



SO CI ET Y

OF L I E S

A NOVEL

Lauren Ling Brown

Society_{of} Lies

A N O V E L

Lauren Ling Brown



Bantam • New York

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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter One: Maya](#)

[Chapter Two: Maya](#)

[Chapter Three: Naomi](#)

[Chapter Four: Maya](#)

[Chapter Five: Maya](#)

[Chapter Six: Naomi](#)

[Chapter Seven: Maya](#)

[Chapter Eight: Maya](#)

[Chapter Nine: Naomi](#)

[Chapter Ten: Maya](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Maya](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Naomi](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Maya](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Naomi](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Maya](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: Naomi](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: Maya](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Maya](#)

Part Two

Chapter Nineteen: Maya

Chapter Twenty: Naomi

Chapter Twenty-One: Maya

Chapter Twenty-Two: Naomi

Chapter Twenty-Three: Maya

Chapter Twenty-Four: Maya

Chapter Twenty-Five: Naomi

Chapter Twenty-Six: Maya

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Naomi

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Maya

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Naomi

Chapter Thirty: Maya

Chapter Thirty-One: Naomi

Chapter Thirty-Two: Maya

Part Three

Chapter Thirty-Three: Maya

Chapter Thirty-Four: Maya

Chapter Thirty-Five: Naomi

Chapter Thirty-Six: Maya

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Naomi

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Maya

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Maya

Chapter Forty: Naomi

Chapter Forty-One: Maya

Chapter Forty-Two: Naomi

Chapter Forty-Three: Maya

[Chapter Forty-Four: Maya](#)
[Chapter Forty-Five: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Forty-Six: Maya](#)
[Chapter Forty-Seven: Maya](#)
[Chapter Forty-Eight: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Forty-Nine: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty-One: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Two: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Three: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Four: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Five: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Six: Naomi](#)

[Part Four](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Seven: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Eight: Maya](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Nine: Maya](#)
[Chapter Sixty: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Sixty-One: Maya](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Two: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Three: Maya](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Four: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Five: Maya](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Six: Naomi](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Seven: Maya](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Eight: Maya](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Nine: Maya](#)

[Author's Note](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[About the Author](#)

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To my family

There is a powerful fascination of belonging to an organization [designed for] literary recreation, glorious friendships, high social culture, and manly honor, as well as mutual help and good fellowship through after years.

—An anonymous alumnus's response to Princeton University's ban on societies, *New-York Tribune*, January 22, 1876

Human nature being what it is, it is inevitable that secret societies should be used for evil purposes.

—Trustee Reverend Charles Hodge, Class of 1819, *New-York Tribune*, January 6, 1876

Princeton's first eating club was founded in 1879.

Prologue

SURROUNDED BY WILD LOOKS AND shuddering bodies, I dance. Everything is elevated, intense, like none of us want this night to end. The air hangs thick as smoke, floors sticky with champagne as heads tip back and arms rise overhead. To my right, strobe lights flash against nineteenth-century doors, their glass panes fogged over. A handprint drips down the glass as a guy presses his date against a wall, her legs wrapped around his waist as they kiss. The place feels charged with electricity, excitement, maybe even fear... if they've been paying attention.

Tonight is the night I've waited for my entire life—our initiation into Sterling Club, Princeton's most prestigious eating club. It's not just a place to have fun, it's also a golden escalator to our future. Once inside, we're bound by our secrets...and that creates a deep bond. It feels dangerous, cultlike, but isn't fun always a little bit reckless?

Pulling my bra strap back up my shoulder, I step onto the patio and into the cool night air. Tonight feels endless, as if nothing matters but this moment, this feeling of belonging to something greater than myself. It's exactly what I need right now, after everything that's happened.

Standing very still, I gaze up at the mansion, which, with its ivied brick and rows of glossy windows, seems to be staring back at me. I shiver. It feels alive, this place. Underneath the shouts and laughter, there's something dark lingering in the shadows—but I don't want to think about that. Feeling uneasy, I turn to go back inside when a hand reaches out of the darkness.

"Come daaaance!" My friend passes me a drink and drags me back to the party. Her face is lit up, eyes winged and glittered, torso draped in the same Sterling Club silk scarf as mine. Closing my eyes, I take a long sip of champagne and sway in front of the speaker. The music booms so loud it

takes my breath away. I want to find someone to spend the night with, to escape, to forget everything else.

After finishing my drink, I approach a guy I met earlier, and let my fingertips graze his forearm. “Hey.”

He smiles and reaches for me.

A song later, our bodies are flush, his broad back hot under my fingertips. After several songs, I’m dizzy and slick with sweat, but more energized than ever. The bodies around me blur into an amorphous, pulsating mass and I close my eyes, imagining us melting together. I’m lost in a trance when something traces the curve of my neck like a cold finger.

My eyes snap open.

A good-looking guy is watching me, his eyes so intense it’s like they’re pulling me in. He runs a hand through his long blond hair. He’s a student, another Sterling member I vaguely recognize...but...there’s something different about him, something unnerving.

“Do you know him?” I whisper to the guy I’m dancing with, nodding in the stranger’s direction.

“Who?” He lifts his head as a couple slides past, but in a flash, the stranger is gone.

I blink, unsettled. Did I imagine him? Frowning at the now-empty spot where he’d been standing, I shake my head. “Oh, nothing. Never mind.”

After the song ends, I find my friend nearby. Slip my arm through hers. “I need another drink.”

—

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, I’m catching my breath on the upstairs terrace overlooking the back lawn. The late February air hangs cool and still, and it hasn’t snowed in weeks—maybe the worst is over.

Exhaling a cloud of breath, I lean over the banister. I like watching people out here: new lovers sneaking off into dark corners, young men sharing a bottle of whiskey, a guy kissing someone who is definitely not his girlfriend.

I'm watching a girl stumble down the back steps when a shadow slides over me from behind. A hand touches the bare skin between my shoulder blades, and I go still.

When I turn around, the guy I saw watching me is there, tall and confident. Attractive. His lips curl into a cocky half grin.

He leans closer, and when his hand touches my waist, I feel a current of electricity, my skin warming under his fingertips as if his touch could burn straight through me.

He leans down to whisper in my ear, and what he says makes me freeze: "You've been tapped for Greystone Society."

I look at him, goosebumps rising over my skin. Greystone Society is so covert that most people at Princeton don't know they exist. But I've been fascinated by them for years.

He looks at his watch. "You have thirty seconds to decide if you want to accept. The moment I leave, the offer's done. So what do you think, are you in?"

As the reality of his offer sinks in, I grow aware of the shakiness of my breath, the rush of blood in my ears, the exhilaration and fear. In front of me is a door to another universe. Another life. I imagine my mother saying from wherever she is now to take every strange adventure life presents to experience the world, not shy away from it.

But in spite of the pride I feel at having been chosen, there's another instinct telling me to run. I bury it, steel myself, and take his hand. "I'm in."

He smiles. "Then come with me."

Part One

MAYA

May 2023

A BLUR OF LIGHTS AND guests streak past as I spin my five-year-old daughter through the cool night air. Dani giggles, smiling with pure childlike joy as golden-brown curls bounce off her flushed cheeks. I hope she never loses this feeling of wonder. I don't want her to know about the bad things in the world—the bad people.

The band switches to Rihanna's "Umbrella" and all around us, alumni dance faster to the beat—old friends and classmates whom I haven't seen in years, their faces now only vaguely familiar. Every May, in the days leading up to commencement, alumni return for Princeton Reunions, where, in over a dozen tents, they host parties all over campus. We bring our partners and kids to show them this place that made such an impression on our lives...It's also an excuse to show them off to one another.

I wonder if my old classmates recognize me now with my proud mane of curls, so different than the flat-ironed hair I'd hidden beneath in college. It took me far too long to embrace my unique set of features, and now that I'm a mother, I want to set a good example for my daughter.

"All right, Dani, Mama's arms need a break." Shoulders burning, I set her down and she runs off, disappearing into the crowd. My heart flutters when I lose sight of her, but moments later, she reappears next to Daisy's daughter, Susie, and I find my breath again.

I have to admit, I'm not at my best tonight. It never feels good when my sister and I argue. Naomi is the only family I have left aside from my husband and daughter, and it's usually my fault when there's an issue between us.

But coming back here always sets me on edge. This place brings with it so many memories, and not all of them are good.

Still, Naomi is graduating in a few days, so I need to pull myself together and try to have a good time for her sake.

Speaking of that, where *is* my sister? She was supposed to be here hours ago.

I'm checking my phone to see if Naomi has called when an alert from campus safety pops onto the screen: *Washington Road Bridge and the Lake Carnegie towpath are closed due to police activity. Please use alternative routes.* And then my phone dies. Great. Now it'll be impossible to get hold of her. Why didn't I charge it earlier? Why couldn't Naomi be on time for once?

"Having fun?" Daisy asks, making her way over.

Daisy looks effortlessly beautiful even after several hours of dancing, wearing her signature pearls and an orange linen dress, copper-brown waves perfectly falling around flushed cheeks. She's my best friend and one of the kindest people I know, and after what we've been through, she's basically family.

I sigh. "Naomi isn't answering, and now my phone's dead."

Daisy gives me a sympathetic frown. "She still upset?"

I shrug. My sister hasn't returned my calls or texts all day, probably because I hung up on her when we spoke yesterday morning.

It wasn't my best moment, but we had plans to spend time together on Friday. I was looking forward to seeing her. Nate and I had even booked the hotel room an extra night just so I could spend time with her, and it wasn't cheap. So when Naomi said something came up last minute and she'd see us Saturday instead, the anger rushed up, and I couldn't stop it: *Fine, I guess I shouldn't miss work, then.*

She began saying something, but I'd already ended the call.

I sigh and close my eyes. All I want is for her to be happy, but sometimes I feel like the more I try to connect with her, the more she pushes me away.

“She’s probably out with her Sterling friends or getting drunk with some new boyfriend,” Daisy says, and when I flinch at the thought, she adds, “Oh, come on, relax! I’m sure she’ll be here soon.”

I take a deep breath and return her smile, pushing away any doubt. *One more day.* One more day, and she’ll be done with this place. We just have to make it one more day.

I’m searching for my husband when something on the other side of the crowd makes me freeze. The profile of a face, one that looks the same as it did ten years ago: porcelain skin, high cheekbones, long red hair...

But it can’t be her.

And yet the way she’s leaning into one hip, quietly observing the crowd, the black jeans and the Doc Martens...it looks just like—

At that moment, she turns, and I step back. It’s not her, it’s just another student. Probably someone who’s graduating with Naomi. My heart falters and my body slackens with relief.

I exhale. *Breathe.* Maybe it’s time to cut myself off.

I’m turning to look for my daughter when a loud *bang* rips through the air like an explosion, and my heart leaps to my throat.

“Fireworks!” Dani screams, rushing past. She grabs Susie’s hand and scampers out for a better look, holding her tiger ears in place on her head. I press a hand to my chest as people around me cheer, my heart kicking against my ribs. *Relax. Everything’s fine. Dani is safe. You’re safe. Everyone is safe. Naomi will be here soon.*

Outside the tent, vibrant bursts of light and color fill the night sky. I’m gazing up at the fireworks, finally able to appreciate the grandness of it all, when I hear Daisy say my name.

“Maya?” Her voice is strange, and when I turn, she’s lowering her phone slowly from her ear. One glance at her face and I know something is wrong.

“What is it? What’s going on?” I ask as I walk toward her, the boom and fizz of the fireworks suddenly deafening in my ears.

Daisy's hand covers her mouth as she stares at the phone in her hand. Her face is pale. "Margaret called." Daisy is never one to scare easily, and the fear in her eyes as she looks up at me sends a chill down my spine.

"What is it?" I ask again, more urgently. Margaret is Naomi's guardian, a no-nonsense Englishwoman to whom I've grown close over the years. I talked to her this morning. She knows we're here. Why would she be calling this late? What could be so important that she called Daisy when she couldn't reach me?

Daisy grabs my arm and pulls me away from the crowd. Her breathing is uneven, and she's on the verge of tears.

I glance back, keeping an eye on our girls as panic flares across my chest. Something is definitely wrong.

"It's Naomi," Daisy says in a choked whisper. "She's—" She can't seem to get out the rest.

"What about Naomi?" *Is she sick? Hurt?*

"Oh, Maya, I'm so sorry." She starts to wrap her arms around me, but I pull back, shaking my head, a horrible feeling growing in the pit of my stomach.

"Is she okay? What happened?"

Daisy shakes her head, hesitates, and somehow I know what she's going to say before the words leave her mouth. "I'm so sorry, Maya. Naomi's dead. She's gone, I'm so sorry."

MAYA

May 2023

WHEN WE GET TO THE police station, I lean out the door and dry heave onto the pavement. It feels like my body is made of lead as I follow Nate across the parking lot and up the steps of the building. How could this happen? I was supposed to protect her. I promised her I would protect her.

“Maya!” In the waiting area, Margaret sobs into a tissue. The woman who raised Naomi, loved her, baked her a raspberry cake every birthday. The woman whom I once saw pull a bee stinger from Naomi’s pinky toe and another time, rush her to the hospital when she fell off her bike and chipped a tooth. The woman who always made me feel like I wasn’t alone in looking after my sister.

When she sees me, she leaps out of the chair and runs over, short black hair a stark contrast to her pale, tear-stained face. “Thank God you’re here.” She pulls me into her arms. “I don’t understand. How could this happen... Why...” Her words spiral off as she chokes on her tears.

“Did they tell you anything more?” I ask. It still doesn’t feel real. Somehow I half expected to see Naomi here, too, even after what Daisy had told me.

Margaret says something about drowning. Lake Carnegie. Suddenly I remember the text alert on my phone and realize it must have been closed so

the police could retrieve Naomi's body. A wave of nausea passes over me as suddenly it all feels very real.

"But what was she doing by the lake?" I ask, more to myself than to her, just trying to understand.

Margaret looks at me, eyes filled with tears. "I spoke with the detective, but she wouldn't tell me much. They plan to do an autopsy."

Now my tears come. I squeeze my eyes shut and let her hold me as they spill from my eyes.

I remember when Naomi was born, the moment I first saw her in our mother's arms when she came home from the hospital. And when it was my turn to hold her, the unexpected lightness of her. The smoothness of her skin, softer than anything I'd felt. Her milky baby scent and tiny fingers curling around my pinky for the first time, nails like rice paper, barely formed.

Some mothers say the love for their child is more intense than anything else, and now that I'm a mother, I understand what they mean. But the moment I held my baby sister, I felt that same innate feeling rise up in me. I loved her more than anyone on this earth and I wanted to keep her safe.

There's a widening gash inside me now as if a knife were tearing me apart, flaying strips from my heart. It was my job to protect her. And I'd failed.

"Maya Banks?" I look up to see a stern-looking female detective with a sturdy frame and a slick low ponytail.

My eyes run warily from her jacket to the gun at her waistband, but I try my best to remember she is on my side. "Yes."

"Detective Simmons. I've been assigned to your case." She holds out a hand for me to shake and I'm struck by the strange formality. "I'm sorry for your loss."

I stare back, unable to respond. The most I can manage is a small nod.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about your sister."

I glance back at my husband, Nate, who is standing with his broad shoulders hunched, hands in pockets, clearly uncomfortable to be the only Black man waiting in the lobby surrounded by white officers, but he nods.

SIMMONS LEADS ME to a small room with a table and two chairs and gestures for me to have a seat. After sitting across from me, she sets a folder on the table.

I stare at it, bile rising in my throat as I imagine what images might be inside. Naomi's body bruised, injured. Her eyes swollen shut, lips cracked and bloated. The room sways.

When Simmons speaks, her voice is gentle yet firm. "Margaret St. Clair has already identified the body." *The body*. I shudder.

"We understand she was Naomi's legal guardian prior to her eighteenth birthday, is that correct?"

I nod.

"There are just a few more things I'd like to go over with you. When was the last time you were in contact with your sister?"

"Um, I—I spoke to her yesterday...around ten that morning." I fold my hands in my lap to try to get them to stop shaking as I remember our argument on the phone. "We just got in this afternoon. Naomi was—" The words get caught in my throat. "She was supposed to meet us at the Reunions tents, but she never showed...What happened?"

She clasps her hands on the table. "We received a call from a member of the rowing team this evening around six and recovered your sister's body from the lake shortly thereafter. Given the circumstances, we requested an autopsy right away."

I stare at her blankly, picturing my sister floating in the lake, the way I'd seen her float on her back in Margaret's pool, and my chest aches, as if my heart has burst, the pain leaking into my arms, my legs. Then the water drains away, replaced by an image of Naomi lying on an autopsy table, and I feel myself struggling to hold on to consciousness.

The detective says my name again, and I drop my face to my palms. My forehead is slick with sweat. I can't do this. "Can I get you some water?" she asks.

I concentrate on taking a deep breath, shake my head *no*, and after a moment, Simmons continues. She speaks slowly and carefully, the way people would sometimes speak to my mother. “The final autopsy results can take weeks, but the preliminary toxicology results show drugs and alcohol in her system as well as evidence of drowning.”

The room is pulsing with the beat of my heart. *Drugs? Naomi never told me she did drugs...*

“When we investigate a drowning, there can be contributing factors. Impaired judgment, coordination...” Simmons opens the folder, slides it across the table.

It takes a moment for me to make sense of what I’m seeing, but after a moment my eyes focus on the first word: *Benzodiazepines*. Okay, Naomi did take medication. She had trouble sleeping. Maybe the detective meant they’d found prescription drugs in her system.

But when I reach the next line, I stop. *Ketamine*.

“Are you aware of any recent events that could be relevant to the investigation?” She hesitates. “Ms. Banks, how much did you know about your sister’s life?”

NAOMI

October 2022, seven months before her death

A DULL THROBBING HEADACHE CREEPS in like a drum, prodding me from sleep. I blink my eyes open as the bright morning light cuts through the blinds. My phone, thankfully, is on the nightstand, the screen smeared with glitter. 8:07. Shit. It's past eight already?

Next to me, Liam is still asleep. Why does he look so hot with his arm over his head like that? *Who sleeps like that?*

As I take in my ex: his blond hair, tousled, his shirt off, I suddenly remember his hands running down my back last night, his lips pressed against mine, and feel my whole body flush.

It was almost as if he were himself again—but no. He was just drunk. We'd hardly talked. This definitely wasn't supposed to happen.

Trying to be quiet, I slip on my jeans and gather the rest of my things that are scattered around his room. *Where is my shirt?*

Liam's phone vibrates on his desk. It's a message from someone saved in his phone as Mollie Field Hockey.

I look away, trying to fight the urge to pick it up and throw it at him. We're not together. I need to remember that. He can text whoever he wants now; last night doesn't change that. We broke up last spring after his brother passed away unexpectedly earlier that year. It was horrible. Impossible to imagine losing a loved one like that, until I saw it firsthand. And I felt awful,

sick to my stomach seeing him in pain like that. I did everything I could to be there for him—bringing him food and water when he refused to leave his bed, writing his papers, waking in the middle of the night and holding him until he could breathe again—but it wasn't enough.

For a few weeks after the funeral, I thought he was doing better. He was going to tennis practice, going to class. He'd stopped drinking and was seeing a new therapist. Though he was grieving, as he should've been, there seemed to be moments where the sadness would lift, and I thought that, eventually, he'd be okay.

But then one night in April, he didn't come home. We'd planned to meet up, so I was waiting for him in his room. Instead, I found him outside his dorm at the bottom of the stairs, wasted, his face bruised and bloody like he'd gotten in a fight. He wouldn't tell me what happened, and he wouldn't let me take him to the student health center to get looked at.

That weekend, we argued about it. *I can't watch you do this to yourself.* I was trying to get him to get help when the words slipped from my mouth—*I love you*—and I immediately regretted it. He blinked at me, stunned, and I could see he was shutting down.

I can't do this, he said as he walked out the door.

I stand frozen in place as the hurt I'd felt that day swells.

