Steph *knew* this.

It nagged at Cate. She knew her sister. Something was off.

Cate was friendly with Aaron, had been since he interviewed her for the book. It was the only interview she ever did, and she'd liked how the book came out. She trusted him. *It's just one of Steph's things*, Aaron said when Cate asked. *She kept asking about how I'd write about Elise's death, wanted to read that chapter the second it was done. God, she had so many notes*.

That's when Cate thought back to that night. Remembered the flicker. Steph on the floor, fiddling with the latch.

But I had told the police I had seen Elise jump.

Unless ... I'd lied for Steph.

But Steph and I weren't even friends.

Cate brought takeout to Steph's apartment. *I have this weird memory about that night*, she told her sister.

You lost a lot of blood, Steph said.

I remember you unlocking the window.

Unlocking the window?

Yeah.

Steph didn't say anything, just got up and began putting away the leftovers, and that's when Cate knew.

You pushed her?

Staring into her fridge, Steph paused. *Yes*, she said.

Why?

What do you mean, why? She tried to kill you. I thought you were dead.

But Charlie said she jumped.

Charlie wasn't even conscious. When I got there, all of you were passed out.

It took Cate a while to process it. She couldn't tell anyone, not even her therapist, and that was how Cate worked through things, by talking them out. But she thought a lot about something that had happened years ago, back in high school. At fifteen, Cate had gotten popular overnight, when she'd grown breasts and faked confidence and left behind the quiet, plain girls she'd been friends with since middle school—not *outcasts*, exactly, but definitely not popular. Her old friends spread rumors: Cate handed out blow jobs like candy, Cate had had four different STIs. The popular girls gave her the cold shoulder. When three of Cate's old friends were roofied at a sweet sixteenth, one so badly she had to have her stomach pumped, they swore Cate was to blame.

Cate wasn't. But she knew who was. She'd borrowed one of Steph's clutches, and in it she'd found two empty vials. Steph had seen her cry every day after school for months. Steph had never comforted her, not once. She'd seemed pleased to be rid of Cate's noisy friends and their endless chatter. Still, Steph had found a way to get even.

When Cate asked her about the pod, Steph answered honestly. *Yeah, it sucked, that Dee was there. But that wasn't my fault.*

She said, *No, Charlie didn't know shit. Like, she was unconscious. Elise even called for help, like, Charlie, please and don't—that was the last thing she said, Charlie, please, yelling Charlie's name—but Charlie didn't move. But I yelled at her when she came to: Elise jumped. Elise jumped from the window. She parroted that to the cops.*

She said, *I was hoping she would leave town, go back to London or whatever. I didn't want her involved. Didn't trust her. Didn't want her feeling guilty and saying, Hey, I lied. So I tipped off a couple of reporters so they'd hound her, had a friend at Vanity Fair fuck with her head a little. But it didn't work. She flipped out, came to my office and threatened me. It was weird, how freaked she was. Secretive. Then I thought, I can use this.*

She said, *Of course I feel bad, Cate. But I didn't start any of this shit, Elise did.*

The funny thing was, it hadn't changed Cate's relationship with her sister. It hadn't brought them closer, exactly, but it hadn't driven a wedge between them, either.

You'd do it for me, Steph joked.

THEN

There was an understanding that once everything started up again, the press would go away. But as we went into mid-February—a month that was cold in a way I didn't expect, the kind of biting cold that felt personal—they were worse than ever. The state attorney's investigation dragged on and every day there was a new headline: *Panel Establishes Timeline for Scarlet Christmas. New Theory About Motive of Morrison Winter's Daughter. Carroll University Denies Ignoring Signs.* And on. And on.

You don't have to be a journalist to know that the big question mark—the *why would a pretty, promising young woman do this?*—hangs over a case like this until someone figures it out. But even when the state attorney's investigation came out with its “determination of the events of December 24,” there were no answers: *grief-induced psychosis*, they theorized; *the interaction of prescription medications and illegal drugs*; *undiagnosed mental illness.* (No shit.) They didn't name Jordan, per his

request, so the report was followed by even more speculation about her motive, her target. Was it Cate? Me? Someone who wasn't even there?