Since we broke up, I'd focused on dance, my friends, our nights out. I tried seeing other people, but no one could fill the gap he'd left.

I can hear my sister's voice as though she's standing right next to me—*He's not good for you, you deserve more*—and I know she's right. But that's the thing about love, isn't it? When you find someone who sees you in a way no one else does, who understands you and makes you feel like you can't be whole without them, it wraps you in a vise and makes you forget how to live life without them.

I blink tears from my eyes and, unable to locate my shirt, grab Liam's instead and throw it on. It smells like him, damn it.

"Hey." He props himself up on an elbow and watches me. "Where are you going?"

"I have dance."

“Naomi. Last night—”

“Don’t. It’s fine.” I don’t need him to explain that it meant nothing to him. That I mean nothing to him. “I have to go.” On my way out, I hide my face so he can’t see my tears.

I TAKE OFF across campus at a jog and don’t stop until I arrive at Dillon Gym, where BAC, the Black Arts Company, is rehearsing. Sweating and out of breath, I try to slip in unnoticed.

“What the hell, Naomi?” It’s Zalikah, my roommate. We met freshman year in the BlackBox basement nightclub in line for free Red Bull and have been best friends ever since. Zee choreographed today’s piece and is pissed I’m late because she’ll have to teach it again just for me.

I square my shoulders and take my place in the formation. “Sorry I’m late! Keep going, I got it.”

She rolls her eyes and finishes teaching the eight-count. I match her movement as she runs it again slowly, watching me.

“Okay, at tempo, from the top. Let’s go!” Zee yells.

She starts the music, and the room shakes with bass and the rhythmic steps of the dancers. I dance in the middle, flowing through the moves, blood pumping through my veins.

Dance studios are where I feel most at home. My mom died when I was eight, and I never knew my dad, so home became the friends that kept showing up, the spaces that welcomed me.

When I was eleven, after living in San Jose with my aunt Ella and having a close call with child protective services, Maya sent me to stay with the St. Clairs, a family she’d met through friends at Princeton. I moved from San Jose to Greenwich, Connecticut, from a futon to a bed fit for a princess.

Margaret and John’s house was enormous, marble-floored and high-ceilinged, with gilt-framed landscapes and antiques from their travels. It had a unique smell too, like a museum or an old library. People were everywhere

—cooks and cleaners and drivers—and they had more books than a person could read in a lifetime.

Their friends would come over for dinner parties and stare at me like I was a new pet, speaking in high, careful tones, or commenting on my *beautiful* skin and *wild* hair. But Margaret would tell them off without missing a beat. She was an odd, quirky woman, and my eleven-year-old self had never met anyone like her before. She was obsessed with tennis, gardening, and the Brontës. Grew up in South London and lost both of her parents when she was a kid too. Over time I realized how much she cared about me, and I grew to love her in return. She and John gave me everything, even though I didn't have many friends or feel fully at home at the new private school. But when I was fifteen, I finally found a place where I belonged.

It was at the dance studio—in those humid, sweaty, overcrowded rooms with their blown-out speakers and mirrored walls—that I found space to breathe. I met other kids like me, a bunch of misfits who wanted to escape their hometowns as much as I did. By sixteen, to the horror of my ballet teacher, I'd gotten several piercings and started wearing my hair in an Afro. He told me not to come to class like that, but I didn't care. I was in heaven—working at the studio with my friends, eating take-out Thai in the splits on the dance floor, taking hip-hop, contemporary, West African, and jazz funk classes. And when I was too tired to dance, I read. I read so much that I got myself into Princeton, just like my sister had.

“Here we go. Full out this time!” Zee resets the music and counts us in. She bends to the left, long ombré twists flying over one shoulder as she dips her head and winds her hips to the beat. “More attitude, ladies. Come on!” She moves so fast that all I see is a blur, then points to a girl on my left. “Ayyyeee. I see you, Chichi!”

After another eight-count, Zee cuts the music. “Naomi, I know you can give me more than that.”

I bend over, catching my breath. She's right. I'm hungover but I'm also distracted, stuck on Liam. “I'm working on it.”

—

AFTER REHEARSAL, I grab my gym bag and head for the door, eager to get to class.

“Hey, wait up.” Behind me, Zee waves, running to catch up as I exit the dance studio. “I didn’t mean to call you out back there...”

I shrug. “It’s okay. I’m just tired.”

“I bet you are,” she teases. “What’d you get into last night? You disappeared.”

Outside, the air is brisk. Students study on the lawn, surrounded by autumn leaves and Gothic towers, trying to squeeze everything out of the last warm days before the brutal winter months ahead.

I don’t feel like admitting I’d lost all self-control and slept with my ex, so I change the subject. “Did you grab some mixers for tonight?” We’re throwing a surprise birthday party for our roommate, Amy, and Zee volunteered to handle the setup.

“Of course, got everything we need—hey, what are you going to wear tonight? And I got a new hook-up for guest passes. Where do we want to go after the pre-game?” Zee asks. “DJ Tongo is playing at BlackBox, and Sterling’s members only.” Being in several different circles, Zee always has a hook-up to get us into any of the clubs. But lately, she’s had her eye on a guy who frequents BlackBox, a student-run nightclub where a lot of our friends hang out, and even though Zee loves Sterling Club, she also likes the more chill vibe of BlackBox...and the chance to spend more time with Trey.

“Shit, I don’t even know,” I tell her, thinking of the pile of clothes in my room. I haven’t done laundry in a month.

I’m running through the options in my head when Zee grabs my arm. “Hey, who is that gorgeous guy?”

Across the quad, a good-looking Asian guy—tall, tan, shirtless—is jogging past. It takes me a moment to realize I know him. “That’s—Ben. Ben Wong,” I tell her. “He’s treasurer of Sterling. We’ve sat next to him at dinner there before.”

“Ohhh, he’s men’s soccer, right? Wow. He looks...good.” Zee looks at him appraisingly, a smile forming on her lips.

I remember sitting next to Ben in psych freshman year. He had these cute glasses and was always doing his engineering homework during class, penciled numbers packed to the edges of his notebook. But I don’t remember him looking quite so fit—did the guy spend all summer working on his abs?

Ben notices us staring and smiles at me. My stomach flutters.

“Girl, I don’t know what you’re waiting for,” Zee says. “Invite him tonight!”

I laugh. “I barely know him.” But Zee’s got me thinking...maybe someone new would be the perfect distraction from Liam.

—

THAT EVENING AFTER class, I’m doing laundry in the basement of our building when movement in the corner of the room catches my eye. Ben is at the far machine, noise-canceling headphones on, peeling off his socks and tossing them one by one into the washing machine. Unaware of my presence, he takes his shirt off too and throws it in after. He glances my way and shrugs, gesturing to the washer.

Embarrassed, I look down, continue pulling my clothes from the dryer as if I wasn’t just staring at him. I’ve turned away and am sorting my socks into pairs when, out of the corner of my eye, I see Ben pull his athletic shorts down and toss them in too. I suppress a laugh.

“Something funny?” To my surprise, Ben is somehow standing right behind me, naked except for his banana-print boxers.

“Oh, sorry, just wasn’t expecting you to strip down,” I say, flustered, trying not to stare at his perfect torso. Blood rushes to my cheeks, spreads up my ears.

As I distractedly gather my things, my hand manages to knock a pile of clothes onto the ground, lacy thongs and socks scattering everywhere. *Oh god.*

I bend down to grab them. He kneels too, and our heads nearly collide. “Sorry,” we say at the same time.

“I was just messing with you,” Ben says as he hands me a sports bra that had fallen onto the ground, expertly avoiding the brightly colored thongs that are inches from his foot. “What can I say, I waited a little too long to do laundry.” He laughs and his smile lights up his eyes.

“Thanks.” I laugh, taking the bra from him. I gather the rest of my clothes from the floor and stand. “I didn’t know you were in this building.”

“Well, I’m actually in Foulke, but all the machines are full, and I couldn’t afford to wait another day.”

My phone vibrates loudly where I’ve left it on the machine. I glance at it, expecting it to be my sister calling me back, but instead *DOUCHEBAG—DO NOT ANSWER* lights up the screen. *Liam*.

I silence it.

When I look back at Ben, I can tell he saw the name by the slight smile playing at his lips. He seems like he’s going to say something but then doesn’t.

“You going out tonight?” he asks instead.

“Yeah—actually, we’re having a surprise party for my roommate, if you want to stop by. Bring whoever.”

“Cool. Yeah—I’ll see what the guys are doing.”

My phone vibrates again, and I rush to silence it.

“You gonna get that?” he asks, a subtle teasing in his tone.

I tug at one of my hoops. Look away. “Nah—it’s...nobody.”

My phone vibrates with a text. We both look.

“Looks like Nobody’s really trying to get your attention,” he says.

I can’t help but smile. “Well.” I release a breath. “Exes tend to do that,” I admit. “But I *really* don’t want to talk to him right now.”

“Ah,” Ben says, with a knowing nod. “Been there.”

“Yeah...”

“Well.” He grabs his empty basket and gives me a salute as he makes his way for the exit. “See you tonight. What’s your room number?”

“Right. Vital information.” I smile. “We’re 211.”

“Cool. Well, see you later, then. And, hey, I hope Nobody lets you finish folding your laundry in peace.” Ben gives me a broad smile and disappears down the hall. I bite my lip, surprised by the giddiness I’m left with as I grab my basket and make my way upstairs, grinning to myself like an idiot.

MAYA

May 2023

KETAMINE.

I press a shaking finger to the page and look up at Detective Simmons. “This one, here. Ketamine? Isn’t that an anesthetic? My sister could have been prescribed the others...but not this.”

Simmons’s lips form a thin line. “Perhaps your sister didn’t share what drugs she was using with you...Ketamine has been popular with young people lately.” Her tone is dismissive. The disbelieving sister, unwilling to accept the truth.

“Excuse me?” How would she know what my sister would or wouldn’t tell me?

“Did your sister ever show signs of recreational drug use? Excessive drinking?”

“No.” My face warms. Am I being irrationally defensive? Sure, my sister liked to go out, but *ketamine*? No. Never. It wasn’t her style.

“It could explain—”

“She was in college, she liked to have fun, but she wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t have tried a drug like that.”

“Ma’am.” She takes a breath, clearly used to this type of reaction. “We’re trying to rule out all possibilities. We’ve seen an uptick in drug-related

fatalities lately. Especially among young women who fit your sister's profile. Were there any signs of isolating behavior?"

I feel myself stiffen at her use of the word *profile*. "No."

"I need you to be honest with me. Did your sister—"

"Stop. Please, stop." I clench my jaw. "My sister...was not a drug addict, she wasn't living a 'high-risk' lifestyle." I squeeze my eyes shut and take a breath.

I think of Naomi, so full of life, always dancing and laughing with her friends. She wanted to see the world, help people, do something important with her life; she had so much left to do. The anger seeps out of me, replaced by a deep, empty, aching loss. I want to go home.

I don't realize I'm crying until Simmons offers me a tissue.

"I'm sorry." Simmons looks me over with a sympathetic frown. "I know this must be extremely difficult. I think I have what I need for tonight. We can talk again another time, when you've had a chance to let things sink in." She closes the folder and slides it back toward her.

"No, wait. Do you have any other theories about what happened?"

Simmons goes still. There's something she's not saying. She inhales sharply and when she speaks again she proceeds slowly, carefully. "When dealing with an overdose, we have to consider the possibility...that it may have been intentional."

—

NATE DRIVES US to the hotel in silence. I stare out the window, eyes swollen, thinking of everything I could have done differently. If only I'd been easier on her. If only I'd called more often these last few months, insisted she tell me what was going on. If only I'd been there for her.

"Almost there," Nate says, a concerned hand reaching over to squeeze mine. Beneath it, I dig my nails into the seat, concentrating on the tiny scar on the base of his knuckle. "You doing okay?" Nate asks, and I cut my gaze to him.

Do I look okay? I want to ask. Naomi is gone. I'll never be okay again.

But I'm too exhausted to respond, so I lean my head against the window and close my eyes. *Breathe*, I command myself. *Breathe*.

When I open them again, we've turned down a street on the edge of campus, one I recognize for all the nights we'd stumbled down it arm in arm after a night of partying. Set back from the road are the university's eating clubs, stunning mansions that house the upper-class coed social clubs that much of Princeton life revolves around. I remember all the times I'd warned Naomi to stay away from them, especially the one that drew me in, Sterling Club. And she'd ignored me, of course, always intent on doing exactly the opposite of what I'd said.

As the clubs float past one by one, I'm struck by a strange sense of déjà vu. The conflicting evidence, the way her body was found—the guilt—reminds me of that day ten years ago when another young woman died and it was dismissed as an accident.

She had been a member of our eating club. A friend. She'd had a promising future ahead of her too.

Life before was a blur, like we were running through a dream. And everything after...well, it's as if I've been dragging around the weight of what we did for the past decade. We made so many mistakes, and instead of telling Naomi the truth, instead of warning her about what she was getting into, I'd buried it down deep. I'd told her not to join Sterling, but I hadn't told her *why*. I hadn't told her about Lila.

Over the years, I've lain awake at night thinking about Lila's death, running through my years at Princeton again and again, so many times that I've come to doubt my own memories.

But now the memories rush in, and as they fill my thoughts, so does the guilt.

"Need some air?" Nate asks, rolling down the window, and I jerk upright, startled by the sound of his voice.

I look at him, unable to speak, and begin to shiver. My nails dig deeper into the seat as my shame grows, crawling over my skin, coiling itself in my gut, the question ringing out in my mind: *Did the same thing happen to my sister?*

MAYA

October 2010, sophomore year

A MIST SWEPT DOWN OVER the fiery autumn landscape as the two-car Dinky train trundled toward the university. I sat pressed against the window, pinned by the large duffel bag the man next to me had stuffed in between us.

I was anxious about the upcoming school year: I wasn't the most outgoing person in the world, and my thoughts didn't easily flow into conversation. Most of my life, I'd been quiet and awkward, preferring reading in the library to trying to make friends.

But I'd spent the summer waiting tables, and I was excited to learn again, excited to have determined my major—economics. I liked the sound of it. It sounded important, sophisticated. Things I was not.

As my breath fogged up the window, I caught a glimpse of my reflection—my glasses, built for a more angular face, my dark, gently curved eyes and flat-ironed hair. Over the years, I'd begun to look more and more like my Chinese mother—though my full lips and high forehead reminded me of my African American father, who'd passed away when I was a kid.

I was nine and a half at the time, and what I remembered most about him was the way he'd listen to R&B on the radio while shaving in the morning. The way he'd braid my hair before bed with the same strongly scented blue Ultra Sheen he used on his own.

My parents were the only interracial couple in our town. My father, the only Black man. One time, after he came back from a jog, I heard him tell my mother about the car driving slowly next to him. Another time, about the neighbors who stopped talking on their front lawns. He was too stubborn to move, though, and they were so proud of that little blue house. They'd bought it after several of my parents' "over-asking" offers were rejected. The previous owner had passed away and no one else wanted it, apparently. But my parents thought the little blue house with its uneven floors and drafty windows was perfect.

—

THE ACCIDENT WAS sudden and devastating. car crash. Immediate brain damage that left him in a coma for a week. He'd been driving home from work and the roads were slick. They said he shouldn't have been going so fast. He'd veered off a turn and crashed into a tree.

My mother had been seven months pregnant with Naomi at the time, and for the first few weeks, she sat immobile, eyes swollen from crying, staring at nothing. She stopped cooking and only ate toasted sesame bread with yuk sung, dried pork that had the texture of coarse cotton, or on a good day, a steaming bowl of stale rice with yuk sung and peanut butter.

One day that spring, I came home to find all of my dad's clothes packed into boxes. It was disorienting, because my mother never parted with anything and seemed to assign emotional meaning to each item she owned. But a few days later the boxes were gone. Only a trunk with his books, records, and albums of old photos remained.

At night, I'd sneak down with a flashlight and look through them, running my fingers over the pictures of the three of us, tracing the lines of his smile. It's strange how after you lose someone, they start to fade piece by piece, until all that's left are memories that could slip through your fingers like water.

My sister was born premature. A tiny pink thing that reminded me of a newborn cat I'd once seen. My mother taught me to support my sister's head,

showed me the soft spot on top where you could see her heartbeat and how to bathe her delicate skin. I taught Naomi to ride a bike with orange streamers, braided her hair, and read her Judy Blume in the room we shared. We didn't have a lot, but we were getting by.

Then, on my eighteenth birthday, Mom passed away too.

Staring out the window, I exhaled a long sigh and shoved down the tears. I'd spent all of freshman year grieving. But sophomore year would be different. It had to be.

"Now arriving at Princeton Station" came the conductor's voice over the intercom. My limbs tingled with excitement as the train bent around the final curve, and the university came into view.

—

AS I WALKED to my residential college, a group of girls wearing bright sundresses and heels were laughing, stumbling arm in arm on their way to a party. I watched them. A girl I knew, Taylor, was among them in a gingham dress, French braid trailing down her back.

I gave her a shy wave.

"Oh, hey, Maya," she said. "How was your summer?"

I thought about how I'd spent the summer working at the restaurant. "It was fun. You?"

"I was getting so behind last year, so I had to do a semester at the Sorbonne. The French boys were trop beaux. Highly recommend. Anyway, are you going to Lawnparties?"

"Oh...yeah, of course," I said, even though I hadn't planned on going to the outdoor day-drinking festivities that marked the start of fall term. I didn't have anyone to go with.

Taylor nodded. "We're meeting at Cottage, and a group of us are walking over. Alex Bain put us on the list." *The list* was the only way to get into the eating clubs if you weren't a member. It was something that I had no access to, not knowing any upperclassmen members well enough to ask the favor.

But because Taylor was in a sorority, she knew older girls who could make sure she and her friends could get in anywhere.

I must have looked eager, because after a quick sideways glance at her friends, she added, somewhat reluctantly, “Want to come?”

My heart squeezed. I’d never set foot inside Cottage, but I’d heard stories. It was where F. Scott Fitzgerald had passed out drunk as a student, so of course I wanted to go.

—

THE SUN HAD faded over the horizon by the time I set off for The Street, the nickname for Prospect Avenue, where the eating clubs lined the tree-studded road, stretching a third of a mile into the distance. Princeton didn’t have frat houses but eating clubs, the architectural masterpieces with crystal chandeliers and opulent décor where the upperclassmen could live out their college fantasies. They should really be called drinking clubs, but in the university’s eyes, “eating” was more respectable. And the members *did* technically eat meals there during the day before the tables were cleared for parties all night. I’d heard rumors of waiters, candlelit dinners, and wild parties.

Sophomore year was the year most students’ fates were solidified—either you ended up in an eating club or you didn’t. And something like eighty percent of students...did. There were a few who chose to be “independent,” but you had to be confident in yourself and your campus meal plan to make that choice. I could never be independent; I wasn’t brave enough to be untethered. I wanted more than anything to belong to something, to find a place in this world, even if I didn’t yet know where that would be.

—

AFTER GETTING DRESSED, I made my way past quadrangle Club or “Quad,” the eating club Jeff Bezos had attended where B.o.B was playing to a cheering crowd, past the plush lawn of Tiger Inn, where tall shirtless waterpolo players had set up tables with beer pong, and Colonial, where a skinny guy with

glasses hung from a zip line, aiming his body for an inflatable pool. It was like each of these students had been sorted into their perfect club.

COTTAGE WAS SET back from the street past an iron gate. It towered above the others, all red brick, white trim, and Georgian symmetry. A long line of students spilled out the front door.

Pulling out my phone, I tried calling Taylor. No answer.

An hour later, I finally made it to the front of the line and saw Taylor and her friends dancing in the distance, red cups swaying overhead.

“Name and ID.” A stern bouncer towered over me, holding a clipboard.

“Uh, yeah, here.” I fished my Princeton ID out of my pocket and handed it to him. “Maya Mason.” I was thinking of what to do when I walked in. Would I go up to Taylor and throw my arms around her like we were good friends? Or casually get two beers and hand her one?