I was furious at them. I was furious at Carroll, for thinking we could all just slip back into our lives. But most of all, I was furious with Cate, with Jordan, with myself. I started to think that there was no shaking it. That I'd be saddled with this anger, this burning in my chest, for as long as I was stuck there, with them.

What I did next, I did very carefully.

First, I applied for internships. I didn't shy away from using my name, from talking about what had happened; I knew it'd pique their attention. It was way past the deadline that Carroll allowed for internships, but I had a feeling I was exempt from all of Carroll's rules by that point. I got four interviews and two offers, and I accepted a six-month internship at *The Chronicle*, a newspaper I didn't know much about but people discussed with reverence.

Then I went to see the dean. I'd been too busy daydreaming about Jordan to listen in law class, but everyone knows American institutions are terrified of being sued. I didn't say anything about suing, of course. But I did say that I didn't feel comfortable on campus, that I wanted to finish out the year remotely, and that it was critical for my mental health that I be given allowances to do that, after all I'd been through on Carroll grounds.

The dean agreed, of course. On the spot.

I meant to ask for some of my tuition back, but I didn't. I wasn't that ballsy. But I did have enough biscuit money left to put down a deposit on a room in a four-bedroom apartment in Williamsburg, which I picked because it was on a whole different island but I could still get the subway to *The Chronicle*. The three girls who lived there were in grad school as well, and I braced myself to have to charm them—I was never *charming*-charming, but I suspected that by now I was downright surly—but they were so captivated by my accent that they offered me the room on my first visit. The school found a girl to take my dorm, a part-time Carroll student who wanted to move in the next week.

Cate was spending spring break at the treatment facility, where she'd gone silent again. (Actually, she might have mentioned they didn't allow

phones. I wasn't really listening.) I didn't leave her a note. I knew I should, and I did mean to, but I didn't know what to say. *I've left. I'm trying to move on. Please don't stay in touch.* In the end, I just packed up and left. Plenty of people on our floor saw me go. They would tell her, I knew.

The last piece was Jordan.

I had to do it in person. I couldn't reach Cate, even if I wanted to, but Jordan was just a five-minute walk away. And he was my boyfriend. And he'd been through so much. There was just no way I could, I don't know, send a text. *Hi. Please consider this notice of our breakup. It's not you, it's me. P.S. Don't come to my dorm, you'll scare the new girl.*

I asked him to meet me at a coffee shop by campus. He didn't seem too thrown by that, so I assumed he knew what was coming.

He didn't.

It was confusing. I realized that. No, I wasn't dropping out; yes, I was moving out. No, I wasn't moving back to England; yes, I was still taking classes. No, I wouldn't be *in* class. I kept trying to redirect the conversation back to Us, to get it over with, but Jordan kept asking questions. "When did you apply for internships?" "Where are you going to live?" "Are you, like ... sure?"

"I'm sure," I told him.

I was, actually. Which was funny, because I'd never been a decisive person. I moved to America on a whim, for God's sake, and only then because my parents wouldn't let me change my mind. But about this, I was certain—not that it was the right thing to do, but that it was the only thing. I couldn't picture myself being there another three months, or even three more days. The story was already written, the decision made for me. There was no point questioning it.

"And what about us, Charlie?" he said. "You and me, I mean?"

This was it, the moment I'd been dreading, and all I felt was relief. Because it was the last piece, the last tie to the Before Times, and once it happened, I'd be free. No more rage. No more pain. No more sitting with him in silence, wishing things had gone differently.

"I think that maybe this is it for us," I said.

Jordan leaned back in his chair and stared up at the fluorescent light fixture.

“You’re breaking up with me,” he said.

“Yes.”

He digested this. There was a nugget of sorrow now, lodged deep in my chest. But for the most part, I was relieved.

“Charlie ... I love you,” he said, still staring at the ceiling. “But you know that, don’t you?”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d done it, it was over. I just wanted to go.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He nodded. He didn’t look at me.

“I’m going to go,” I told him.

“Got it, got it.” He ducked his head. Then he looked up at me. His eyes were shiny. I felt a powerful urge to run away, just get out, just go.

“I hope you ... I hope things go okay,” he said. “And you can always call me. If you want.”

I wished he’d been unkind. It would have been easier.

“You, too,” I said awkwardly. “Bye, Jordan.”

* * *

I didn’t miss them. Not at all.

I know what you’re thinking. He was my boyfriend. I loved him. She was ... Cate. I left them behind, right when they needed me most, and I didn’t even *miss* them?

Well, wait for it. I was relieved. So relieved I felt high from it. It was like drinking water when you’re dizzy with thirst, like a warm blanket when you’re freezing.

Later, when I told people that I worked a round-the-clock internship while finishing up my master’s—watching taped lectures at nights, working on assignments until one or two in the morning, setting my alarm for six—they took it as evidence of my ambition. But they got the order wrong. I didn’t do it because I was ambitious. I was ambitious because I knew that if I stopped propelling myself forward, even for a moment, I would have to go back. To school. To what I did. To all of it.

In hindsight, that's where it all started.

That winter felt endless. Later, I'd learn that's true of every winter in New York. Summers, too. They feel infinite, so much so that you can't imagine you'll ever step outside and it won't be blistering cold or warm-breath humid. They go on too long for you to wait it out. You have to forget the weather was ever anything else. It's the only way to get through it.

But that first winter, I wasn't expecting it. In London, it starts to get warmer in February and March. In New York, it just gets more brutal. It must have snowed thirteen times that winter, and for days afterwards it was nearly impossible to walk. I was sure I was risking my life every time I climbed down those icy subway steps. At night, I wore two sweaters under my duvet because my roommates wanted to keep the electric bill down.

It added to the feeling that crystallized inside of me that winter, the idea that all of it was just something to *get through*.

One day in April—*late* April, I should add, when in London it's practically summer—the sun came out. I was walking to work when I felt it. It was the worst period of my life, but I still remember that moment. Feeling warm again. It was simple. It was glorious.

I thought: I like that about New York. It pushes you to your very edge, and then it embraces you. I liked the idea that I was living in a city of fellow survivalists.

I finished my master's that May. I didn't go to graduation.

I got used to it. Getting up every day, and washing my face, and making breakfast, and on and on and on, all the time feeling like I was a weighted marionette and somehow, also, the person tugging up the strings. Work helped. When I was working, I didn't have to fake anything, and the more successful I became, the easier it was to hide behind.

When I met Tripp, when he told me that first night at the town house that he hadn't felt like this since his girlfriend passed, I thought: *I can't do this*. I thought: *I'm too ambitious*. I thought: *Yeah, sure, Charlie, that's why*. I took the drink he offered me, and I tried to decide what to do.

He was so handsome, and driven, and careful.

But something was missing. We hit stilted patches in conversation, found each other hard to read. We didn't walk in step, smile knowingly,

laugh at the same jokes. Our connection wasn't natural, instinctual, like I'd thought a relationship needed to be.

Like it had been with Jordan.

It struck me as childish, suddenly. To have thought I needed a soul mate, rather than a teammate. (*Teammate*—Tripp loved that word, used it even then.) Tripp believed in building love, not falling headfirst into it. Tripp had asked questions about me and listened carefully to my answers, and then Tripp had chosen me—me as I was, me as I'd become, not an amalgamation of the selves nesting inside of me like Russian dolls.

There was something romantic, I decided, romantic and satisfyingly adult, about choosing a partner, choosing a life, working those things into being, rather than falling down a rabbit hole to God knows where. It reminded me, comfortingly, of my job, of the gratification and contentment—more than I deserved—I'd found there.

It reminded me that I was in control.

“You've become special to me, too,” I said.

I might as well have said “I do” then and there.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

All right. There's no need to panic. Yes, the cake appears to be melting, and yes, there's ice cream on my shirt, and yes, I'm a little nervous, but that's normal. That's to be expected. At least I have the—

Wait. Where is the *gift*?

“Jackson!” I yell.

Silence. Which is never a good sign.

“*Jackson!*”

Jackson pitter-patters into the kitchen and plops down at my feet. Which would be cute if he didn't still have a sliver of wrapping paper hanging out of his mouth.

“Jackson, no!” I race into the bedroom, where the gift, a bracelet, is lying on the floor. Still intact, thank God, but I can't say as much for the box, the wrapping paper, the card ...“Jackson,” I groan, bending down to pick it up.