“You’re not on the list.” The bouncer looked up from the clipboard, shaking his head.

“Oh, my friend Taylor said she’d put me on. She’s right there. Let me just —” I tried to move around him to get Taylor’s attention, but his large torso blocked my path.

“Ma’am. You’re not on the list,” he said before gesturing to the group of girls behind me. “Next.”

I stepped onto the front lawn to call Taylor. *Hello, you’ve reached Taylor Little, please leave a message.*

A group of rowdy football players hung out of an upstairs window. One of them, I recognized.

“Alex! Hi,” I called out, waving. He looked down at me with a smirk before turning back to his friend. “I’m not sure if you remember me,” I said, “but we went to Sacred Heart together? I’m Taylor Little’s friend?” *Please don’t ignore me.*

“Oh yeah, what’s up?” Alex shouted, and his friends laughed and slapped him on the back.

“Yeah, hi! So, uh, Taylor said she put me on the list? But they’re giving me a little trouble. Could you go downstairs and get her? I think there must have been a mix-up or something—”

“You wanna come in?” another guy yelled from the window.

“Oh yes! That would be amazing.”

“Come here,” Alex’s friend said. “If you catch this in your mouth, we’ll let you in.”

Alex’s friend extended a bottle of champagne out the window. I made my way to the window, standing directly below.

“Ready?” he yelled.

I took a breath, tilted my head back, and opened my mouth. Champagne poured onto my tongue. The guys in the window whooped. “*Ha!* She did it.”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and grinned. I might have been sticky with champagne, but I felt cool as hell.

“All right, that was too easy,” Alex said. “Let me do it.”

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes again, but this time nothing happened. I heard stifled laughter up above, and when I opened my eyes, a torrent of beer poured all over me.

“What the hell?” I shouted, ducking out of the way as the guys emptied the rest of the pitcher.

“Oops, sorry, it slipped,” Alex said. His friends slapped him on the back and hollered.

My hair and dress were soaked. Behind me, a group of sorority girls pointed and whispered, everyone in line staring.

Resisting the urge to sprint away in embarrassment, I turned around and walked away from the club. When I looked back, Taylor was standing in the upstairs window. Our eyes met and she quickly looked away, not moving from where she stood tucked under Alex’s arm. *Really, Taylor?*

Tears stung my eyes as I pushed through the crowd. I wanted to turn around and yell at all of them, but the pain in my chest was too severe.

Once I was clear, I ran away from Cottage and onto the street, slipping off my heels and running barefoot until my feet stung, tiny rocks cutting into the soles until they bled.

NAOMI

October 2022, seven months before her death

“HOW’S THIS?” ZEE STANDS ON top of the mini fridge holding one end of a HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner. She sticks it to the wall and jumps down.

“You’ve really outdone yourself,” I tell her, taking in the birthday decorations.

“I wasn’t joking when I told you I cleaned out Party City.” Zee had thrown her long ombré twists into a high ponytail with two strands loose and changed into a bustier bodysuit, wide-leg cargo pants, and platform boots.

I put an arm around the life-sized cardboard cutout of our roommate, Amy, and check my phone to see if she’s replied. After class, I’d bought Amy a little birthday present—a novel about a bookshop owner by Gabrielle Zevin, a Totoro sticker to add to her collection of laptop stickers, and her favorite Kasugai lychee candy.

I suddenly realize I haven’t heard from Amy all day. “Hey.” I turn to Zee. “Do you think something’s up with her?”

“Amy?” Zee asks, distracted by the purple eyeliner held carefully against her lid.

“Yeah, has she seemed kind of distant lately?” I always worry about her pulling too many all-nighters, obsessed with trying to spin her internship with *The New York Times* into a full-time job after graduation, but recently she’s

been gone even more than usual, and when she is home, she's been keeping her door shut.

Zee shrugs. "Not that I've noticed."

—

IN MY ROOM, I throw on a cropped long-sleeve shirt, jeans, and bigger hoops, freshen up my curls, and when I return to the common room, Zee is on the couch scrolling through her phone.

I check the fridge to make sure we have enough beer, and behind some cans of Coors Light and JuneShine is a suspicious-looking mason jar filled with cloudy white liquid. Written in permanent marker is *ZEE'S—DON'T TOUCH*.

"What is this?" I ask, pulling it out.

Zee laughs. "I made homemade vodka!" She jumps up and swipes it from my hand.

The sound of a key turning in the lock makes us look, and Amy rushes in holding a stack of books and her laptop, looking like she'd slept at the library.

"Surprise!" Zee and I shout, as she takes in our party decorations. "Happy birthday!"

I throw my arms around Amy, books and all, while Zee turns up the music.

As Amy takes in the room, her expression flickers from surprise to confusion and then to a teary smile. "Wait a minute...what is going on here?"

"You only turn twenty-two once," Zee says as she hands us each a shot.

I hold it up high. "Happy birthday to one of the smartest, kindest, hardest-working people I know. You deserve to have a little fun."

Amy smiles, reluctantly accepting a shot from Zee and holding it toward mine.

"Fine, I'll come out, but I have to be up early tomorrow."

"What are you working on? I feel like I've hardly seen you."

Amy hesitates. “It’s research for the reporter I’m working with. She liked what I found and wants me to keep digging. They might even publish what I wrote if we can get the editor’s approval.”

“Your first article!” Zee says.

“In *The New York Times*,” I add. “That’s huge, Amy. Congrats!”

“What’s it about?” Zee asks.

“Oh, it’s—” Amy starts, and rattles out the rest. “Just a little thing about the water quality in low-income neighborhoods.” Her eyes slide away to the floor, as if embarrassed.

“Oh you know, just a little thing with very real impact,” I tease, and she grins.

Amy and Zee are way ahead of me in terms of having their lives figured out. Zee has her heart set on Harvard Law and is likely going to graduate summa cum laude, and Amy, originally from Beijing, was the only international student to intern for the *Times* this summer. They’d recently discussed offering her a permanent position and sponsoring her visa.

And then there’s me: an English major with no idea what to do with my life, working for Labyrinth Books on Nassau Street and daydreaming about owning a bookstore someday. My sister always reminds me how hard she worked for me to be here, and how I need to think more about my future. But she only sees success in terms of money and career. She wasn’t happy when I ended up in the English department, saying that hardly any six-figure jobs existed for English majors, especially those actually wanting to use their degree.

Maya had interned at a Wall Street bank the summer after her junior year, accepting a full-time position the year after...but quickly realized she didn’t fit in. That to be great at investment banking meant to be great at wining and dining people with deep pockets. So when her friend offered her an equally lucrative job at the Hunt Gallery in Chelsea, she accepted and never looked back.

I don’t understand why she feels like she sacrificed so much for me, when every decision she’s made has benefited *her*. Or why she wants me to work in

finance when she hated it. To make her happy, I interned at a hedge fund last summer, but I still haven't accepted their job offer. It doesn't feel right.

"Cheers, ladies!" Zee says. We clink our glasses together and down the shots.

Our faces wrinkle in unison. "What *was* that?" Amy asks.

Zee grins and holds up the mason jar. "Homemade vodka, batch number one."

"You mean moonshine?" Amy asks, horrified.

I examine my shot glass. "You know, it's really not bad."

—

AN HOUR LATER, Zee's turned up the music and the room is overflowing with people drinking and laughing. "Hey, Trey! What's up?" she calls out to our friend as he rolls in the door with ten more people.

I'm grabbing another beer from the fridge when a hand touches my shoulder. "Hey, Naomi."

I turn around to find Ben leaning against the wall, freshly showered, wearing a denim shirt and black jeans, and feel my shoulder tingle in the spot where he touched me.

"Sweet place," he says, taking in the disco ball, the wall of Polaroids, and the vintage mirror my sister bought me at a flea market in Brooklyn.

"So Benjamin Wong *does* wear shirts," I tease, bending down to pull out a second beer. "Want one?"

Ben laughs as I toss him the can, two dimple lines appearing at the corners of his mouth. He pops the can open. "What you witnessed earlier was a life hack used by only the most efficient launderers."

"Oh, really?" Now it's my turn to smile. Suddenly I'm unable to stop myself from picturing him shirtless—his tanned, perfect body as he handed me my sports bra—and I flush.

"Yup," he says. "It works especially well for getting invites to exclusive dorm parties." Ben grins when I look up at him and holds my gaze.

For the first time, I notice the fullness of his lips, the way one lock of hair refuses to stay in place, and his eyes, which I thought were black but are actually a deep, warm brown.

I'm normally not like this, but Ben's confidence is tipping me off-balance. I'm suddenly conscious of how close we're standing, the clean scent of his deodorant, the way his eyes won't leave mine. I bite my lip and look away.

"Anyway," Ben says, turning, and the tension between us eases slightly. "Is that your laptop? I love Studio Ghibli." He juts his chin toward Amy's laptop on her desk in the corner of the common room and the Totoro sticker I gave her.

"It's my roommate's, actually, but I like Studio Ghibli too."

"Have you seen *Princess Mononoke*?" Ben asks, and I shake my head. "Oh, we've got to watch it sometime. Miyazaki's my favorite director. His mind is weird and brilliant." I catch his use of the word *we*, and must have paused longer than is necessary because he points to the speaker and says, "By the way, who made this playlist? I don't think I've recognized a song yet."

"Woah...you don't know Tems?" I throw him a mock-offended look.

He shrugs.

"This woman is singlehandedly changing the sound of R&B." I throw up my hands and groove for a minute.

He laughs. "If you say so."

—

I'M SO INTO our conversation that I don't realize how late it is until the room is almost empty.

"We're going to The Street!" Zee shouts, pointing to a tipsy-looking Amy wandering out the door in a birthday hat.

Zee's friend Trey comes over, holding two yellow Cap & Gown passes, likely from Zee's stash. "They said they're heading to Cap."

After nodding at Trey, Ben turns back to me. "You wanna get out of here?"

MAYA

May 2023

I COULDN'T SLEEP ALL NIGHT. over and over, I replayed the detective's words: *Drug use. Excessive drinking. An overdose.*

But I know in my gut something's not right, that there is more to the story. Naomi and I talked on the phone Friday morning. We'd agreed to meet at the Tenth Reunion tent. It doesn't make sense that she'd go down to the lake alone instead.

The detective said the last person to see her was one of her roommates, Zalikah, but that was Thursday night. So what happened between then and Saturday?

Naomi didn't drink alone; she'd even admitted once that she was worried about how often her ex did. She didn't abuse her meds, not after she'd seen what that had done to Aunt Ella. It doesn't make sense. None of it makes sense.

"Hey." Nate sits on the bed and gently wakes me from my half-conscious state. "You've got to eat something."

The scent of the food fills the room, a bagel and coffee, but the thought of eating makes me sick. The guilt I have, the feeling that I could have prevented her death, fills my stomach like a fist-sized stone.

I roll over and squint at him in the bright light. His normally vibrant hazel eyes look worried, his shoulders low, locs frayed around his hairline. "I

can't," I tell him.

Pulling a pillow over my head, I roll away from the window, wishing I could disappear. I want to be back home in my own bed, but we decided to stay in Princeton the rest of the week. My sister's body was still at the morgue. I couldn't just leave her. Leaving would feel like giving up.

I manage to drift off to sleep, and a few hours later, a cold, damp towel is placed on my forehead, like I do for Dani when she's sick. When I feel her tiny hand reaching for mine, I break down. I have to keep going. My daughter needs me.

—

BY TUESDAY, I manage to shower and walk to small World Coffee to meet Daisy, who stayed in case I needed anything.

I'm absent-mindedly scrolling through Twitter at the table while Daisy waits in line, looking for any mention of my sister, when I come across an article: PRINCETON STUDENT DROWNS DAYS BEFORE GRADUATION. A TRAGIC ACCIDENT.

My hand shakes, blurring the text as I scan the comments: *Please tell me this isn't real. Rest in power, sweet friend. I'm so sorry to hear this.* And one that catches my eye: *When it's one of us it's an "accident."* It's from a private account, @FWPhD. My whole body goes numb as I reread it.

"Maya?" I look up to find Daisy holding two cups of coffee and release the breath I'd been holding. Her large brown eyes have deep lines around them, but she looks put-together as usual in white jeans and a silk blouse, hair pulled off her face to show a scattering of freckles. "How are you doing?"

I look at her weakly. "She was supposed to graduate today. She was supposed to start the rest of her life today."

"I know." Daisy places a hand on my shoulder. "I'm here for you. Anything you need."

I bite my lip as tears well. I can't cry right now. Not here in front of all these people.

"Come here." Daisy pulls me into her arms.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” I say into her shoulder.

It’s hard for me to accept that the last time my sister and I spoke was the last time I’d hear her voice. She didn’t sound like herself, either: the hollowness in her voice, the short responses. More signs I should have seen.

“I’m so sorry, Maya.” Daisy releases me from her arms. “I’m here, okay? If you want to talk or cry or anything.” She gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

—

OUTSIDE, THE AIR is hot and muggy. too many people walk too quickly, laugh too loudly. We enter the gates on the north end of campus and are immediately swallowed by a churning mass of students, some holding their thesis projects and graduation caps and gowns.

It’s like a punch to the gut. Naomi should be on that stage, smiling, receiving her diploma with them. She would have graduated with honors. She’d almost made it.

Suddenly dizzy, I grab Daisy’s arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t sleep much last night. I should head back, but thanks for this.” I lift the coffee. “And thanks for being here.”

“You sure you can make it back okay? Want me to call Nate?” Daisy asks. Her phone buzzes, and she looks down. “Oh shoot, it’s the nanny—”

“I’m fine, I promise. Go.” I give her my most convincing smile. “I’ll text you.”

“Okay.” Daisy gives me a look that says *I’m sorry*. “And...eat something, all right?” She gives me a hug. “Call if you need anything.”

—

WITH DAISY GONE, grief seeps in like a tide. I squeeze my eyes shut. Force myself to breathe. I need a moment before heading back.

When I open them again, the crowd has parted, and I see a familiar face: the same shocking blue eyes I remember from all those years ago, the same

self-assured set of his jaw—my former professor and Sterling Club mentor, Matthew DuPont.

Matthew stands twenty yards away, leaning on a patina-green tiger statue as he laughs with a pretty blond woman on the steps of Nassau Hall. The sight of him floods me with a mix of emotion—nostalgia, sadness, distrust. I hate the way he can exist in the world, carefree, handsome as ever, as if what happened ten years ago didn't affect him at all.

For a moment, I consider averting my gaze and pretending I never saw him, but before I have time to think, he parts ways with her and is...*Oh god, he's coming over here.*

He looks the same as he did when I was a student, with his lean build, thin-rimmed glasses, his navy cashmere sweater, the confident stride. Though we run in similar circles, we haven't spoken in years, and I don't even know what I would say—

"Maya." He stops abruptly, leaving several feet between us, perhaps able to read my apprehension. "I'm so sorry for your loss. I heard what happened to your sister."

What did you hear? I wonder, as his eyes search my face. They're just as bright as I remember, but with a few more wrinkles lining the corners. Wavy hair just as full, but now peppered in gray. I lower my gaze. Naomi's death is all over social media, but the school hasn't yet made an official announcement.

"Thank you." When I glance up at him, there's something strange in the way he's looking at me, like he's about to say something. But doesn't. "Did you know her well?"

"As well as any of my students."

"She told me you were helping her look for a job." Naomi didn't share much about her life, but she'd told me that much. Probably because she knew I wouldn't like it. Over the years, she'd asserted her independence, and I'd learned that for the sake of our relationship, the best thing to do was to bite my tongue.

But maybe that was a mistake.

He nods and looks down, shifts his weight. Why does he seem so nervous? I begin to wonder if there's more he's not saying. Naomi was a good student, beautiful too, and Matthew always had his favorites...

"Well, was anything—was she acting differently? Did she seem anxious? Stressed about looking for jobs or...?"

He hesitates.

"Yes?" I hold my breath as the muscles in his jaw work. *Come on. Tell me what you know. Please.*

"She was a lot like you, you know. But—" He looks at his watch. "You'll have to excuse me, I'm late for—again, my deepest condolences." With that he turns and walks away, long quick strides lengthening the sidewalk between us, as I stare in the direction he went, my heart hammering in my chest.

MAYA

October 2011, junior year

PROFESSOR DUPONT'S BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS 301 was the single most popular class at the university. So much so that to get in, we'd wait at 6:59 A.M. on class registration day, with the class queued up on TigerHub, pale and slick-palmed as our fingers hovered over the return key waiting for the second hand to reach the hour. It was rumored even the waitlist was filled within the first ten minutes.

Maybe I'd had enough bad luck sophomore year that by junior year, the universe decided to let me into the class. And that Friday, I sat in the second row next to Daisy Miller as Professor DuPont paced onstage in front of over four hundred students. After the Lawnparties incident, the rest of sophomore year had been uneventful as I studied alone, ate alone, lived alone...but the one good thing that came out of it was meeting Daisy. She'd sat next to me in a microeconomics class at the beginning of spring semester, and her bubbly personality ensured we'd been friends ever since.

I'd been worried Daisy and I would lose touch over the summer, but we somehow remained close—she'd send me updates about the boys in the Hamptons, and I'd keep her entertained with stories about living in San Jose with my sister and Aunt Ella, though it took some effort to omit the more concerning details. I admired Daisy's sense of style, her spontaneity, and her ability to befriend anyone. To her, everything in life was a game.

McCosh Hall had a tall domed ceiling, diamond-paned windows, and a sloping wooden floor with hundreds of antique-style desks curving around the stage. Every seat was full, including the upper level, which, like opera house seating, jutted out over the lower rows. The way everyone's eyes were fixed on Professor DuPont, nodding as pens scratched notebooks and fingers flew madly over keyboards, it was as if he were a pastor speaking to his congregation.

“‘Our comforting conviction that the world makes sense rests on a secure foundation: our almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.’ Does anyone know who said that?”

A girl with thick glasses raised her hand. “Economist Daniel Kahneman,” she said.

Professor DuPont nodded. “That’s correct. The Israeli American psychologist and economist who won the 2002 Nobel Prize for his work, the father of behavioral economics, and my esteemed colleague.”

Professor DuPont rarely name-dropped, but he must have known he was somewhat of a campus celebrity. We’d all seen the pictures of him in *Time* magazine shaking hands with the president, the links circling the internet to his TED Talks and leadership conference appearances. He’d spent time on Wall Street after graduating from Princeton and less than a decade later, had become the most successful wealth manager on *Forbes 40 under 40*.

Yet despite his success, he had the laid-back ease of a man humbled by it all. He didn’t brag, he didn’t dress ostentatiously, and he kept his office hours open late.

I began sketching Professor DuPont as he lectured. Not only was he smart, but he was beautiful. It was as if Michelangelo’s David had put on a tailored suit.

Daisy sighed. She was wearing a tweed mini skirt and a cashmere sweater, her legs crossed daintily at the knee. She had stopped taking notes and was staring at him with a faraway look in her eyes.

“The world does not make sense. Humans are not rational decision makers—we are driven by our wants, our needs, our fears.” I swore for a moment he looked straight at me, and my heart beat faster. “I hope that in my

class, you will question everything. Don't take what is written in these textbooks as fact. Don't take what I say as fact. Do your own research. Draw your own conclusions...and then I'll enjoy challenging them in class." He grinned. "All right. Get out of here. I want you to think about this over the weekend and come to class next week with some specific examples of heuristics, those mental shortcuts we use to make decisions."

I TOOK THE long way back to my dorm, enjoying the chilly fall air and the bright orange and red leaves drifting from the trees. Though it was my junior year, the thrill of being at an Ivy League school still hadn't worn off. The Gothic buildings, the labyrinthian campus, the ivied brick and stone. Then there were the designer clothes, Barbour hunting jackets, and Longchamp bags draped over their shoulders. The quick pace of conversation. The summer homes in East Hampton and the winter cabins in the Swiss Alps, and, above all, how students grouped together by some invisible marker of status: sports team, boarding school, or eating club.