He nudges my elbow with his nose as if to say, *I didn't mean it, Mom.*

“I know, angel. I know.” It's my fault; I know not to leave anything where Jackson can find it. “You're still high on being free, aren't you?” I reach over to rub behind his ears, the way he likes. Jackson's “freedom ride” home from the shelter was almost a year ago, but if he isn't still riding that buzz, my dog is an anarchist.

“*Charlie!*”

Jackson leaps up at the familiar sound of hammering on glass.

“Charlie! Let me in!”

I’ve *told* her to stop coming down the fire escape. In an effort not to encourage her behavior—she has a key, for God’s sake, and she can go down the stairs inside the building—I stay exactly where I am, except I have to hold back Jackson, who’s whining for his aunt.

“Jackson! I hear you, Jackson! Where’s my *favorite boy*?”

Jackson wriggles out of my grasp and races to the kitchen. Reluctantly, I follow him and slide up the window so she can climb in. “I’m not going to open it next time,” I warn her. “I’m going to leave you out there. I swear.”

Cate is too busy fussing over Jackson to respond. “Hello, my handsome boy! Did you get *more* handsome since this morning? Oh, I think you did —”

Shit. The cake. I slide in front of the kitchen island so she can’t see it.

“I saw it from the window,” Cate says, her eyes never leaving Jackson. “Did your *mom* get the wrong *cake*, baby? Yes, she did! Yes, she did—”

“You like ice cream cake!” I say defensively.

“Sure I do. But not when it’s melted?”

“It isn’t *melted*...”

The problem is, the ice cream cake—which I did not, in fact, mean to get; I should have read the description on the website more closely, but Jackson was whining to go out—is too big for my freezer. “We’ll cut it in half,” I say firmly. “Then it can go in the freezer. People will still eat it.”

“Whatever you say, dude.” Cate gets up and pulls out a knife from the rack. The sight of it makes my insides curdle, just for a second, but I focus on Jackson instead, who is holding out a paw to me in an effort to obtain cake. “This is just for you and me, though,” she says as she cuts it into oozing pieces. “’Cause Gunnar is bringing another. I just texted him.”

“Oh.” I’m torn between relief and annoyance.

“We’ll eat this when you’re hungover tomorrow,” Cate says.

“I will not be hungover,” I say loftily. (I mean it this time. There’s nothing more annoying than hearing Cate, who just celebrated five years sober, get up at eight A.M. to do goddamn *sunrise yoga* when I’m hungover.)

“Mm-hmm.” She looks at me. “You gonna be okay tonight?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“You just say the word, we come right back down here.”

“I know.”

Jackson lets out a howl in protest of not being given cake. “It’s not your birthday,” Cate tells him firmly. “On your birthday, you get cake. You know that.”

(This is true. On Jackson’s third birthday, his first with me and his aunt-slash-godmother, we put Whisper in a party hat and made him a peanut butter cake. He threw up afterwards, but I got the sense he thought it was worth it.)

“Well, I’ll let you take care of ... this.” Cate gestures at the carnage that was the cake, now eight blocks of rapidly melting ice cream. “Come up in, like, ten? I want to make sure Jackson’s bow tie fits him right before people get here.”

“Okay.”

She taps my nose with an ice cream-covered finger. “You got this. Okay?”

I wipe it off. “I know. Go back up.”

★ ★ ★

I live in the apartment below Cate now, the second floor of a brownstone in Cobble Hill. I moved out of Tripp’s the January before last, a horrible, gray time I don’t like to think about. You’d think I’d be relieved, knowing the truth, but I wasn’t. It was like waking up to a world that spoke a different language, like looking in the mirror and seeing someone else’s face. I’d built a life on the foundation of what I thought had happened. The moment Cate told me about Steph, it crumbled. I crumbled.

Cate got me to the facility she’d stayed at after Scarlet Christmas. I was there for three weeks. By the time I left, I still didn’t know much about *who Charlie was*—that’s what they kept saying in the facility, eagerly: *We need to find out who Charlie is now*—but I knew it wasn’t right with Tripp. I wasn’t what he wanted, even though I’d let him think otherwise. And, like I said, I had no idea what I wanted. He deserved better.