My mother would have loved it. She was able to forget that she was the only Asian person in a room and chat up the other moms at school, make the rounds at a block party and ignore the people who mistook her for the nanny.

But despite my mother's public persona, she was very strict at home. I was jealous of my friends, whose mothers would shower them with hugs and gossip about boys, watch *Friends* with them, take them shopping at Victoria's Secret, and teach them how to shave their legs.

My mother rejected displays of affection, which she felt were unnecessary, and preferred a no-nonsense approach to life: Ziplock bags were reused. Shoes were worn until the soles peeled. Tea, rice, and Tiger Balm never went bad.

Both of my parents were the first in their family to go to college, and my education mattered more to them than anything else. Sometimes I wondered if my mother saw me as a reflection of herself. A younger, more American

version of her whose sole purpose was to live out her dreams, to achieve more than she'd been able to.

In high school, I pushed back. We'd argue when she'd criticize my tank tops, my laziness, my disrespectful tone. One night, when I was sixteen and had come home late from my boyfriend's house, my mother and I got into our worst argument yet. She was yelling, pummeling me with words like *promiscuous* and *hell* and *regret*, when I'd responded with a burst of anger that surprised us both. *Well, I don't want to end up like you.* Her palm collided with my cheek and shocked me into silence.

Ungrateful girl, she'd muttered as she walked away, the only words I knew in Cantonese. I'd turned away, fighting the urge to clutch my cheek, pretending her words didn't hurt as they cut straight to my core.

And despite what she thought, I *did* listen.

It wasn't until after she was gone that I realized my mother was human too. That she was far away from her family, her culture, her friends, and had sacrificed everything to give us the best chance she could.

When I went to Princeton, I remembered her favorite lesson to instill in us—*education means choice, and choice means freedom*. I wanted to make her proud.

That evening, I'd gotten off my shift at the restaurant an hour early and was lying on my stomach reading the faded copy of *Interpreter of Maladies* that had belonged to my mother when there was a knock at the door.

I answered, and Daisy strutted past me in a fringed flapper dress and heels, hair in two buns high on her head. With a grand display, she revealed a second flapper costume. "This is for you! Get dressed!"

I studied her flushed cheeks and smiling, yet slightly glazed expression. "Did you start without me?"

She grinned and revealed a bottle of Pinnacle whipped-cream-flavored vodka. "I may have gotten a head start." She handed me a feather headband. "Come on, it's Gatsby Night, the best night of the year!"

I ran my fingers over the sequins. I hadn't gone out much since the embarrassing night at Cottage last year. A couple of times here and there, when my friend Ayana would invite me to dorm parties and Charter Fridays,

but I was skilled in coming up with excuses not to go, and eventually she stopped asking.

Tonight, Daisy's hopeful grin—and the fact that she'd thought to buy an extra costume just for me—filled me with a warm, fuzzy, hopeful feeling. *What am I doing hiding in my room?* I thought. *This is a new year. This could be different.*

At my desk, Daisy pushed over a stack of econ textbooks, set down two shot glasses, and filled them with vodka.

"One for you." Daisy handed me a shot and raised the second in the air. "To a new year!"

I drank it and grimaced—more nail polish than cotton candy—but enjoyed the warm feeling of the alcohol as it slid into my stomach. "Okay, I'll come out."

"Yay!" She grinned. "I promise you won't regret it." After studying me for a moment, she set a bag of makeup and a straightening iron on my desk. "Now, let me do something about your hair."

—

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, we were stalking across campus, a broken umbrella shielding us from the rain. Daisy wove her arm through mine and leaned in close.

"Okay, so don't freak out," Daisy said, "but Gatsby Night is at Sterling Club, members and guests only."

Despite my buzz, a new anxiety flickered across my chest. Sterling Club had a reputation for being exclusive: it was the eating club where only the most elite students partied, flirted, and shared secrets. The collective net worth of the members probably rivaled the GDP of most nations. And their *list* was so ironclad, most Princeton students never saw beyond the iron gate. My heart fluttered. "Daisy...thanks, but—"

Daisy looked at me. "Come on, Maya. Don't you think it's time you got over the Cottage thing? I get why you didn't bicker last year, but it'll be different now. You have me."

“Bicker” was the process of selecting new members, mostly from the sophomore class. Daisy had tried to get me to bicker with her last year. Though I’d declined, I’d watched longingly from my window as Daisy and her friends filed out from the dorms to The Street and into the clubs where they’d remain bonded for life.

She’d told me about her whole bicker experience after she was accepted into Sterling. *It’s mostly about impressing the members, Daisy explained, but sometimes they would rapid-fire questions at you, and get you to spill secrets they could use against you later.* Her tone gave me a strange chill.

“It’s not too late for you to join,” Daisy said as we ascended a flight of stairs and passed under a large stone arch. “There are a few other juniors bickering...”

I sighed. “I don’t know...”

“—and if it’s about the money, then don’t worry about it, the club’s financial aid covers it.”

“Daisy—”

“Oh, come on, Maya.” She took my hand in hers. “You have to bicker Sterling. I’m a member. I’ll introduce you to everyone. It could completely change your life.” She gave my hand a squeeze.

When I didn’t answer, Daisy sighed. “You’re always talking about how you need to figure out a way to help your sister, get her into a better situation...this could be the way to do it.”

It was raining harder now, and we were getting wet despite the umbrella. I shook my head. “I don’t see how getting drunk every weekend would help my sister.”

“Look, we have one of the most powerful alumni networks in the world. They arrange interviews, housing in the city. Not only can they get you a six-figure job, they can also get you a place to stay for way under market value. This is the way the world works. You join Sterling, you make these connections, and you could give Naomi a different life.”

Daisy’s words spun in my head. I wanted more than anything to provide for my sister. She was living with our aunt Ella, who was kind but had been through a lot and could barely take care of her own family. After our mother

died, we'd been left with nothing. And then somehow I'd gotten into one of the best schools in the world. It was my responsibility to make something of myself. For Naomi.

It was also my chance to have a real college experience, the one I'd missed out on so far.

I drew in a breath and turned to Daisy. "Let's Gatsby."

She grinned. "That's what I wanted to hear."

—

MY EXCITEMENT GREW as Daisy and I walked down the Street toward Sterling. We passed Ivy, where international students met old money and Eton prep boys went heli-skiing in Courchevel over the winter break. They were the one percent of the one percent: your Rockefellers, Kennedys, and Forbeses.

As we neared Cottage, I cringed, remembering being soaked in beer while everyone laughed. Here were the Southern boys who loved their hunting trips, the athletes, and the sophisticated girls with runners' legs and pearl earrings. Their members seemed to have a pipeline straight into Wall Street.

Across the way was Tiger Inn, the laid-back one with Animal House-style ragers. Daisy told me they'd once spent so much money on beer, they'd had to survive on hot dogs for the rest of the semester.

Next came Cap & Gown: more diverse, good music, great food. Tower: for intellectuals and politics majors. Terrace: artists and activists. Charter: nice guys. And Cloister, which according to Daisy was for *floaters, boaters, and one-night stands*.

—

THE NEXT BLOCK was dark and empty, and as the music and laughter of the eating clubs faded into the distance, I grew increasingly nervous. A cold breeze brushed my collarbone, sending a shiver up my spine, and I pulled my jacket tighter to my chest.

Finally, there it was: Sterling Club.

The dark mansion towered over me, all gray brick and ivy, captivating

and exquisite, music and party noise drifting from its glowing windows. Daisy looked back at me. “You ready?”

I nodded. I couldn’t believe I was doing this.

Daisy walked to the front of the line and showed her ID to a guard at the door. As the heavy door slowly unfolded, my heart beat faster. It felt as if some unseen force were pulling me in.

Daisy turned to me with a wicked grin. “Let’s get you into Sterling Club.”

NAOMI

October 2022, seven months before her death

“ALL RIGHT,” BEN SAYS AS we make our way across the shadowy campus and out to The Street. “So you’ll come to a game, and I’ll go to your show?”

I turn to him and grin. “Deal.”

Despite the couple of beers I’d had, I’m cold out here. And beneath the rustle of fall leaves, there’s a strange stillness, like the campus is lying dormant. Like it’s waiting for something.

We walk in silence for a minute, past the umber brick and ivied walls of East Pyne, our watery reflections slithering across diamond-paned glass. We duck under stone archways, wind through cloisters, and descend stone steps. We’re walking under a large tree when crows burst from its branches, making me jump.

Despite it being a Saturday night, the campus is oddly empty, and though I’ve walked this path many times, there’s something unnerving about the dark.

I turn to Ben, hoping to distract myself. “Can I ask you a serious question?”

“Shoot.”

“I’ve always wondered...why do men’s soccer players shave their legs?”

Ben laughs. “I don’t know, some guys think it feels better under their shin guards or tape. Why?”

“Well, I think that’s refreshingly subverting of gender norms, and I’m not against all guys doing it.”

Ben laughs. “Somehow I think that might be giving some of my teammates more credit than they deserve.”

He asks me about dance, and I tell him how I’m in five pieces this year and choreographing two of them. “I’m nervous I won’t be able to pull it off.”

“Wow. I mean, I have no doubt you can pull it off, but yeah, wow, that is a lot.” I laugh, and he smiles. “Are you going to keep dancing after?” he asks. “Professionally?”

I shake my head. “There’s no way I’m good enough. And...I don’t know, I want to travel, see the world, then figure out all the career stuff.”

Ben nods. “If you could go anywhere...where would you go?”

“So many places: Morocco, Brazil, Egypt. I’d love to backpack through Switzerland and then end up on some small island in Indonesia, work on a boat, and go climbing and scuba diving every day.”

“You know how to scuba dive?”

“I could learn.” I pause. “I just feel stuck here. Like life is meant to be bigger.”

He looks at me. “You really want to get out of here, huh?”

I shrug. “Nothing keeping me.”

“What about your family?”

I hesitate. I never know what to say when someone asks about my family. How much of the story they want. “My parents passed away when I was a kid. It’s just me and my sister...and...we’re not that close.”

“She older?”

I nod. “Ten years older. She went here too, actually.”

Ben looks surprised. “That’s cool. Got your own little legacy thing going.”

“I guess it is...yeah.” I don’t tell Ben how complicated our relationship is. It’s not really like most siblings. Between our age difference and our parents passing when we were so young, Maya acts more like a parent than a sister most of the time. She thinks she’s helping with all her advice, but the truth is: after Mom died, Maya left. She went to Princeton and left me with Aunt Ella,

who couldn't take care of me, and then handed me off to the St. Clairs. I know she was only twenty-one at the time, but it always stung that she didn't want me. I feel a tiny prick of hurt in the center of my chest thinking about it now.

Yet still, I adored her. My junior year of high school, I remember telling her how excited I was to apply early to Princeton. I wanted to follow in her footsteps.

But instead of the excitement I'd expected to see, her face had fallen: *What about Brown?* she'd asked, in a false tone that made me cringe. *They don't have traditional majors. You could choose any classes you wanted!*

She'd gone here, and all her friends had gone here, and her entire life was built around having gone here, yet she was pushing me to go anywhere else. I guess she wanted to keep Princeton for herself.

That's when I realized I had to look out for myself.

"I mean, I love my sister, of course. And Margaret, the woman who took me in, is great, but this place"—I gesture around—"it feels so isolated sometimes. Don't you ever want to see what else is out there?"

"Yeah." He nods. "Yeah I do."

Ben tells me about his parents in Singapore. His mother is a caregiver for a wealthy woman. His father was an accountant before retiring in his seventies. Ben grows quiet, and I can tell he's hurting.

"My dad's not doing great," he says without looking up.

I look at Ben. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Yeah...he had a stroke last year. My mom's got him on a special diet, but..." He shoves his hands in his pockets and grows quiet. "I feel guilty sometimes, being here...when she could really use my help..." He blows out a breath. "Anyway, I don't know where that came from. Sorry to lay it all on you."

"No...not at all." I'm surprised and humbled he'd share something so personal. We walk in silence. Ben is so different from Liam: sensitive and kind. Liam would never open up like this. But maybe that was the least of our problems.

MAYA

October 2011

A RUSH OF WARM AIR loosened the wind-chilled skin on my cheeks as I crossed the threshold into Sterling Club, the fringe on my dress brushing my thighs with each step.

“This place is insane.” I looked around, awestruck as if we’d entered another world, something on the edge of reality, like a movie, or a dream. A beautiful girl swept past, her feather boa tickling my arm, expensive perfume lingering in the air.

“Let me take your coat, dear.” The strongly accented English came from behind me. I whirled around to find a housekeeper behind me with dark wiry hair, bushy eyebrows, and an unreadable expression. She had a sturdy frame and looked to be about fifty.

“Oh, um—”

“Hi, Marta,” Daisy said, along with a few words in what might have been Ukrainian. Daisy was good with languages and loved to befriend everyone. “This is my friend Maya.”

Marta gave a small nod and took our coats. “Marta’s worked here forever,” Daisy explained. “She knows where all the bodies are buried.”

“Wait—what bodies?”

Daisy giggled. “Oh my god, your face! It’s just an expression. Come, I’ll give you the tour.”

I struggled to keep up as Daisy strode through the party. She greeted a tall guy with a kiss on the cheek. He winked at me as we swept past. We passed the ballroom, where a packed dance floor spilled out around a DJ, and continued down a hall. On one side, glass doors stretched to high ceilings, and on the other, nineteenth-century portraits of important-looking white men hung, their eyes following as we passed.

As Daisy led me up the grand staircase, the sound of a wind chime made me look up. A glowing chandelier swayed precariously overhead, its crystals trembling.

“Tonight we invited all the people we’re hoping will bicker.” At the landing, she handed me a glass of champagne that seemed to appear out of thin air.

“Thanks.” I took a long sip and wondered how many glasses it would take to ease my nerves.

Daisy led me down a dark hall, and with every step, the sound of clinking glass, music, and laughter rose. But there was something else there too. Underneath, obscured by the low throb of music, was a quiet hum...At first, I thought it was the wind outside, but no, this was something darker, like a whisper in a language I didn’t understand.

Daisy was still talking. “Does that make sense?” She was looking at me as if I’d missed what she’d said.

“Um. Sorry, I— What were you saying?”

She heaved an exasperated sigh. “In order to get in, you need at least one gold card from a member, which I’ll give you, but the entire club will have to vote. Since you don’t know anyone, it’s really important to make a good impression...so to that end, I told them your grandfather is a wealthy Chinese investor.”

I nearly choked. “Wait, what—”

Daisy waved her hand through the air. “Look, I just fluffed up your résumé a bit. Your grandparents must invest in *something*.”

What was I expecting? I couldn’t seriously think they’d let in someone like me. Daisy was right. I could pretend. I *had* to pretend. I had to let them

think that I didn't need them, to let them think that *I* was a connection that *they* needed to make.

I felt a new jolt of anxiety as Daisy pushed open the doors at the end of the hall to reveal a spectacular library filled to the brim with people. I'd been to a couple of the eating clubs before, but this was the first time I'd experienced a party like this.

Daisy charged in and threw her arms around a tall, slender guy, who picked her up and twirled her through the air. "Come on, Maya!" she yelled over the music.

As we made our way through the party, Daisy jutted her chin in the direction of a clean-cut man in a bow tie and whispered, "Jackson speaks eight languages. Top recruit for the CIA."

She pointed at a couple making out against a wall. "Those two went full-on Animal Planet in the middle of the soccer field. During a snowstorm!"

A blond guy with a comb-over. "Rumor is his family owns the stolen Rembrandts from the Gardner Museum."

After grabbing champagne at the bar, I followed Daisy out to the terrace and through a maze of attractive young men in suit jackets and bow ties drinking whiskey and smoking cigars.

On the other side of the club, we entered a single restroom, and after locking the door behind us, Daisy unearthed a pill from her purse.

"Want some?" She was carefully dissecting the pill with her nails.

"What is it?" I eyed the capsule with its tiny blue beads, suddenly apprehensive.

"Extended-release Adderall." Daisy poured half the pill's tiny beads on her tongue and handed the other half to me, which I held awkwardly.

Someone knocked on the door. "One second," Daisy shouted, then gestured for me to hurry up. Without thinking, I poured the tiny beads onto my tongue like she did and took a drink of champagne.

Downstairs, she grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the packed dance floor. The lights were low and flickering and there was this wild energy, this intensity, like a spell had been cast over the room.

The bass of the music pulsed through my chest, deep into my body, and for the first time in longer than I could remember, I could let go. I felt so alive. So free.

Before long, sweaty bodies pressed against one another. On one side, a flapper made out with a guy in an unbuttoned shirt, his hand unhooking her bra. On the other, a red-haired guy in a bow tie was passed out drunk on the floor.

“Want to dance?” A tall, dark-haired guy was standing in front of me. There was something thrilling about his eyes, his self-assured way of carrying himself. Everyone carried themselves this way in Sterling, and I wondered if that kind of confidence was inherited along with immeasurable wealth. Maybe the posture came with the genes.

Before I had a chance to respond, he’d pulled me in and in less than thirty seconds reached for my face with both hands. His lips met mine with such intensity that I jerked back in surprise. But after I recovered, I kissed him right back. This was how I had always pictured college. Dance floor make-out: *Check*.

I found Daisy near the champagne tower afterward. “That guy you kissed is Kevin Francis,” she said. “I got the Adderall from him.”

Behind her, a drunk guy attempted to pull a glass from the center of the champagne tower, sending the delicately balanced pyramid crashing to the ground.

I yanked her out of the way as shards of glass exploded on the floor. “Whoops,” Daisy giggled, then started to sway. “I think I need some air,” she said.

As we talked on the back patio, movement overhead drew my eye. A tall blond girl leaned on the railing of the upstairs terrace, surrounded by a group of wide-eyed look-alikes. There was something refined about the way she moved, her long fingers resting against her collarbone, shoulders pulled back and neck outstretched like a swan. Light seemed to radiate from her, everyone around her soaking it in.

“Wait, isn’t that—”

“Cecily St. Clair, president-elect of Sterling Club. She’ll take over running the club next semester,” Daisy said with a hint of jealousy. “She’s brilliant. She was a ballet prodigy at the age of twelve, got into Juilliard at sixteen, but decided to go to Princeton instead. Started a company in high school that connected professional dancers to product lines for endorsement. Sold it freshman year. And yes, that’s *St. Clair* as in the family who owns half of Manhattan.”

For a moment, I saw it. The life I’d been dreaming of. One where we would drink champagne in each other’s rooms as we tried on designer dresses, dance late into the night, and swap stories the next morning about the wild nights we’d had. This was my chance. I took a deep breath and turned to Daisy. “Can you introduce me?”

“Sure, why not?” Daisy said, then shot me a warning look. “Just don’t screw it up.”

—

“HEY, CECILY,” DAISY called out once we’d made our way over.

Despite the alcohol pumping through my system, I was suddenly aware of the sweat slicking my palms, the steady thud of my heart.

Cecily twisted to face us. “Daisy, hi! I’m so glad you made it. Love this look on you.” She ran her hand over Daisy’s fringed dress.

“This is my friend Maya,” Daisy said, and Cecily fixed her gaze on me.

Oh no. Was I smiling too much? I tried to relax the muscles in my face.

“Hey, nice to meet you,” I said. *Nice to meet you?* Too formal. *Think.* “I’ve heard so much—” *No, not that.* But it didn’t matter, she’d turned away and was listening to Daisy instead.

After whatever Daisy said, Cecily tossed her head back in laughter. Then she turned back to me. “So, why do you think you’d be a good fit for Sterling Club? I mean, I assume that’s why you’re here...”

“I—uh—”

Luckily, Daisy stepped in. “You know, Maya went to Sacred Heart with Alex Bain.”

Cecily's eyes widened. "Do you know him?" Something had changed in Cecily's expression, like she was seeing me clearly for the first time.

Humiliation whipped through me as I remembered the way he'd pass me in the hall like I didn't exist. And his cruel laugh after he'd drenched me in beer outside Cottage.