I still think it was the worst thing I've ever done. Not breaking up with Tripp—which was horrible, worse than with Jordan, uniquely and horribly horrible—but wasting all those years of his life, then crushing him in an impossible to explain way that, oh yes, made *The New York Times* (*Publishing Magnate and Editor in Chief Call Off Wedding*). My therapist from the facility, Gina, says that I need to remember that I wasn't well, that I was doing the best I could, but I fire back that *Elise* was sick and *Elise* still deserves to be held accountable and so should I, that shattering people isn't something you can justify.

And Tripp put up quite the fight. It's the Goodman West way: if you want something, work for it, and it shalt come. For months he believed I could be talked out of it, that with enough flowers and letters and soul-baring walks in Central Park I could be won over once again, even though Jude and I and everyone else told him I was a lost cause. "You thought you didn't want *us* when we first met, too," he kept saying. "I could tell. I just had to be patient."

I never even told him I didn't kill Dee. There was no point. He forgave me anyway, lumped our lies together and promised to "put it all behind us." It half killed me, his steadfast belief that if he just behaved as he *should*, if he forgave and was patient and stayed the course, we would be okay. I didn't just decimate his heart, I decimated his worldview. And I knew what that felt like.

I stayed in Cate's guest room for three months. Then the couple in the apartment below hers moved out and it was almost a given, that I would live there. If for no other reason, to show Tripp that it was really over. My new apartment was small and bright and I crammed it with things that made me feel like myself—photos of my family, an old-fashioned typewriter, weird lamps I found at flea markets—but it was still too quiet, like something was missing. I told myself sternly it wasn't a man, that I was a better feminist than that.

One evening, I was on the phone to Felicity, and she asked if she should throw away her bridesmaid dress. I started to cry—it's annoying, the crying; I can't seem to stop—and she said in alarm, "Don't cry, don't cry!"

I sniffed. “I’m sorry, angel.” We speak every day now, Felicity and I, but usually just about her new dog, Six, and Cate. (Felicity *loves* Cate. They got so close during her last visit that Cate calls Felicity her “bonus sister,” which makes Felicity squeal with delight.)

There was a pause. “When I cry,” Felicity said finally, “the thing that makes me feel good again is Five ... or Six. You should get a dog.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Definitely,” Felicity said with conviction.

I told Cate, because, well, I didn’t think *that* through, and every Sunday for four weeks she took me for a “drive” that ended in a pit stop at an animal shelter. It was horrible, like being forced to play God. I cried when I saw the rows and rows of dogs in cages, all of them howling pitifully as we walked past, and I kept marching Cate out and demanding she drive us home. But on the fifth Sunday, she took us to an outdoor adoption event that didn’t break my heart—the dogs looked sad and thin, but at least they were playing outside—and I spotted this skinny brown dog with floppy ears and a teeny-tiny mohawk. He was standing huffily off to the side.

“Who’s that?” I asked one of the volunteers.

“Oh, *this* guy!” The woman picked up the dog, who grumbled in response, and held him out to me. I took him gingerly, like you might hold a toilet brush. “We think he’s about two. He was left in a box at the side of the road. People are so awful, don’t you think?”

The brown dog was filthy and smelled terrible. But he rested his little head with its muddy mohawk against my arm and let out a long sigh, like he was sick and tired of just about *everything*, and I fell in love. We took him home that same day and gave him a long, sudsy bath, which he still hasn’t forgiven either of us for.

It had been years since I’d thought of myself as a dog person. And Jackson probably wasn’t much of a human person, after all he’d been through. But we’ve taught each other a lot. For example, Jackson has taught me about the healing powers of long walks, frequent treats, and drinking plenty of water. I’ve taught Jackson not to chase squirrels. (Well. We’re working on it.)

It was because of Jackson that I had the Conversation with Walter. It just wasn't working, being back at C. The long nights, the round-the-clock emails, the endless copy to approve—it drained me more than it used to, or maybe I just noticed it more. (It didn't help that I was down an assistant, having had to fire Julie when it turned out she was giving Renée and anyone who would listen “anonymous” quotes.) Gina and I had been talking it out on our weekly FaceTime sessions, but adopting Jackson made up my mind: I couldn't take care of him and keep working like that. (I couldn't take care of myself, either, as Gina pointed out approximately one million times. But I like to think of it as Jackson's doing.)