"Uh, we weren't exactly close," I told her. "He was the captain of the football team."

To my relief, a girl interrupted us, slinking an arm around Cecily's waist. She had an air of confidence, even more than the others, with long jet-black hair that poured down her back and perfect winged eyeliner. She was obviously from Cecily and Daisy's world—her stiff black dress, while not Gatsby-themed, could have been a work of art.

She gave me a once-over. "Who's the girl scout?"

"This is Daisy's new friend," Cecily said. "She went to Sacred Heart with Alex Bain." *Why was she looking at me differently now?*

Her friend's eyes went wide. "Your ex?" *Ah.*

"We hate him," Cecily explained.

I nodded, grateful I'd gone with the truth. "He's a total dick," I added.

Her friend jutted a hand toward me. "Kai Ling."

Ling was my mom's maiden name, and I felt an immediate kinship. "Maya. Nice to meet you."

"Daisy, is this your friend whose grandfather is an investor in Hong Kong?" Kai asked, turning to me. "My parents are too. Is he in real estate?"

Oh god.

I glanced at Daisy, who gave me a subtle look back. "Yeah...I mean, well, he was. He invested in...buildings—uh, commercial real estate—until he passed away." The lie burned in my throat, but then it was done.

"I'm sorry to hear," Kai said.

As the girls discussed the upcoming member selection process, something about them drew me in. The easy, lyrical way in which they spoke, their confidence and witty banter. I studied the way they held themselves and tried to imitate it. The whole world was open to them, and they knew it.

At one point, I could feel Cecily's eyes on me as Kai whispered something in her ear. I held my breath, praying I hadn't messed everything up earlier.

"So, bicker's soon. You should come." Cecily's eyes shimmered, and my heart beat faster.

This was the opportunity I'd been waiting for.

I nodded, trying to contain my excitement. "Yeah, maybe, I mean, yes, I'd love to."

"Great. We'll see you there." Cecily sashayed away, Kai trailing close behind.

Daisy dragged me to a corner and gave my arm a squeeze. "You did great!"

I grinned back, but over the course of the night, an unsettling thought lingered: *Why would they want someone like me?*

MAYA

May 2023

I ASK CECILY, DAISY, AND Kai to meet me for a late lunch in Palmer Square. They immediately take off work and Uber down from Manhattan. It means a lot that they've come; they're the closest thing I have to family now, besides Nate and Dani.

"Being back here," I say slowly, cautiously, "I can't help but think about what happened..."

Ever since running into Matthew, I've felt a question nagging at me. The grief is still there, but there's a new energy running through me as well. I have to know if Naomi's death was my fault. If it was because I didn't warn her about Sterling Club, didn't warn her about what membership really means.

"What happened when?" Daisy asks.

"What happened to Lila."

Daisy stiffens. Cecily and Kai exchange a nervous look and the silence hangs heavy between us until Kai clears her throat. "That...was a long time ago."

"And," Daisy adds, "didn't we agree not to talk about it?"

"It's okay." Cecily places a hand on Daisy's arm before turning to me. "We can talk about it if you want to."

But their reluctance has made me back off. I don't know what to say. What is there to say?

"Never mind, I think I'm just shaken up after everything."

After nodding in understanding, they change the subject, something about the Hunt Gallery, which Cecily and her husband own and where I've worked for the past eight years. As my friends discuss the new women's initiative, I study them.

Kai, now a high-powered attorney, is a more put-together version of her college self, if that's possible. She's perfectly at home in her leather pants and crisp button-down, engagement ring perched on her finger. She's enmeshed in the final stages of planning for her wedding later this summer, and I'm worried my grief will overshadow it.

Cecily has the same gray-blue eyes, same platinum hair, though it's now cropped shorter along her jaw. Looking closely, I can see how exhausted she is. Her husband, Theodore, had some trouble at work recently. His investment fund is under investigation, he's been working nonstop, and it's taken a toll on her. Now that I think of it, I don't think I've seen them together in months. Not that they've ever been the kind of couple to spend every minute together, but sometimes I wonder if their marriage was more of a merging of dynasties than anything else.

Daisy, now an adjunct professor at NYU teaching business ethics, is always upbeat and energized, despite having confessed how hard it is to balance work and motherhood. I appreciate her presence all the more for knowing how stressed she's been lately.

"What's that?" Daisy asks, staring at my phone, which I'd left open.

I glance down at the screen to find the Twitter comment I'd been looking at ever since I first saw it: *When it's one of us it's an "accident."*

Shuddering, I consider the implications. *Would* the investigation have been taken more seriously had someone else been pulled from those waters? They still hadn't determined how she'd gotten there. Was there something Detective Simmons wasn't telling me?

I scroll down and below the first comment, I notice another that makes my heart stop:

Maybe someone should talk to her boyfriend.

NAOMI

October 2022, seven months before her death

BEN AND I ARE PASSING the eating clubs on our way to Sterling when my heart tightens in warning. Up ahead, a rowdy group of guys are blocking the sidewalk, shouting and laughing, completely wasted. A lanky guy in a blazer tosses an empty bottle in the air. His friend unbuckles his pants and relieves himself into a bush. They're the type of boys I've spent my entire life trying to avoid.

"Excuse us," Ben says, making his way through them. We're almost clear, just passing the last two, who are in the midst of a shouting match. Now that we're closer I realize these guys are juniors in Sterling, which makes me feel better since that means Ben knows them too. Ben taps one of them on the shoulder to let him know we're squeezing by, and when the guy turns around, Ben's hand accidentally grazes his chin.

"My bad, Pete," Ben says.

Pete Whitney, a junior on the lacrosse team, turns, smile fading as his eyes focus on us. He doesn't move out of our way. Instead, his bloodshot eyes shift from Ben to me. He has red hair, narrow-set eyes, and a nose that looks like it'd been broken and healed poorly.

My shoulders tense, and suddenly I'm back in eighth grade, staring up at the boy who'd left a condom-wrapped banana in my lunch box, once again the awkward girl who'd been poked and teased.

“Not cool, man,” Pete says.

“You’re taking up the whole sidewalk,” I tell him, the familiar anger unfurling in my chest.

He raises his eyebrows, his face nearly as red as his hair. When he steps closer, the alcohol on his breath fills my nostrils. My hands curl into fists and I have the sudden urge to fight back. Ben puts up a hand, stopping Pete from getting closer.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Pete says, the words spewing from his mouth like hate. My whole body is tense, flushed with anger and adrenaline.

“Then move, asshole,” I mutter.

I should have seen it coming, but what happens next happens fast. In one swift movement, Pete raises a hand to strike me. I anticipate the sharp blow to my cheek, the pain. But suddenly, he staggers back instead. Ben’s shoved him to the ground. Furious, he pushes himself up and shoots us a look of disgust.

“Woah.” His friend, a slightly taller and lankier version of him, grabs his arm. “Come on, Pete, take it down a notch.”

He wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve. His face twists, lips curling in disgust, and for a second, I think he might lunge at us again, but his friend keeps a firm grasp on his shoulders.

Ben pulls me past, and I hold my breath until we’re a good distance away. When I look back, Pete looks furious; he’s muttering something to his friend, who is still holding his shoulders. Though it’s dark, I can make out his twisted expression, the veins in his neck, can practically feel his hate crawling over my skin. What he says next makes my arms go numb. “Motherfucking chinks. Go back to wherever you came from.”

—

“WHAT AN ASSHOLE,” I say, once Pete and his friends are out of earshot. My hands ache from being clenched into fists, and blood has rushed to my face.

Ben remains silent, eyes cast down as we create distance between ourselves and them. When he finally speaks, I can hear the anger in his voice.

“Pete Whitney went to my high school in Manhattan, a year behind me,” he explains. “He’s disgusting. He has Confederate flag shot glasses in his room, a tattoo of one on his thigh. In high school, he got suspended for writing a racist email to a girl who’d turned him down for a date.”

“Did he get kicked out?”

Ben shakes his head. “Nope. Dad’s a billionaire. Mom’s a congresswoman and big-time donor. His parents hired a lawyer who claimed free speech. He didn’t even get suspended.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yeah,” Ben sighs. “I’m pretty sure he spends his time commenting on conspiracy-theory subreddits and harassing people on Twitter.” I can hear the hurt in his voice, and despite how different Ben and I look, I understand our shared pain.

I think of the boy who used to bully me. The one who used accents with his friends, threw bits of gum wrapper in my hair in class, and spread horrible rumors about me.

“I can’t believe Princeton let him in.”

“Yeah,” Ben says. “It’s fucked up, the amount of racist shit he’s said. The other Sterling guys are always saying to chill, it’s not that bad, but they don’t know. They don’t see it.”

I understand what he means. To some of my friends or past partners it had seemed invisible, even though for me it was a constant presence. And the truth was, it had gotten worse since Covid.

“I tried to keep him out of Sterling,” Ben says, “but he had someone on his side.”

At Ben’s words, I look up. But I don’t mention what I know and he does not: Pete isn’t just in Sterling, he’s also in Greystone.

—

FINALLY WE ARRIVE at Sterling, and after a couple of beers, I forget all about Pete Whitney. On the back patio, a guy in my class is playing a set, all in Spanish, and everyone is shouting the words to his songs. My sister always

told me when she was here the crowd was all preppy and white, but while there are still guys like Pete, it's not like that anymore. Around me, there are students of all shades of brown, black, beige, and everything in between.

I'm taking a sip of my beer when I feel someone staring at me from the other side of the crowd. I look up to find Liam, his arm around a girl I don't recognize, and quickly force my gaze away. I shouldn't be surprised to see him; he's a member. We've managed to avoid each other lately, but seeing him with someone else so shortly after we'd spent the night together still stings.

Ben notices me staring and whispers in my ear, "Is that Nobody?"

I can't help but smile.

He tilts his head to mine conspiratorially. "Want to make him jealous?"

I raise my eyebrows as adrenaline whips through me.

On the dance floor, Ben pulls me up tight against his body, and I try to forget about Liam. But a few songs later, I open my eyes and see him on the other side of the room, dancing with the same girl he was with earlier. Now that they're closer, I think she's a sophomore on the field hockey team. Probably *Mollie Field Hockey*.

Liam looks over and meets my eyes, and then to my disbelief, he grabs her chin and kisses her. *What the hell is he doing?*

Flushing with anger, I force my eyes shut and press myself closer to Ben, who seems surprised at first but then wraps his arms tighter around me. We dance that way for several songs, until we're out of breath and slick with sweat.

A half hour later, we've moved to the far corner of the dance floor, and when I scan the crowd for Liam, he and the girl are gone.

Ben looks down at me. "Do you want to get out of here? You could come to my place and I could show you my photography."

I laugh. "Haven't heard that one before."

"No pressure," Ben says, flushing.

I'd hooked up with a few people since Liam and I broke up—there had been Abe, the mouth breather; Gio, who was way too into role-play; Thea, who would not stop quoting Shakespeare. But this feels different.

At the same time, though, I'm not sure I'm ready to feel like this again. Everything with Liam still feels too fresh.

Over Ben's shoulder, I see Liam standing with a beer in the hallway, watching me. With a rush of adrenaline, I turn back to Ben, thread my fingers through his belt loops, and kiss him. After a moment of surprise, Ben grins and kisses me back. I like the way his lips feel on mine, and his lack of hesitation is attractive. Without opening my eyes, I sense Liam watching us and it feels good in a kind of wicked, vengeful way.

The room is packed and sweaty, and we're both breathing more heavily than usual. After another song, I pull back from Ben. His hair is pushed back off his forehead, shirt unbuttoned a little, and he looks kind of wild. "Okay, let's see your photography."

—

BEN'S ROOM is not at all what I was expecting. it's warm and filled with life: plants and music and abstract art. "Mind if I look around?" I ask him.

He hands me a beer. "Be my guest."

I make my way around the space, taking in his framed black-and-white photography of people in Chinatown, an antique abacus (his grandfather's), running my fingers over his books: *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, *A Brief History of Time*, and *The End of Everything (Astrophysically Speaking)*. I pluck through his record collection—A Tribe Called Quest, Flowdan, Japanese Breakfast.

"So why can't you pursue photography? I mean, after we graduate," I say without looking up. My hands stop on a Childish Gambino album, and I lift it from the case.

"Oh." He pushes a hand through his hair. "It's not in the cards for me."

I set the record down and make my way over to him. "What do you mean?"

Ben shows me a picture of him and an older Asian couple I assume are his parents. "The only way for someone like me to make it is to become a doctor or a lawyer or something."

“That’s not true,” I tell him. “Look at these photos. You’re so talented. You could make a career out of it.”

“Maybe someone raised by the St. Clairs can.” Ben looks away. “But not me.”

And now I get it. Ben’s not from money. Being an artist is a risk, a privilege he won’t consider, and to him, I’ve had this easy life with so many more opportunities because of my connection to the St. Clairs.

For a moment, I worry I’ve ruined everything, but then Ben turns toward me again and I can feel the hum of energy between us. Before I can say anything else, he leans down and kisses me.

—

OVER THE COURSE of the night, I learn that not only is Ben a talented photographer, but he is talented in other areas as well.

We stay up until the sun rises, sometimes talking, sometimes listening to the rain, and deep within me, a knot loosens. He shows me portraits he’d shot of people on the streets of New York City: an elderly Chinese woman, wearing a black dress and hat, a deep sadness in her eyes. “She fled China during the Cultural Revolution. Her son was a history teacher in Beijing and someone had written an anti-Communist phrase on his chalkboard. He was sent to a pig farm, and she never saw him again,” he explains. “She teared up when she learned I went to Princeton...it was the life she would have wanted for her son. Someday I want to make a book of these photographs and their stories.”

I ask him about growing up in Singapore, and he asks me about moving from California to Greenwich. I read him the short story I wrote about my sister, about the year after our mom died, when Maya left for college and I moved in with Aunt Ella, who already had three kids of her own. The story is about how I never told Maya about the kids who teased me, the days I had to run home, or the nights I went without dinner. It feels strange, that Ben should know the things I’ve never told Maya, but as he and I lie naked under

his sheets, the glow of my phone the only light in the room, I feel a knot inside my heart loosen slightly.

A COUPLE OF hours later, Ben slips from bed, stirring me awake. “You sleep okay?”

The rain has stopped and a cool breeze drafts in from the crack in the window. The square patch of light on the wall has turned from blue-gray to gold, and the birds are chirping outside.

“Yeah.” I push myself onto my elbow and look over at Ben, who raises a camera.

“Turn your face a little toward the light.”

I roll my eyes. “Do you take pictures of everyone you hook up with?”

“Only the ones I like.” Ben grins, and I know he’s joking. He’d been in my freshman seminar, so I knew he’d had a girlfriend who went to Harvard, I think, or Yale, for at least a couple years; he didn’t have a reputation for sleeping around.

Laughing, I push his camera away with one hand and cover my face with the other. It’s one thing to hook up with a guy, and another to let him take a photo of you first thing in the morning with caked-over drool on the side of your mouth.

Sitting up, I take in his face. His sleek black hair sticking up to one side, his deep brown eyes. *Click*. The shutter goes off.

“How’s this.” I sit up, letting the sheet fall off my chest, and face the window, exposing my back to him and giving him a half-joking sultry stare over my shoulder.

“Stay there.” He presses the shutter. *Click*. “That’s perfect.” He snaps a few more, then sets the camera down and kisses me.

ON MY WALK back, I don’t care who sees me. I’m buzzing, lit up, glowing with the memory of Ben’s arms curled around me. The warmth of his bed.

I'm about to text Amy when DOUCHEBAG—DO NOT ANSWER fills the screen. Sighing, I pick up.

"What?"

"Naomi." I'm annoyed at how much I like the sound of his voice.

"What's up?"

Liam sighs. "I've been trying to reach you."

"Okay..."

"I wanted to talk to you last night."

A flash of him making out with the girl sends anger whirling through me, and I tighten my grip on the phone. "Why?"

"Listen." Liam is silent a moment, and when he speaks again his voice is low. "It's about Theodore Hunt's company—I thought you'd want to know, since you interned at his fund last summer."

I stop walking and look over my shoulder to make sure no one is listening. "What are you talking about? Liam, is this because of last night?"

"No, I'm serious. Meet me at Sterling. I've got something to show you."

—

WHEN I SEE Liam at the far table in the Sterling Club library, I'm caught off guard. Seeing him makes me lightheaded, and as much as I want to be, I'm still not over him.

Determined not to let it show, I settle into the chair across from him. He looks up from his laptop and pushes a to-go cup of coffee toward me that says *Mason*. A small reminder that he still cares.

I draw my hand into my lap and refuse to touch it.

"About last night—" Liam starts, but I stop him.

"It's fine." I'm finding it hard to meet his eyes. They're a murky greenish blue, the color of the bottom of a lake, and they seem to be able to see right through me. "We were both with other people."

Liam raises an eyebrow. Good. I'd meant for that to sting.

We sit in awkward silence until I nod at the tennis racket, hoping to change the subject. "How's the season going?"

“Could be better. It’d be nice to have my hitting partner back.” Half of his mouth curls up. Margaret St. Clair had taught me to play tennis at her country club, and I was pretty good.

On those rare free afternoons when neither of us had practice, we used to go out to the tennis courts and play until the sun set, then go back to his room to rip each other’s clothes off. It was an intense, all-consuming kind of love. The memory sends a shiver from the base of my spine up to my neck.

I soften. “That’s not a real answer.”

“We’re three and three in the Ivy League, 17–8 overall...” Liam leans back in his chair and runs a hand through his blond hair, his eyes never leaving mine. “You’re killing me, you know that?”

I roll my eyes. This is his way of flirting. “Why’s that?”

He laughs. “One minute you’re in my bed, the next you refuse to speak to me.”

I look away, feeling my cheeks warm. Liam is not the type of guy I’d normally go for. Zee teased me about how I’d have to teach him how to dance, and I was skeptical of his old-money family. Their relationship was strained, and I’d always hoped to be with someone with a big, loving family.

Sitting up straighter, I force myself to stay present. “So what’s so important?”

Liam looks over my shoulder, then dips his head low. “Professor DuPont told me there’s some stuff going down at Hunt. It’s bad, and he’s worried it’s going to affect...things.”

I lean forward, interested.

Liam runs a hand through his hair again, exposing the tattoo on his forearm, the Greystone insignia—a tattoo of which only members would know the significance.

He turns his laptop around. He shows me an article. HUNT GROUP UNDER SCRUTINY FOR INSIDER TRADING, SECURITIES FRAUD.

I sit back, not sure what to think. Had there been signs that I missed while I was there? Something illegal going on behind the scenes? In upper management?

“Obviously this would be bad for Greystone...financially.”

Theodore Hunt's firm prided itself on having some of the highest-net-worth clients in the world. Many Greystone Society alumni trust them with their portfolios...as did Greystone itself.

If a scandal broke out, and their clients started to panic and pull their money, the fund could risk losing billions. Not anticipating the recent interest rate hike, they'd made risky bets and were already overleveraged...And if someone *had* done something illegal, Theodore or other alums at Hunt could go to prison. It would be a total shit show for Greystone...and Sterling too.

"A whistleblower leaked thousands of emails to the *Times*. They're launching an internal investigation to find out who went to the press...but they're running out of time—the SEC showed up at the office on Friday. I heard Hunt's legal team are going to interview everyone who worked there over the summer. I wanted to warn you."

My breath stops. "Why would they need to talk to me?"

"They think it might have been an assistant. Maybe someone recently let go. Anyway...I didn't want you to be blindsided."

MAYA

May 2023

THAT NIGHT, I WAKE SOMETIME after midnight from a horrible dream. A watery image of Lila floating on her back in the lake, skin pale and bloated, lips discolored jaundice yellow and purple. I sit up with a gasp as the image slips away into the dark.

Water. I need water. I reach for the glass, gulp it down as my heart returns to normal. Still, a headache remains, my temples on fire as thoughts buzz loudly in my skull. *Why am I dreaming of Lila when I should be trying to figure out what happened to Naomi?*

Wide awake, I scroll through comments on Naomi's social media, thinking about her, thinking about Lila, wondering who my sister might have been dating, who might know something. Anything. The only guy I'd known of was the tennis player, Liam, and Naomi had said she'd cut it off months ago.

Earlier this afternoon, I reached out to Naomi's roommate, Zalikah, who said she'd be happy to talk to me, but her other roommate, the quiet one, won't return my messages.

As I sit there in the dark hotel room, I think of Matthew. How he looked the same as he did all those years ago, like he'd stepped right out of my memory. He'd seemed nervous, hadn't he? Or was it all in my head? Was I

so gutted over Naomi's death that my mind was spinning wild narratives of what could have happened?

When I google *Naomi Mason*, I find a new article about her death, posted yesterday evening. I click on it. A photo of my sister stares back at me: she's at a table, studying, the edge of a bookshelf behind her, and she has looked up at whoever took the photo and smiled. It's strange to see her like this, my sister, a local headline, my sister, gone. Closing my eyes, I brace myself and read.

The body of Princeton University senior Naomi Mason was found in Lake Carnegie Saturday evening. According to a statement made by the Mercer County Medical Examiner's office, "It is too soon to determine cause of death, but at this time, no foul play is suspected."

A member of Sterling Club, Liam Alexander III, commented on her death: "Naomi was a beloved member of our club, an intelligent, kind, and caring friend and classmate. We are deeply saddened by her loss."

I pull my face back from the screen. Why would her ex comment on her death? It's not like he was the Sterling Club president.

As I reread the article, searching for anything that might be useful, my eyes drift back to the picture: a mahogany bookshelf with antique hardcover books, dark wood paneling on the walls, intricately hand-carved.

Sterling Club. That's the Sterling Club library.

On one side of the photo, a man's arm rests on her shoulders, the rest of him cropped out. And my eyes stop on something: just below the roll of his sleeve is a small tattoo no bigger than a penny: the Greystone Society insignia.

—

ZALIKAH AGREES TO meet me at a café on campus. her fingernails are bitten to shreds, and she keeps glancing over her shoulder as if someone might come

up behind her.

“I can’t believe they’re saying it was an accident,” Zalikah whispers.

I look at her. “You don’t think it was?”

She closes her eyes and draws in a breath. Exhales. “Oh god. I don’t know. I really don’t know.” She wraps her arms around herself and rocks forward and back. Forward and back. The motion makes me nauseated.

“Zalikah,” I say, trying to get her to look at me. “Can you think of anyone who would have wanted to hurt her? Anyone who she might have had an argument with?”

“Please, it’s Zee,” she corrects me as she shakes her head. Blinks several times as if fighting tears.

“How about someone she was dating?”

Zee looks up. “She did have an argument with someone the night before she went missing. Thursday around seven or eight. I heard her on the phone.” She swallows. Looks away.

“Who was it?”

She hesitates. “She didn’t say.”

“Was it her ex? Liam?” I bristle as I remember the bruise I’d seen on her wrist the night we had dinner last April. She’d laughed it off with some excuse, but it was clearly made by a hand grabbing her. After that, I never liked Liam. Never trusted him. “I remember him,” I tell her.

Zee breathes out. “Or this other guy...Ben. Ben Wong. She was sort of dating him earlier this year, but I haven’t seen him around for a while.”

Ben? I don’t remember her mentioning someone named Ben. But how closely had I paid attention? I’d been so busy. So overwhelmed with my own day-to-day problems, so focused on Dani. Had one of these boys gotten jealous? Taken it out on her?

I shudder, making a mental note to look up Liam’s and Ben’s socials when I get back to the hotel. “So you think it could have been one of them?”

Zee shrugs, bends a braid around a finger. She looks over her shoulder. “I mean, I don’t know, I just...I can’t believe Naomi would have gotten herself into a situation to have an accident like that. And don’t those true-crime podcasts always look at the boyfriend first?”

For the first time, I realize just how young Zee looks. And how scared. “It’s okay,” I say, gently. “We’re all just trying to make sense of it.”

Zee hesitates. “Talk to Liam.” She looks at her phone, then back at me. “He’s probably at tennis practice. You might be able to catch him if you hurry.”

—

OUTSIDE, THE AIR is hot, oppressive. the concrete burns the soles of my shoes as I walk quickly down the hill toward the tennis courts at the bottom of campus.

I find Liam practicing at the courts, exactly where Zee said he’d be. An opponent waits across the net. Liam tosses the ball into the air, racket raised, and slams it down, firing the ball across the net.

His opponent sends the ball back to the far side with a loud grunt.

Liam lunges for it and misses, and to my surprise, he slams his racket against the ground, breaking it in two. I inhale sharply. Suddenly it’s easy to picture how Naomi could have gotten that bruise.

The coach and the other player disappear from the court, leaving Liam alone. Taking a deep breath, I cautiously approach. I watch from behind the fence as Liam sits on a bench, removing his knee brace and ripping off the tape and pre-wrap underneath it. He furiously tears the last of it and throws it on the ground. With another angry curse, he slams the bench before grabbing his broken racket and yelling out as if in pain.

His fist tightens on the racket, and I think he’s going to slam it into the ground again, but instead it slips from his hand, landing with a loud echoing rattle. He presses his hands to his eyes for a moment before his body goes slack. His head hangs low, forearms to his knees. I hold my breath, watching him, until, after a moment, he senses me and looks up, and to my surprise, his eyes are watery.

But then he blinks and narrows his eyes, his face confused. “What are you doing here?”

“Liam, hi,” I say, steeling myself.

He makes his way over, stopping short and eyeing me from behind the fence. He's taller than I remember. Stronger too. I glance down at the broken racket, remembering how easily he'd cracked it a moment ago. Think of how he could break me, too, if he wanted.

Though the same age as Zee and Naomi, Liam strikes me as a fully grown man. He's several inches taller than I am, lean and athletic, and there's something about his eyes and the way he carries himself that makes me nervous, like he could snap any minute.

"Maya," he says. "What are you doing here?" There's a flicker of something unreadable in his expression, but as quickly as it appears, it's gone.

"I wanted to ask you if you spoke to Naomi recently—"

"Why? You think this is somehow my fault, so you show up here, at practice?" He makes a sound that might have been a laugh and what he does next is so strange, it makes me draw back: he smiles, actually smiles.

It's so alarming it takes me a minute to speak again. "I—"

"She was fucked up long before I met her," he says. "There's nothing I could have done to help her. If she did this herself, that's not on me." With a scowl, Liam turns away from me and begins packing up his things. "I'm sorry for your loss," he mutters.

When he reaches down for his bag, I catch sight of something on his forearm. It's small and easy to miss, but I zero in on it. The Greystone Society insignia. The tattoo I saw in Naomi's photo. It suddenly clicks into place.

"Was she in Greystone with you?"

He stops. I take his silence as confirmation.

My heart beats fast as I find the opening in the fence and make my way over to him, keeping a good ten feet of distance between us. "Please," I say, breathing hard. "I just want to talk, I'm just trying to find out what happened. Don't you want to know too, or did you never actually care about her to begin with?"

He mutters something I can't make out as he continues packing.

"Excuse me?"

“I said, *I loved her.*” He looks up, and I see the emotion twisting his face. Not bitterness or resentment but a deep pain.

He shoves the broken racket into his bag and hauls it over his shoulder. With one last look in my direction he says, “Have a nice day, Maya.”

He’s halfway across the court when my legs snap into action. “Wait.”

I’m at his shoulder when he stops, and what happens next happens fast: he whips around and his hand flies at my face. I think he’s about to hit me, but he grabs my wrist instead.

He spits out the next words like a threat: “You act like you’re some kind of saint, but I know you’re hiding things too.” He releases my wrist. “I’m not going to stand here and take any more of this shit. Leave me the fuck alone.”

Liam leaves the courts and disappears into the clubhouse, the door slamming shut behind him.

NAOMI

October 2022, seven months before her death

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, the news about the hunt scandal quiets to a trickle. Greystone has the best legal team—all alumni, some of the best lawyers in New York. They’ve no doubt launched a wide-scale PR cleanup campaign and gained control of the narrative already.

And, to my surprise, my feelings for Liam wane along with it. I knew when we broke up last spring he wasn’t okay. That it wasn’t normal for me to have to hide bottles of alcohol or pour them down the bathroom sink. I knew he drank to avoid dealing with his pain, and part of the way he treats me has to do with that too. Liam is still grieving. He needs space to heal.

—

OVER THE FOLLOWING weeks, Ben takes me to his favorite spots on campus: the reading nook with dappled light, the suspension bridge, the underground tunnels. He tells me about his family: his parents used their savings to send him to high school in the States and live with his uncle in Manhattan. *Not everyone from Singapore is wealthy*, he explains.

Last night, he brought out an old map with his home in Singapore circled in pencil and the places in Southeast Asia he’d traveled. We talked about his parents, and I told him how I lost mine. How Maya took the place of my

mom but that just like a parent who's never there, she doesn't really know me. How she assumes my life was easy, growing up in Greenwich, going to private school. How we never really talk about the years I was in San Jose alone, when she left.

It's the first time I've been so open and vulnerable with someone other than Liam, and I feel completely exposed. But Ben listens, quietly, and he doesn't judge, and before long, I realize that I'm falling for him.

"This one's called *Relativity*," Ben says. We're studying in Firestone Library, and he's looked up from his computer to show me a picture of an endless staircase.

"Isn't that the poster in your room?"

He nods. "M. C. Escher. I could stare at it forever. Makes me think we're those faceless guys, looking at our phones, walking up flight after flight of stairs, never going anywhere and totally unaware of the amazing world around us."

I like the way his mind works—he's smart but sensitive and doesn't accept anything at face value. I like how creative he is, obsessed with abstract reasoning, numbers, and design. And as I go back to my reading, I wonder if this, whatever this is, counts as dating. It feels so easy, being with Ben, so—I don't know—good, and it scares me.

—

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT, and I promised Ben I'd go to his game after dance rehearsal. We've stopped by my room so I can get ready, and when we reach the door to my suite, he leans against the wall. "What time are you done?" As I search for my keys, he slips his hand under my shirt onto the small of my back.

I throw him a look. "Why, you need a pep talk before the game?" I tease.

He grins. "If that's what you want to call it."

The common area is dark when we enter: none of my roommates are home. Ben pulls me toward him, sliding his hand higher up the back of my shirt and unhooking my bra.

He's kissing my neck, and I'm pulling off his shirt as we make our way down the dark hallway toward my room, and despite enjoying Ben's body against mine, the gentle yet strong touch of his hands, I keep seeing flashes of Liam, remembering the last time we were together—the way he threw me against the wall and kissed me hard. Ben and I are on my bed when, hearing a noise, I stop abruptly.

“What was that?” I lift my head, listening into the silence. I could have sworn there was a voice coming from right outside the door.

“What?” Ben keeps his lips hovering over the skin on my neck as he speaks.

But I pull away. “Did you hear that?”

He looks at me, confused.

A few minutes later, there it is again. The creak of a bed frame, someone whispering. My roommates and I are all pretty good at letting one another know when one of us is having a *guest* over, but I hadn't told them today. Zee said she was going to rehearsal early to work on her piece, and Amy's practically been living in the library.

“Hold on.” I put a finger up to my lips and creep out to the hall. The walls are thin—maybe it's the neighbors. But as I walk toward Amy's room, the sounds grow louder. I'm not sure how I didn't notice earlier, but Amy's door is open a crack, light seeping into the dark hallway.

My shoulders relax. She's private about who she's dating, so maybe she'd secretly brought someone back. I'm about to look away when she shifts into my line of sight. To my surprise, she's wearing lacy underwear, and her laptop is propped on the bed as if she's on a video chat with someone. Feeling uncomfortable, I avert my gaze and tiptoe back to my room.

“Who was it?” Ben asks, when I shut the door quietly.

“Amy...She's on the phone with someone...” I shrug. “It's none of my business...I'm just kind of surprised.” I didn't know she was dating anyone.

Ben grins. “I guess that means we have to be quiet, then.” And he leans in to kiss me again.

MAYA

June 2023

WITH A GASP, I WAKE at six A.M. covered in sweat. Amy. Her roommate. I have to talk to her.

Reaching for my phone, I navigate to my sister's Instagram, scrolling until I find a photo of the two of them together.

Amy's profile has almost no pictures of her but is filled with political posts and nature shots, and, when I click through her latest stories, there's a new picture of a place I recognize: the Lake Carnegie towpath.

—

AS I APPROACH Lake Carnegie, the sight of the stone bridge overwhelms me with emotion. I remember Cecily and Kai running across it after our team won intramural volleyball. Skinny-dipping in the lake with Nate. Lila at the stern of a boat in the early morning as her crew team's oars slid over the water. I've never seen it this lush, though, the Japanese maples and purple nightshade blossoming along the shore.

But underneath, a darker buzz: cicadas, a cold breeze shaking the branches. My sister's body was found here.

I suddenly picture her being pulled from the water and grip onto the ledge as a chill passes through me.

On the other side of the bridge is the towpath where Naomi liked to jog alone. What if she'd been on a run when someone attacked her?

I'm thinking of the possibilities when something brushes my arm, making me jump. A head of long black hair streaks past. A young woman. I'd been so lost in thought I hadn't heard her approach.

She turns to look at me over her shoulder. "Sorry—" and fear flashes across her face. She slows for a moment, opening her mouth as if to say something, and closes it again. *Amy*. But she turns, continuing down the trail, faster now.

"Hey, wait." I jog after her. I could see that she'd recognized me. Why is she running away?

Amy ignores me, picking up her pace so she's increased the distance between us.

"Amy!" I struggle to catch up.

She's in clothes that look too warm for the heat, her dark hair draping over her shoulders.

As I gain on her, my chest tightens. Strange, of course, that she hasn't answered my messages, that she's pretending she didn't hear me call her name, but something else too. I remember helping Naomi move in freshman year, how Amy had sat on the bed in her room reading a book, watching us from beyond the crack in the door. She was quiet, observant. If anyone would have spotted something different in how Naomi was acting, it would have been her.

"Amy! Hey!" I shout, and finally she slows to a walk. "Hey, it's Maya, Naomi's sister."

She looks at me with trepidation as I approach, slowly lowering an earbud from her ear. "I remember you," she says quietly as her eyes slide to the ground. The girl looks up at me. I notice she's shivering. "I'm so sorry about what happened."

"Thank you. I'm sure it's hard for you too, you were one of her best friends. Listen, did you see her? I mean, did you see her the day she died?"

She shakes her head, looks down, her black hair falling like curtains over her face.

“Do you know what was going on with her the last few months?”

She bites her lip, and I can tell she’s trying to hold back tears.

“I talked to Liam, and he seemed upset...Did they have a falling-out?” I remember the way Liam grabbed my wrist. The broken racket.

“She—” Amy starts to sob. “I’m sorry.”

I stand there, unsure of what to do.

“Oh, no, don’t. It’s okay.” I touch Amy on the arm. She swipes at her tears, but they keep coming. She’s sobbing hard, the way a child would, gasps shaking her whole body.

I want to reach out and hug her, but I barely know this girl. She looks terrified, but I can’t tell if she’s scared of me or of whatever happened to my sister.

When Amy finally calms down, I lean in, lowering my voice. “I know this is hard. Trust me, I know. But if you know something...I promise to keep it between us. I just want to find out what happened to her. She was the only family I had left, and I loved her so much.”

She looks at the ground and doesn’t respond.

“She canceled our plans Friday night because something came up, and I’m guessing she came here to meet someone. Do you know who that might have been? Was it Liam? Or someone else in Sterling? Or even Greystone?” I wasn’t even sure Amy knew what Greystone was—she wasn’t even a member of Sterling Club, and these societies were meant to stay secret, after all.

But Amy flinches when I say *Greystone*. She looks at me, eyes wide, and I realize she does know—either because Naomi told her, or Amy found out on her own—but then she says, so quietly I have to strain to hear, “The night before she died, she was acting really weird...like on the verge of a breakdown. She kept saying she thought someone was following her. But I have no idea where she went that night.” Her voice gives way. “I guess she could’ve been with this guy Ben? But...I’m not sure...I don’t think he’d ever do anything to hurt her.”

She’s looking down at her feet, arms wrapped around herself. There’s something she isn’t telling me. “Do you think you could let me into her

room?”

Amy's eyes flick up to mine. “Um, sure, I guess. Follow me.”

—

AMY UNLOCKS THE door to their room and turns on the light. It's been a long time since I've seen their room. I haven't seen it since the day I'd helped her move in. I feel guilty—Princeton's not far from the city at all, but I hardly ever came out here to see her, and when I did, I'd come for a quick dinner and avoid campus.

The common area is what I expected: the turquoise IKEA couch I bought for Naomi, the old lamps that belonged to Margaret. Books, clothes, makeup. An antique mirror we'd found at a flea market in Brooklyn. The wall covered in Polaroids of the three of them, though fewer than the last time I saw it, some bent and worn. Tears prick my eyes, and I have to look away.

That's when I notice a strange spot on the wall, one that seems to have been covered in fresh paint. In fact, the entire wall seems to have been recently painted and is slightly off in color. Odd. But when I turn to ask Amy, she's gone.

I move toward her bedroom. The door is closed and blocked with crime scene tape. The police had told us that they'd finished searching her room, and we were free to gather her belongings whenever we wanted, but it's still a shock to see it this way. Carefully removing the crime scene tape, I enter Naomi's bedroom, pulse quickening. As I survey the room, my eyes fall on the framed photograph of the two of us on her desk, in our matching blue swimsuits, and the sight of it makes me choke up.

The rest of the space was clearly disturbed from the police investigation. Her drawers have all been opened and pawed through, fingerprint powder dusted on her desk, on the mugs and wineglass. The air still smells faintly of Naomi's perfume: light and youthful, with notes of vanilla.

I close my eyes for a moment, steadying myself. I have to keep it together. Stay focused. Find some sort of clue. Something, anything the police might have missed.

The top drawer of her desk is filled with random items: gum, loose credit cards, lip balm.

“The police took her laptop...” I startle at the sound of Amy’s voice, and when I turn around, she’s pointing to the bottom of the desk. “But maybe check and see if they took her notebook? She kept it there, in the bottom drawer. Maybe there’ll be something useful in it.”

But in the bottom drawer are just sketches and notes from class. No notebook.

“That’s weird...” Amy says, her face wrinkling in confusion. “I could’ve sworn...They must have taken it.”

I search more quickly now, going through her dresser. The pressure of tears is right behind my eyes, but I have to keep going.

After another thirty minutes, I decide it’s no use. The police have taken everything important, and there’s nothing left.

Sighing, I bend down to pick up a piece of paper that’s fallen under the dresser, and that’s when I notice it. I reach under the dresser and pull it out. A dried flower petal. I turn it over in my hand, and looking under the dresser again, there are more, and a small piece of folded card stock, all the way in the back, difficult to reach.

It’s faded, barely legible, with a gold leaf design printed around the edges, and on it, a handwritten note: *Naomi, I’m sorry about last night. Let me make it up to you. —M.*

“I don’t know what those are doing there,” Amy says, standing behind me. She’s reading the card from over my shoulder, and when I look up at her, all the blood has drained from her face.

NAOMI

October 2022, seven months before her death

BY THE TIME I GET to the soccer stadium, the temperature has dropped ten degrees. The wind has picked up, sending dark clouds hurtling past overhead, a disorienting contrast to the harsh glare of the stadium lights.

The game has just started, and the players are out on the field, but I don't see Ben. I'm searching the crowd for Zee and Trey when I hear my name.

"Naomi!" Zee calls down to me. I make my way over to them, and Zee points across the field. "Hey, look at number seventeen! What a freakin' stud!"

I'm relieved to see Ben high-five another player as he subs into the game. I cup my hand around my mouth. "Woooo! Let's gooo!" And when he looks up and finds me in the crowd, it makes me light up.