I went into Walter's office with a whole speech prepared. *While I've loved my time at C, I think the time has come*—and Walter cut me off. You know when they say people turn white? I'd never seen it until that moment. Literally, all the color emptied out from Walter's face, and he jumped in with, “Charlotte, I'm sure we can work something out—”

“With all respect, Walter,” I said, “I don't think we can.”

It was that that did it, I think. He saw I wasn't bluffing. The poor guy nearly tripped over himself trying to offer me things, things I never imagined they'd give me. More money. (No, thank you.) Another assistant. (Thank you, but no.) Two assistants! (I appreciate it, but.)

“Charlotte,” Walter said—and I might have imagined it, but he looked like he was hyperventilating—“what is it that needs to change?”

“I need a better work-life balance,” I said truthfully, “and I don't think that in this job—”

“I promise you, Charlotte,” he barked, “we will get you that.”

I thought he was full of shit, as usual. But we made a list of all the things I had to get done in my day, all of the reasons I could never just up and leave at five P.M., and Walter found solutions. We'd hire a new director to oversee copy. Redirect the advertisers and their emails to the sales team. Get an executive assistant to better manage my time. (He did walk back the two assistants thing, but I let him have that.)

It didn't get easier overnight. For a start, I had to hire and train all those new people, which was even *more* work. (I still feel guilty about my period of absentee parenting. But Cate says Jackson slept for most of it, like he

was making up for lost time.) Still, after a while, I could leave work earlier. And earlier. Then I instituted work-from-home Fridays, mostly because I wanted to stay on the couch with Jackson and a cup of tea. Now, most days, I leave for work after Cate does and I'm here when she gets home, which she's *thrilled* by—

Bam. Bam. Bam. The ceiling rattles three times. It sounds like a natural disaster, but I've lived here long enough to know it's Cate's way of saying: Get up here. Tonight is her thirty-fifth birthday party.

"I'm *coming!*" I pick up Jackson, who insists on being carried like a baby even though he's fifteen pounds heavier than when I adopted him. (The vet says he's "at risk of losing definition in his waist" if I keep feeding him his favorite treat, tender chicken soaked in bone broth, which I think is a bit mean.)

"It's going to be fine, buddy," I say.

He licks my face in solidarity.

* * *

Tonight isn't the first time I've seen people from Carroll. Gunnar and his husband John are over all the time with their one-year-old twins, Eve and Blair, and Steph and I spent all that time together last year. There's no reason to be nervous, I tell myself as I fill my wineglass more than is strictly necessary.

"Hey, you." It's John. He pulls me into a bear hug. "Ready for this?"

I used to think making friends in your thirties was a myth. And it's true that John is Gunnar's husband and therefore an automatic friend—but even if he wasn't, I like to think John and I would still be as close as we are. Cate and Gunnar joke that we're trying to make them jealous, but John is one of the best surprises of the last couple of years. He's the only person, aside from Gina, that I can tell anything to, anything at all, and he won't flinch.

"I think so," I mumble. "I haven't decided yet."

"Jackson looks great," John says approvingly. (Jackson *does* look great in his bow tie. I'm biased, but there is nothing cuter than my dog in formal wear.)

“He does.” I look around the room. It amazes me, how many people from Carroll Cate stayed in touch with. I can see Riley and Salvatore and a couple others whose names I can’t remember, plus of course Steph and—God help me—Zach. (On the bright side, time has not been kind to Zach’s hairline.)

John follows my gaze. “You said hi to any of them yet?”

“Not exactly.”

He nods and doesn’t say anything.

“All *right*.” I take another gulp of wine. “I’m going.”

“Atta girl.” His eyes crinkle at the corners. “I’ll be right here.”

I go to Steph first, kiss her on the cheek. “Hi,” I say. “How are you?”

Steph and I have reached a fragile peace. We had to, during that weird period when we were trying to figure out what to do about the movie. “Yes, *we*,” Cate said bossily. We were in Cate’s apartment for most of it, Steph and I glaring at each other across the kitchen island. “*We* have had enough secrets. *We* are going to figure out what we’re going to *do*.”

I wanted Steph to call off the film. Even if I barely came up, even if there was nothing a Reddit board could uncover, I didn’t want my family to have to deal with the spotlight any longer. Steph kept repeating that that was *not* going to work, that the narrative needed to be that Elise jumped and the public needed to have *not a shadow of a doubt*, and your family will be *just fine*, Charlie.

To which I said, I can go to the police at any time, you know that, right?

To which Steph said, But you’re not going to, because you’d have to tell them you lied. And who would believe you, after all the time you spent making shit up?

Cate jumped in at that point. One of her newfound talents is calming down heated situations, which is part of why she started her own PR agency. She says it’s one of the ways she dealt with what happened at Carroll. “Neither of you are going to the police,” she said. “Let’s go back to what we’re going to *do*.”

I admitted, grudgingly, that the film would be hard to shut down at this stage. Steph admitted, even more grudgingly, that my family and I had been

through a lot already (“even though I didn’t *know* you thought you *killed* her, like, what sort of main character bullshit is that? You were *unconscious!*”). It took weeks and several more meetings in Cate’s apartment, but we agreed on a compromise: My role in the film would be almost completely cut, reducing me to a side character with very little to do. Any outlet that approached my family would have no access to interviews or previews. The film would come out on the tenth anniversary, as planned. Fifteen percent of the proceeds would go to a charity chosen by Dee’s dad.

“I’m sorry you thought you did it,” Steph said grumpily before she left.

(I didn’t say, *I’m sorry I showed up at your building with freshly baked muffins in an effort to poison you*, because why ruin a good thing.)

Now, after wishing Steph a happy birthday, I move on to Zach and Riley and the others. A decade ago, when I first met these people, I was bumbling and awkward. A few years ago, I’d have told myself that I was more successful than any of them, so why should I be nervous? But now I’m figuring it out from scratch, how to talk to people. Not in the icy way that had become my default, not with the openness and naïveté of my twenty-three-year-old self. I still don’t know what the middle ground is. Probably still quite awkward.

But I try. I do. I chat with them about what they’ve been up to, ask the right questions, coo appropriately at the rings. They ask about *C* and my fiancé and I try to answer honestly: *Work is fine. It can get overwhelming. No, we broke up, actually. Last year. Thanks, it was hard.*

“Thing is, Charlie, I think Goodman West would be a great fit for me, something in corporate,” is Zach’s response. Zach was put on this earth to test me. “D’you think you could put in a good word for me? I dunno if I’ve told you what I’m doing now, but...”

He has. Twice.

“Probably not,” I tell him. “We don’t really talk.”

(Tripp’s exact words: *I really don’t want to be friends, at all, ever, Charlie, but thanks.*)

Zach scratches his face. “Huh. Well, did you know anyone in HR there?”

John swoops in and wraps an arm around me. “Want to grab a smoke?” he asks. (He’s never smoked a cigarette in his life. I love him so much.)

“Oh, sure, that sounds good.” I smile at Zach. “Excuse me.” As John steers me away, I whisper, “Did I even *tell* you about that guy?”

“Cate did,” John mutters. “He got, like, obsessed with Steph back in the day, right?”

“That’s the one.”

We slide open the window and climb out. Cate’s fire escape is a carbon copy of mine below it: tiny and dotted by succulents, with a great view of the city. “Should I pretend to smoke?” John jokes.

“No,” I rest my head on his shoulder. “Then other people will join us.”

He rubs my back. “You’re doing great, you know.”

“Thanks.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a moment. The Manhattan skyline stretches out in front of us, its lights flickering. “Who’s with the twins?” I ask.

“My mom. Shut up. We’re having a moment.”

“*Guys.*” Cate pops her head out of the window. “You can’t *hide* out here—”

“We’re smoking,” John says. “Allegedly.”

“The Carroll people are a lot!” I say defensively.

“Tell me about it,” a voice says from behind Cate.

I freeze.

“Jordan!” Cate squeals. “You *came!*”

Oh my God.