Sometime later, I'm watching Ben send a long pass to a guy open in front of the goal when, out of the corner of my eye, I catch a small, dark-haired girl in a long pink coat watching me. At first, I think it must be someone I know, but when I turn and meet her gaze, she quickly looks away. I'm still trying to place her when I hear the halftime buzzer.

DURING THE BREAK, Zee and Trey leave in search of food, and a few minutes later, I'm watching Ben run down the sideline when a heavy arm wraps around my shoulders.

"There you are." Liam smiles down at me, charming as ever, as if we'd planned to meet each other here. My ribs clench as I try to fight the attraction. "Liam. How's it going?"

He moves closer, and I don't move away. I'm hyperaware of the contact of his body against mine. The way he's pulling me toward him. *Why does he do this to me?* I know this isn't good, Liam being here. I know he's hoping Ben will see—Liam might not want me anymore, but he doesn't want anyone else to have me, either. The warmth of him so close to me makes every cell in my body alert, and I try to inch away from him. "We're up," I say, ignoring the fluttering in my stomach and pointing my chin at the field.

"I don't care about the game...how are you?"

I turn away from him, unable to look him in the eye. If I look at him, I'm done. "Good, you?"

"Yeah?" I can tell Liam's watching me. "Look, I just wanted to say—"

"We don't have to do this."

"Mollie and I broke up, you know," he adds, and I have to force myself not to react. I shouldn't consider getting back together, but I can't help that pang behind my ribs.

The crowd cheers again, saving me.

Ben is on a breakaway, running down the sideline past the last defender. He cuts toward the goal, and the goalie comes out for him. They're about to collide when, at the last moment, he switches the ball to his left foot and flicks it past the goalie's outstretched hand.

As the crowd erupts, I cheer more than I need to, glad for the excuse to pull farther away from Liam.

"He got lucky," Liam mutters.

I need to get away from here before Ben sees us and gets the wrong idea.

"Hey," Liam says. "There's something I forgot to tell you."

I turn to reply, but before I know what's happening, Liam leans down and kisses me.

For a moment, it's all there is. The shock of it, the pressure and warmth of his lips, sends me spiraling. The kiss lasts a second too long before I jerk back, my whole body flushed. "What are you *doing*?"

Liam shrugs, smiles.

I turn away, furious, and when I look up, Ben is standing on the sideline, staring right at us.

—

AFTER THE GAME, I search for Ben at the tailgate to explain what happened with Liam. I spot him talking to his teammate and start to jog over when the girl with the pink coat I saw in the stands earlier throws her arms around his waist.

He turns toward her and I stop in my tracks. She's saying something to him. He's smiling. There's a familiarity to their body language. An intimacy to the way he leans over her. The way she touches his elbow gently. I watch him laugh at whatever she's said and tug at one side of her earmuffs. What is going on?

"Ben?" My legs feel wobbly beneath me as I take a cautious step toward them. Startled, he and the girl pull back from each other. Their heads whip to me. The sky has broken and it's started to drizzle, the cold making my hands go numb.

Ben looks at me over the girl's head. She's wearing a Yale sweatshirt under her coat, and when she sees me, her smile falters.

"Hey." His voice is flat, eyes distant. "This is—"

"Jamie," she says, with a tight smile. "Ben's girlfriend." She says it with a mildly annoyed tone as if asking, *And who the hell are you?*

"Oh, okay. Good to know." I take a step back, shaking my head as my throat constricts. I look at Ben, whose face is a mix of emotions I don't understand.

Without another word, I turn sharply and march in the opposite direction, and as soon as I'm far enough away, I run.

I FIGHT THE urge to cry as I surge through the dark, rainy campus. The wind has picked up and it's throwing rain against my face, tearing my hair from my forehead.

Back in my dorm, I grab a bottle of tequila from the mini fridge and take a sip. It burns my throat but numbs the pain a little.

A half hour later, wandering down Washington Road, I reach the bridge over Lake Carnegie and push myself onto the stone ledge. It's freezing out here. Wind surges around me, brutal, shoving me forward. I trip over an uneven stone, and as I recover my balance and glance down at the rushing water below, vertigo sends me reeling.

Out of the darkness, someone shouts my name.

Down the road, a light grows nearer. Too bright. Disorienting. It takes me a moment to realize it's Liam on his motorcycle. He'd gotten it over the summer after wrecking his Jeep a few months before, and I'd always wondered what riding it would be like.

"What are you doing here?" I shout over the wind. The edges of him appear in the dark as he parks his bike.

He approaches slowly, cautiously, careful not to startle me in case I might lose my balance. "I'd like to ask the same of you."

"What does it matter?" The irritation I'd felt when he'd kissed me at the game is still there, but the tension between us has returned, the tightness in my stomach that wavers between frustration and intense attraction.

After making my way down from the ledge, I take another drink of tequila and look at Liam.

I sink down to the ground, leaning my back against the stone and wrapping my arms around my shivering body.

"Let me take you back," he says.

"I'm fine."

"I never said you weren't." Liam sits down next to me on the wet pavement, takes off his jacket, and drapes it over my shoulders. The gesture

surprises me, but I don't stop him. Then Liam grabs the tequila from my hand and takes a long drink.

I watch him. "I thought you weren't drinking."

He shrugs, finishes it off, and wipes his mouth with the back of his arm.

Zee never liked Liam. Most people didn't. They saw his brashness as rude. But I knew it came from a deeper pain he didn't share, one I understood.

One night during my sophomore year, he told me he spent more time with his tennis coach than his own parents. After her failed back surgery, his mom took Xanax and Oxycontin like they were vitamins. His dad was always working late—or so he claimed—and so Liam was left alone. I think he put up walls to protect himself.

"It's freezing." Liam turns to me, leaning in so close that his breath tingles on my cheek. "Come on. Let me take you home."

—

WE PAUSE UNDER the eave of Liam's dorm as the rain beats down on the pavement. I'm wearing his jacket, and we're both soaked from the rain. Before opening the door, he hesitates, turns to me. "You want me to take you home instead?"

The unsaid question floats between us: *Or do you want to come up?* My eyes lift to his, and I take him in—the way his pupils fill his irises, the bead of rain tracing the lines of his cheek, the sheer fabric of his shirt clinging to his chest—and suddenly the air feels different, charged. My heart is beating so hard, I can feel it in my ears.

"No," I tell him, and before I can say anything else, he leans down and kisses me. Suddenly it's as if we're right back in sophomore year at the beginning of our relationship, coming back from a night out at the eating clubs.

We burst into his room and tear off our wet clothes and it feels so familiar yet different, but when we get to his bed, he stops abruptly. His face is flushed and his hair rumpled from where my hands have run through it.

“You’re drunk—this feels weird,” he says, taking a step back.

“I’m fine,” I say, pushing myself up onto his bed, but as much as I want to keep kissing him, I can’t help but feel it’s kind of sweet of him to care.

He smiles, takes a step toward me, and leans in, but instead of wrapping his arms around me, he pulls the comforter over my chest and settles into bed next to me. “Get some sleep.”

—

I MUST HAVE drifted off because when I open my eyes, I’m alone in his bed. It’s a little disorienting at first, and takes a moment for me to remember how I got here. Liam’s left a T-shirt and sweatpants on the end of the bed for me to change into, and after I slip them on, I find him asleep on the couch in the living room. I fight the urge to curl up next to him.

When he sees me, he smiles sleepily and props himself up on an elbow. “You look good in my shirt.”

I try not to smile. Wrapping my arms around myself, I look around the room. “Could I have a glass of water? I’m so thirsty.”

He rises from the couch. “I have that peppermint tea you like.”

I sink into the couch in his place and watch as he makes his way to the kettle. His blond hair is still damp from the rain, and he’s leaner, the lines of his jaw and cheekbones more pronounced. It occurs to me that it’s been a long time since we’ve spent this much time together. The last time we hooked up was an alcohol-fueled whirlwind, no more than a few words exchanged.

He hands me a cup and sits on the other end of the couch, pulling my feet into his lap. It’s killing me the way he’s treating me like we’re back together. Like nothing ever changed. I want to be angry with him, but I can’t help but feel that intense pull, that heightened sense whenever we’re close.

“So,” he says, “you going to tell me what happened or what?”

I look down and take a sip of tea, grimacing as it burns my tongue. I’d rather not talk about Ben.

“It’s the new guy, isn’t it.” Liam’s expression darkens. He breathes out. “I hate that guy. What a fucking tool.”

My eyes snap to his. “What’s your problem?” And the moment bursts. I push myself to my feet and reach for my phone. But I stand too quickly and blood rushes to my head.

“Woah, where are you going?” Liam asks, catching my elbow. He positions himself between me and the door.

I try to move around him. I knew this was a bad idea. “I should probably go.”

“Stay.”

“I work the opening shift at the bookstore tomorrow.” When I move for the door, he grabs my wrist but then quickly drops it, shoving his hands into his pockets instead.

“Naomi.”

“Liam.”

Just before I leave, I look at him one last time where he’s leaning against the frame, watching me closely, and I desperately want to close the space between us.

“Why do you always do this?” Liam breathes out. He’s not angry, but I can hear the frustration in his voice.

“Do what?”

“Leave like this.”

I let out a disbelieving laugh and glare at him, trying to control my voice. “When you disappeared last spring, I called you every day... You didn’t even text me back. Not *once*.” I’d never brought this up. The nights I’d spent worrying about him. The voicemails on his parents’ phone they never returned. “No one knew where you went. I thought—I don’t know what I thought...” My voice breaks as tears prick my eyes.

Liam breathes deeply. His jaw works, and I can tell he’s struggling. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“No?” My voice rises. After losing both my parents? After everything I’d told him?

“It was confusing.”

“You could have told me.” The pressure behind my eyes is painful, and I bite the inside of my lip, trying not to cry. “I didn’t want to lose you.” Now the tears come. Scraping them away, I push past him.

“Hey.” Liam catches my arm, gently. His face softens. “I didn’t want to lose you either.”

The air between us feels tense, and my face is flushed. I both regret everything and want him even more. We stand there, eyes locked, and when I can no longer stand it, I turn and walk away.

“I was here,” Liam says as I yank open the door at the end of the hall. There’s a deep sadness in his eyes. “Just know...I never left. I was always here.”

MAYA

October 2011

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, DAISY prepped me on everything related to Sterling Club bicker, which was quickly approaching. I sat on her bed while she stood with a chart she'd made with printed photos of everyone in Sterling Club and what I should know about them. *Jill and River have an open relationship; Amelie's dad just got arrested for securities fraud; Everett is a genius, but he's also addicted to coke.* We went shopping, and when I gasped at the price tag, Daisy whispered, *You can keep the tag on and return it after.*

It was then that I realized Daisy wasn't like them. She looked the part, but the Chloé purse she carefully kept in its original bag, the Byredo perfume she used until it was gone, the way she'd carefully apply her drugstore makeup. No. Daisy wasn't from this world any more than I was, she was just better at pretending.

"Sterling is members-only tonight, Ivy is list, and TI is on pass, two of any color," Daisy said.

She showed me their chest of multicolored paper tickets, which we'd use to get into the clubs that were *on pass* and not *list*. We danced, drank beer, and ended the night with a giant bowl of microwaved ramen. During these nights, I became someone else. I shed the protective layer I'd hidden behind. I learned to let go, to dance, to flirt, to kiss strangers...and I felt freer than I'd

ever been. I would do anything to keep feeling this way, to keep living this life...and that meant getting into Sterling no matter what.

ONE COOL SATURDAY morning in mid-October, the weekend before bicker, I stood in Cecily's room wearing a Princeton football uniform that was at least three sizes too big. Cecily adjusted the helmet as Kai and Daisy stood behind her with their fists to their chins, heads tilted to one side. I could barely see them past the cage of the helmet.

After fiddling with the chin strap, Cecily stepped back and joined Daisy and Kai with the same puzzled expression. "There's something that doesn't read 'men's football' to me."

"Maybe try more pads," Kai said, grabbing a stack of them and stuffing them under the uniform, against my chest. The cold pads scraped against my skin as I fidgeted. As much as I tried to breathe through my mouth, it wasn't enough to prevent the body odor stink of the dirty uniform from penetrating my nostrils.

"Whose uniform is this?" I asked, adjusting the chrome visor. Daisy had explained that if I did this one task, the three of them would do everything in their power to get me into Sterling. And hearing how unpredictable the bicker interview process could be, I didn't want to chance it. You couldn't ask for a better guarantee than having Cecily, the president-elect of the club, on your side.

"I stole it from the third-string kicker," Daisy explained. "We hooked up last night on the hood of his car in the lot behind Ivy." I gave her a look and she shrugged. "What? I was a literal nun all summer. Something had to be done."

"I got it," Cecily said, and disappeared into her closet. She emerged moments later holding a mouth guard. "Try this."

I slipped the mouth guard in my mouth, and the girls hollered. "That's it!" Daisy said, turning me around to face the mirror.

Staring back at me was a scrawny-looking third-string kicker with a long brown braid hanging out of the helmet. I stuffed my hair back in, took the mouth guard out, and smiled. “It’s perfect.”

Kai shoved a pill bottle into my hands. “You know what to do,” she said.

I looked down and read the label: *Stimulant Laxative*.

Earlier today, Cecily told me what Alex Bain did to her at the end of sophomore year. He had led her on, acting like they were serious when he really just wanted to hook up with her. When they did finally have sex, he had taped the whole thing on a video camera hidden under a pile of clothes in his room and then showed the entire football team. Cecily couldn’t even report it to the school because she knew they’d never kick out their star football player.

I’d never seen her so upset. Cecily, who was always poised, well-spoken. Strong. As she told the story, I felt myself growing more and more angry. How could we let him get away with this? Although what he’d done to her was much worse, I couldn’t help but remember how I felt the day I stood there soaking wet with beer as everyone pointed and laughed. The shame, the resonant fury.

Payback’s a bitch, Alex. And this time, I’ll be the one laughing.

—

THE STADIUM WAS packed with students and alumni. an excitement flowed through the stands as fans gripped their beers and sounded their noisemakers. Princeton football was 5 and 0 this season and this was the biggest game yet. We were playing our archrivals—Harvard—and if we won, we’d clinch the Ivy League. As the band played the school fight song, the crowd erupted in cheers.

Wearing my gear, I’d managed to sneak into the huddle in the tunnel that led out to the field. My heart thudded as Alex Bain, the quarterback, gave a pep talk. Daisy had persuaded the third-string kicker to stay home in exchange for front-row tickets to a Patriots game, which Kai bought for this purpose. And here I was in his place.

“Let’s go out there and fuck shit up. Every play. Bring the pain, hit hard, let’s leave it all on the field.”

The guys whooped their approval and jumped up and down. I awkwardly joined in. Someone slapped me hard on the back, knocking the wind out of me. Everyone shouted, thudded their fists against their chests. Someone slapped my butt and a yelp of surprise escaped me.

Music boomed and the announcer’s voice crackled over the loudspeakers as we ran out onto the field. “Welcome the Princeton Tigers!” The crowd erupted in cheers, and my whole body tingled with pride. *So this is what it feels like.* Players ran in dizzying patterns, tossing the football back and forth.

I anxiously scanned the crowd. Cecily, Daisy, and Kai were in the front row with giant signs and Tigers gear. They were shouting at me, but it was impossible to hear over all the noise. Daisy signaled toward a table where Gatorade drinks sat with players’ numbers written on them. A #2 and #12 sat side by side. *What number was it?* Pulse racing, I turned toward the field to scan the players for Alex, but all I saw was a blur of orange-and-black-spandexed men.

“Palmer, there you are.” Someone slapped me on the back. My stomach dropped as I whipped around. Surely I was about to be caught.

But to my surprise the trainer kept talking, seemingly unaware that I was definitely not Palmer. He was a fast-talking man with a nasal voice and rectangular glasses. “I thought I told you to sit this one out. Your shin splints aren’t going to get better if you keep pounding on ’em.”

I nodded and gave a quick grunt, like I’d heard the other guys do.

He squinted at me. “You sure everything’s okay?” My palms were slick with sweat as I nodded enthusiastically.

“Hey, Carl, can I get taped up? My ankle tape’s getting loose again.” It was Alex’s voice.

I couldn’t believe I was so close to him. I hadn’t really looked at him since that night at Cottage—his sweep of blond hair and freckled skin, that cocky grin—and a tremor of anger rippled through me again.

Clocking the number on his jersey, #2, I quickly turned back to the drink bottles and grabbed #2 off the table. Jogging past a row of cheerleaders to the

far corner of the field, I bent down like I was tying my shoe. I felt sick with adrenaline as I unscrewed the cap, took out the laxatives, which we'd crushed and put in a napkin, and poured it into the Gatorade. My hands were slick with sweat as I screwed the cap back on and gave the drink a shake.

"Hey, Palmer, *the fuck* you doing?" I heard another voice, this time angry. It was another kicker.

Unable to get away this time, I made my voice low and hoarse and gestured to my throat. "Sick as fuck," I said, shaking my head. I clutched my stomach and pretended to heave.

"Oh shit," the guy said, taking a step back. "Never mind, man. You just chill. We're good." He disappeared off into the mass of players on the field.

Alex was getting taped up on the bench when I finally handed him the bottle, which he accepted without looking up. "Thanks, man." And a spike of adrenaline lit my insides as I sprinted away.

—

"DID YOU DO it?" Daisy asked, after I'd changed back into normal clothes and joined them in the stands.

"Yeah," I said, catching my breath. "I poured in the whole thing."

I watched Alex launch a perfect pass into the end zone. All around us, the crowd cheered.

"Maybe it takes some time to kick in," Kai said. I wrung my hands nervously. I was sure I'd shaken it well. But what if Alex hadn't drunk enough of it?

The announcer's voice crackled over the intercom. "Princeton and Harvard tied 14-14 as we go into the fourth quarter."

My heart wouldn't slow down. I'd never been so invested in a football game in my life. "Tigers interception on the ten-yard line!" the announcer shouted, and the crowd erupted. Alex came onto the field for the next play. After the hike, he gripped the ball and was backing up like he was about to throw it. A wide receiver stood wide open in the end zone, waving his hands in the air.

Cecily gripped my forearm and I held my breath. Instead of throwing the ball, Alex fumbled and his knees buckled together, like a little boy who needed to pee. There were confused cries from the crowd. “Not sure what Bain is doing right now,” the announcer said.

My heart beat fast. I held on to the railing as Alex sprinted in the wrong direction. Everyone was confused for a moment, but then a Princeton running back picked up the ball and dodged his way into the end zone and the crowd cheered.

Alex was on the far side of the field, grabbing his backside as he waddled the rest of the way off. Daisy and I exchanged a look before breaking down in a fit of laughter.

Kai handed me a beer and clinked her glass against mine. “Good work out there, babe.”

“You did it,” Cecily said, hugging me.

“Fuck Alex Bain,” Kai said, her beer high in the air.

“Yeah, fuck Alex Bain,” I said, swelling with pride.

Daisy was laughing so hard, tears formed in her eyes. I couldn’t help but grin as I watched Alex disappear into the tunnel. *Revenge is so sweet.*

After that, Sterling Club bicker was just a formality. I knew I was in.

MAYA

June 2023

BACK AT THE POLICE STATION, I set the note on the metal table between us and remain standing, breathing hard. *Naomi, I'm sorry about last night. Let me make it up to you. —M*

Simmons studies it with a frown. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it in my sister's dorm room. Underneath the dresser. Maybe if your team had looked more carefully..."

She presses her lips together. Studies the note. "*M.*"

"Did you talk to her roommates? The boys she was dating? She got in a fight with someone on Thursday night—did you know that? Maybe the guy she was seeing, Benjamin Wong, or her ex, Liam—"

"We're in touch with them." Simmons reviews her notes. "Benjamin Wong was out of the country."

"And Liam?"

Simmons narrows her eyes. "We've spoken to his lawyer."

My heart is pounding, sweat slicking my brow. "Another thing you should know: my sister was in a secret society. Greystone Society."