“I was outside for, like, twenty minutes,” Jordan says. “You know your buzzer isn’t working, right?”

(Charlie, you knew he might be here. You braced yourself for this.)

“Oh, shit.” Cate turns on her heel and starts pushing through the throng of people.

(Well, I guess I didn’t do a very good *job*, did I?)

“Hello, Jordan,” John says cheerfully. He shakes off my hand—I didn’t realize it, but my nails are digging into his forearm—and gets to his feet. “I’m John. I should go help her with that.”

I know I should say something, but I can't.

Jordan moves aside to let John climb in. I make out, "Do you want to..." at the same time that he says, "Is it okay if I...?"

"Sure," I say, at the same time that he says, "Totally."

"It's good to see you," Jordan says as he sits down.

I twist my head slightly to look at him. It reminds me of that reverse déjà vu feeling I used to dread so much, when you know you've been somewhere but nothing is familiar. His hair is different, his clothes are different, but his profile is the same as when I used to wake up in the night in that poky dorm and look over at him.

"I wa-wanted to apologize," he says.

It takes me a moment. "You wanted to apologize? For what? I was the worst. I fucked everything up."

He smiles. It breaks the ice a bit. "You were doing the best you could."

Do not cry, Charlie.

"That email I sent you," he continues. "It was ... curt."

"It was fine." (It was a little curt.)

"You were so ... not curt. In your email. So ... disarming, you know? Like you always were." He dips his head low for a moment, a gesture I remember. "It brought some stuff back."

It takes me a moment to realize what he's referring to. Oh, yes. The email I sent him from the facility last year, my own personal version of a twelve-step program's "making amends": *I should have been honest with you. I convinced myself you were furious with me, probably because I was so angry with myself...*

"You were nice," I say. "It was a nice email."

(That's what I kept telling myself. *All things considered, he was nice.*)

"I was trying to be nice. But it was hard. To remember it." He shakes his head. "You were right. I was angry back then, too. More than angry. I was ... I *hated* myself. For not protecting you and the others. For not *saying* something about ... that girl." His breath catches. "I—"

"You don't have to," I say in a rush. "It's okay—"

"Hey, no, listen to me. I'm sorry. You said you were sorry, in your email, but I didn't say it back. But I am. Sorry, I mean. About ... about

everything.”

I don't say anything, mostly because I'm trying not to cry.

“Your fiancé seems nice,” he says uncomfortably. “Congratulations. It sounds weird, I know, but—”

“Sorry?”

“Okay, yeah. That was weird. Sorry.”

I'm lost. “My fiancé?”

“The tall guy. He seems nice.” He nods towards the party. “Anyway...”

I snort. I don't mean to; it just comes out. “John is Gunnar's husband.”

“Oh.”

“I don't have a fiancé.” (Like he said, it's already weird.) “I mean, I did. But we broke up.”

“Oh. Right.”

We sit in silence for a moment.

“Cool succulent,” Jordan says, picking up Cate's little jade plant. “Really ... green.”

I hold back a giggle. “Green?”

He's laughing now, too. “Look, this is ... It's weird, all right?”

“I can't believe you're still such an idiot.” It feels good to laugh, to release the tension curled up in me like a spring.

“You're an idiot.” He's still laughing. “Here I am, trying to apologize...”

“Which is so bloody *stupid*...”

He bumps my shoulder with his. “We're all right, Colbert. You and me. Okay?”

“Okay.”

After another pause, he says, “I should go inside.”

I can't help it. The disappointment, dragging me down like a stone. “Yeah. Totally. Thanks for ... the chat. I'm glad ... I'm glad we talked.”

He gets up. “You know, if you ever want to...”

I wait, my heart pounding.

“I don't know, go for a walk or something.” He gestures to the jade plant. “Go to a ... plant nursery and talk about how *green* they are. Just text

me. Cate has my number.” He swings his legs over the window. “See you. Okay? Okay.” He waves awkwardly, and then he disappears into the crowd.

I should get up. Go back to the party.

Instead, I sit on the fire escape, my arms wrapped around my legs, and I let it wash over me: the thrill, the rush of fear, all of it.

“Okay,” I whisper.

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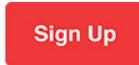
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