"A secret society..." Her mouth twists, a note of disbelief in her voice.

"Yes." I take a breath. "They are one of the most powerful groups in the country." I wait for a flicker of recognition but find none. My eyes flit to the note on the table. Signed *M...* "There was a professor involved with

Greystone when I was a student—Matthew DuPont. He still has ties to them, and there were always rumors about him hooking up with students. What if he has something to—”

Simmons exchanges a look with a young police officer guarding the door. She clears her throat and turns back to me. “I appreciate your diligence, Ms. Banks, but we need to let the evidence speak for itself.”

“I’m not making this up.”

“I have to reiterate: there is no evidence that your sister’s death was criminal in nature.”

“Are you serious? Everything about her death says it is.” My hands are shaking as I grip the edge of the table.

Simmons stands. “Thank you for coming by. We’ll be sure to keep you informed of our progress.”

“Wait.” I consider telling her about Lila so she’ll understand just how dangerous Greystone can be, but a knot is blocking my throat. Telling her about Lila implicates me too. What would she think then? Would she think it was my fault? *Was it my fault?*

I draw in a breath. *We were young. We were scared.* That was the truth, wasn’t it?

Or.

You were guilty, a voice in my head says. *Guilty,* it says, and I shudder, slouching back in my chair. The adrenaline coursing through me evaporates, and now I’m cold, so cold in this suffocating room.

“Please.” My voice is strange.

Simmons stares at me blankly. After a painfully long silence, she sighs. “Mr. DuPont has a solid alibi.”

“You spoke with him?”

“We spoke with anyone she may have interacted with in the weeks leading up to her death. We’ve narrowed the time of death to Friday night between eight P.M. and five A.M. Mr. DuPont was on campus giving a speech in front of hundreds of people. Home with his fiancée the remainder of the night.”

“I thought it was hard to determine the exact time of death in a drowning?”

“It’s an estimate. But more importantly, Mr. DuPont’s home security system shows he arrived home around the same time your sister’s phone pinged a tower in Manhattan. Around seven-thirty P.M. Like I said, home with his fiancée the rest of the evening.”

“If Naomi was in Manhattan that night, then how did she end up at the lake?”

“I can’t answer that, yet, but what I can tell you is Mr. DuPont was nowhere near your sister.”

Part Two

Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of
mankind.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lotos-Eaters*

MAYA

November 2011

OVER THE PAST MONTH, THE last dregs of fall finally gave way to winter. Temperatures fell, Lake Carnegie froze over, and winter came with a vengeance. Snow poured over campus, cloaking trees, weighing on rooftops, and settling into the cracks between stones, while the pavement became so slick with black ice that one false step could send you plunging toward the earth.

To escape the storm, I decided to find refuge in Firestone Library.

I wandered to C Floor, under the Skylight Atrium, where rays of light sifted through the high glass ceiling, illuminating dust in the air. Once settled, I opened my laptop and stared at the blank page. The header of my paper filled the screen—"Female Hysteria in the 19th Century—Nervous Disorder or Disordered Society?" I'd never had trouble focusing before. Why was it all of a sudden so hard to write one paper? The cursor blinked back at me. Sighing, I leaned back and looked across the room.

I'd chosen this spot because A, it was one of the few places where I could have my back against a wall, and B, it had the perfect view of Lila Jones. She was a member of Sterling Club whom I'd briefly met at bicker but was totally in awe of. She had this cool confidence about her, a series of tiny gold hoops crawling up her ear, ripped jeans and Doc Martens. Her bright red hair was the color of embers and draped over her face as she scanned the textbook in

front of her. I suppose I felt a sort of closeness to her—being that we were both outsiders. She didn't have many friends and spent most of her time in the library too.

When I went to Professor DuPont's office hours, she had been there when I arrived. She'd tilted her head back, exposing her neck, and laughed in the most sensual yet unaffected way. As I stood outside, looking in through the blinds, his eyes were glued to her face, infatuated.

I watched Lila adjust her headphones now and wondered what music she was listening to. Maybe the Smiths, or something darker, like Nick Cave. I was taking a sip of my coffee, now lukewarm, when my phone buzzed.

It was a text from Daisy: *Excited about initiation Sunday?* And pride swelled within me. I couldn't believe I'd gotten into Sterling.

After typing my response—*Hell yes!*—I looked over my shoulder to where Lila had been. She was gone.

"Hey, Maya." Lila leaned on the armchair across from me and tucked a loose strand of hair behind an ear, headphones dangling around her neck.

"Hey," I said, unable to think. I suddenly became aware of my heartbeat. "Um, what are you studying?" *What are you studying?* I sounded like such a nerd.

"I'm reading T. S. Eliot. My thesis is on time and memory in *Four Quartets*," she said. Her catlike eyes were a vibrant emerald green and she had light freckles scattered across her nose.

"That's cool," I said, regaining composure. "I read *Four Quartets*, it's beautiful. 'Footfalls echo in the memory...'"

"'...down the passage we did not take, toward the door we never opened, into the rose garden.'" Lila smiled. She sat on the arm of my chair, leaned toward me, and whispered in my ear. "*Be careful.*"

I pulled back and looked at her, confused. *Be careful?* Of what?

"Did you say something?"

But Lila didn't answer. She gave a small smile and walked away, leaving goosebumps on my arm where she touched me.

After returning to my work for some time, I grabbed the next book from the stack and opened it. Tucked in the front cover was a torn piece of paper.

In scrawling handwriting, it read: *Don't trust them. Get out while you still can.*

A part of me wanted to laugh at the cryptic message. Did Lila slide this note into my book? I looked around, expecting her to jump out of the shadows. Was this some kind of joke?

I glanced back in the direction Lila had been, but she was gone. A few students hovered over their reading—no one I recognized. My breath grew shallow. Was she trying to warn me away from Sterling Club? From Princeton?

A chilly draft swept past as I scanned the corners of the room, and somewhere in the depths of my subconscious was a flutter of unease.

NAOMI

November 2022, six months before her death

THE NEXT DAY IS COLD and gray, the trees' branches wilted, as if exhausted from yesterday's storm. In desperate need of coffee, I walk up to Nassau Street to get Olive's for breakfast, and to my surprise, I nearly run headfirst into Ben. He's carrying a bag of food, head down as if in a hurry. I wonder if he has one sandwich in there, or if he'd gotten a second one for his girlfriend.

"Hey," I say.

He shoves his hands in his pockets and keeps his head bowed low like the trees. "Hey."

We stand there in silence for a moment, until Ben speaks. "Look, about what happened at the game. She's not my girlfriend, okay? We broke up months ago. I just, this is embarrassing, but I saw you with Liam so when she said it...I didn't correct her. It was stupid and, yeah, I'm sorry."

"Thanks for clearing that up." I look down at the sidewalk too, still damp from last night's rain. I believe him. She seemed like she was there to win him back.

"Anyway, I'm guessing it doesn't really matter now, does it?" When I look up at him, his gaze is somewhere past me. His hands are still in his pockets, and he has his guard up, like he knows I was with Liam last night after the game. Maybe it was for the best that he saw Liam kiss me.

“Yeah, umm...” I say, wondering how to word this. “Ben, I really like hanging out with you, but Liam and I, we still have some shit to figure out—”

“So I saw.” Ben says this abruptly and looks up at me for the first time. I’d expected to see a distant, if not angry, look in his eyes and am surprised to see a sadness there instead. He shifts his weight. “Well, I have to go. See you around.” He pushes his way past me and when he’s a few strides away he stops and turns around. “I just...I think you’re making a mistake. I think you deserve better.”

Defensive, I open my mouth to respond, maybe to tell him the truth—*that I’m still in love with Liam*—but before I can think of what to say, he dips his head and is gone.

—

ON MONDAY, I worry when Amy doesn’t show up to class. She seems like she’s going through something, but like me, she always tries to deal with it on her own. After class, I text her, *where are you?* to make sure she’s okay—I hadn’t seen her since Saturday morning—but also to talk, to tell her about Liam and Ben.

I grow more anxious when I don’t hear back from her all day, and after an evening meeting with my thesis advisor, I’m walking back to my dorm in the dark when I’m overcome by an inexplicable sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The sensation grows as I enter our building and climb the stairs. I’m rounding the landing when a scream from somewhere deep in the building rips through the silence. I freeze, holding my breath, listening into the dark, until I hear it again, followed by a string of laughter.

Shadows stretch over the hall leading to our room and our front door is ajar. As I approach, my heart beats faster.

Something is wrong.

My thoughts are spiraling—Is it Amy? Is she sick? Hurt? It’d been raining; had there been an accident?—when I see what’s painted on the door: an X. Two angry slashes dripping like blood.

What the hell is going on?

Is this a prank? Some dumb frat guy prank? An X marking an infected house?

I cautiously edge forward, apprehension rising with each step, and brace myself as I tip open the door.

It's so much worse than I'd expected.

The room is destroyed. Lamps knocked over and shattered, bottles and books and clothes all over the floor like someone had been frantically searching for something. Muddy footprints. Defiled essay pages, scattered across the room. And a strange smell—something grassy, decaying, like rotting trash.

My hands begin to shake. I feel violated.

That's when I see her. Nearly hidden in all the chaos of the room, Amy's slender form sits in a heap on the couch, head in her hands, crying.

I rush to her side. "Are you okay?"

She doesn't respond.

"What happened?" I look her over for injuries and when I notice she's clutching her hand, blood oozing from it, I feel a fresh wave of panic. Pieces of broken glass litter the floor around her, drops of blood. "You're bleeding." I move closer, reaching for her. "Let me see."

She flinches and pulls away. "It doesn't hurt."

I convince her to show me her hand and wince when I see how deep the cut is. "We should take you to the health center." I find a first-aid kit and wet a wipe with peroxide. "Come here."

Once we've stopped the bleeding, I survey the room. My insides twist as I take in the overturned furniture. The broken glass. Pages ripped from books.

"Did you see that?" Amy points to the far wall, and when I see it, the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

The wall that used to be covered in our Polaroids and posters is now graffitied. Dark red words spray-painted across all our memories: *Nos Semper Vigilantes*. Below it, *Suck my dick* and hateful slurs: *Slut. Chink. Bitch.*

"I looked it up. It means *We Are Always Watching*," Amy says quietly.

It feels as if the temperature in the room has dropped ten degrees. My stomach is in knots and my heart is loud in my chest. I think of the incident with Pete, the hate in his eyes when he'd shouted at Ben and me.

Up until now, I believed—naïvely—that Princeton existed on some plane outside normal existence. A place where we could walk alone at night without having to look over our shoulders, without having to worry about the targets pinned to our backs.

Since the pandemic, I'd felt tension in certain circles, in certain rooms. There'd been a growing chasm between students like me and students like them. In a time like this, how could we not stand up for our beliefs? But it was like our beliefs had forced us into tight boxes, oblivious to the nuances and in-betweens. The campus from before the pandemic forced us into remote learning was not the same campus we returned to.

"It's my fault," Amy says, staring down into her lap.

"What? Why would you say that? It's not your fault that there are hateful people in the world. Look, in October, after your surprise party—Ben and I ran into some guys, they were really drunk, and one of them, Pete Whitney, said some racist bullshit. I'm willing to bet he and his friends did this."

"But that was a month ago." She's still looking down as I pull her into my arms, hold her cold, shivering body as if she were a child. Amy shakes her head, sniffs. "This isn't for you. It's for me."

I pull back from her. "It could be for any of us. I'm calling public safety." I grab my phone to call the campus police, but she puts a hand on mine, stopping me.

"We can't," she says, shaking her head. Her eyes are huge. Terrified.

"Why not?"

"I'm telling you. Please." She looks down and shakes her head, letting her long hair fall over her face. "I'm sorry, but...it wasn't meant for you, okay? It's a warning. For me. It's about the article I'm working on. If we call public safety, they'll investigate, and the wrong people will get wind of what I'm writing. That's all I can say. Let them think they won. Please. Don't report it."

—

THAT NIGHT AMY stays with a friend and Zee with Trey. Unwilling to stay in by myself, I go to Liam's room. Knock on the door.

Liam answers with a look of surprise, sleepy and shirtless in the doorway. I try not to look down at the lines of his muscular stomach, or the V trailing from each hip down to his sweatpants. "Hey," I say.

His face relaxes and one side of his mouth tips up in a grin that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "You have no idea how much I've missed you."

MAYA

November 2011

IT WAS THE DAY OF my initiation into Sterling Club, and outside our window, downy flakes of snow drifted from a starless sky. Since Lila's warning, anxiety had grown steadily within me. What was she warning me away from? And why didn't Daisy want me to talk about it?

I'd shown Daisy the note when we were getting ready.

"Who wrote that?" Daisy's eyes had narrowed as she'd read it a second time.

I'd shrugged. "It was tucked into my book."

"You sure no one else was around?"

I'd shaken my head. For some reason, I hadn't wanted to tell her it was Lila. Daisy had stared at me with a strange look in her eyes, and I'd been torn as to whether to laugh or feel unsettled. But before I could ask anything else, she'd torn the paper and told me not to bring it up again.

—

NOW, AS MOONLIGHT pooled against the snow-covered grounds on our way to Sterling Club, Daisy's strange reaction surfaced in my thoughts again. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

Daisy was walking quickly. Though I was the one being initiated tonight, she'd been on edge all day. "Of course!"

"All of you talk about Sterling like it's perfect...but it can't be, right? I mean, nothing is ever really perfect."

She slowed her pace to a walk and glanced at me as if deciding whether to tell me the truth. Eventually she spoke. "Well, like anything, there are pros and cons. Once you're in, you're in for life...and that can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how you look at it. Nothing is free, and the life Sterling gives to its alumni has a price too. We get all this: connections, jobs...Think of it as an early favor you spend the rest of your life repaying. That's what makes the whole thing so successful." There was something dark about her expression, but in an instant, it was gone.

My apprehension rose as the eating clubs came into view. I got the strange sensation of eyes on me and glanced up to find a monkey gargoyle staring down at us. "That note...whoever wrote it seemed like they were warning me not to join."

"It was probably just a stupid joke, some idiot that's jealous you're getting initiated into Sterling and they're not," she replied, but there was a quality to her voice that made me think she was withholding something.

When we paused at the last stoplight, Daisy turned to me. She checked to make sure no one was around before leaning in close. "Okay, so there's something you need to know before we go in. Greystone Society operates from within Sterling Club."

I stared at her, the hairs on the back of my neck rising. I'd heard whispers about Greystone Society ever since I came to campus, that it held the same level of prestige that Skull and Bones did at Yale. But I thought it was an urban legend. I thought Princeton didn't have secret societies.

"I thought they dissolved when the university banned them?"

She shook her head. "Maya, what do you think eating clubs are if not just rebranded secret societies? They were banned like a hundred and fifty years ago when one of them set fire to Nassau Hall, but as always, someone's daddy got involved—and his friends, powerful alumni—and got the school to approve a group of students who wanted to form an *eating club*, with known

membership. That first club was Ivy.” The light had changed and Daisy surged across the street. “Since then, eating clubs have been sanctioned and supported by the university. But a few *secret* societies never disbanded. They still operate, sheltered within the clubs.”

She explained the rest as we hurried toward Sterling initiation, her words swirling between us along with the snow the rest of the way there.

“YOU EXCITED?” DAISY asked, when we finally arrived. She removed her snow-covered gloves as we stepped across the threshold into Sterling. It was like stepping into a warm embrace, melting the snow from our coats.

Was I excited? I pushed what Daisy had just told me from my mind and came back to myself. I should be excited. I’d wanted this so badly, and now I was here. When I saw the members gathered in the front hall, on the leather couches, spilling up the stairs, I began to wonder...which of them could be in the society? What qualified you to be in the innermost circle of this already exclusive space?

Outside was below freezing, and by contrast, the front hall of the club felt like a furnace. There were at least a hundred of us packed in the space as flickering taper candles tossed shadows across the walls. The intensity in the room felt like a held breath, and I was immediately put on edge. Perhaps it was the members’ glowing faces, their unblemished skin and unnatural symmetry.

Lila’s warning surfaced in my thoughts again. A whisper, louder this time: *Get out while you can. GET OUT!* Did I really understand what I was signing up for with Sterling? Nearly everyone else around me was a legacy. They knew what to expect, but did I?

The candles shuddered as an icy draft sneaked in through the door.

I jumped as, a few seconds later, the heavy wooden door slammed shut and another new member scampered in. Her cheeks were red from the cold, and her hair was pulled back in a plaid headband that matched her dress. She

pressed her lips together when she passed me, her eyes running over my outfit.

We had Romanticism together, and she'd never spoken to me until yesterday, when she'd looked over at me and asked, "So where are you from?"

I smiled. "The Bay Area," I said, though I knew from the way she was looking at me that she was asking about my race. I got this question all the time and didn't mind—people were curious, it could be a conversation starter—and I believed that we all experienced some form of bias in our lives. To be human was to categorize, wasn't it? Was bias inherent to being human?

"Hm." She'd squinted her eyes in an expression I soon realized was curiosity mixed with distrust. "I mean, what *are* you?" And I'd hesitated. Was she genuinely curious or did I sense something else? *Or* was this conversation colored by my own scars—being called *oreo* and *mutt* and *token Black girl*, and not whatever enough, part but never whole.

"I'm Black and Chinese," I'd said, casual, guarded.

She stared at me in wonder. "I never thought of you as *Black Black*...but I see it now. The hair. The nose." Okay...a bit problematic...but whatever.

"Yeah, well." I'd tried a laugh, but it caught in my throat. The truth was, I too was tired of trying to figure out *what I was*. I'd met a girl named Ayana sophomore year a month or so after the beer incident. She'd taken me under her wing, introduced me to her friends.

But when I went out with them, I couldn't keep up. While they danced to songs they knew by heart, I drifted off to the side.

Then there was Kai, whose family was from Hong Kong, but because she had grown up in Manhattan, her high school, clothes, and address seemed to matter more to her than being Chinese.

Still, she spoke Cantonese, visited her aunt in Shanghai every summer, and belonged to the AAPI student union—so what did I know?

The girl shrugged. "It's just, we're past all this, aren't we? Where I'm from, we consider Puerto Ricans and East Asians to be basically white."

Okay, wow, that was *more* problematic. Basically white? What did it mean to be *basically white*? Did she just dismiss my identity, my family's

struggles, and my personal experiences in one breath?

She tilted her head, studying me. “Your dad’s the Black one, right? Is he still around?”

“New members come forward.” Cecily’s voice yanked me back to the front hall, and I moved forward from the crowd with the other new members. Cecily was not only Sterling Club’s incoming president, Daisy had explained, but also head of Greystone Society. I’d had no idea.

As I stood in the center of the hall, I studied their faces. Daisy had explained that they chose seven new Greystone members each year to join the existing fourteen, voted in by committee. And new members would be tapped tonight, from among the new initiates.

Suddenly, Lila’s warning sounded again—*get out, get out, get out!*—and my stomach roiled. Something was off about the way they were staring at us, their eyes boring into my skin, or maybe it was the eyes of the men in the nineteenth-century portraits, aware I did not belong.

Before long, a man entered the room, dressed in a blazer and khaki slacks. To my surprise, it was Professor DuPont.

“Welcome, new Sterling members. We are honored to have you join us.” He greeted some of the members, shaking their hands, and I could tell he was just as well-respected and well-liked in Sterling as he was on the rest of campus. “As a member of the Sterling Club board of trustees, I am your link to the outside world. As you may have guessed, you’ve been vetted extensively. You were chosen from your peers because we think you will be able to contribute something meaningful to this club.”

He stopped in front of me, and my palms began to sweat.

“There is a reason the most successful choose to work with their oldest friends,” he said. “It’s about trust. And confidence. Sterling Club was founded in 1879 by a group of friends, and since then we’ve built a far-reaching web. Look around. The people in this room will become your allies. Your chosen family.

“What do you think? How long will we stay?” he called out.

The crowd responded. “*Usque ad finem.*”

Professor DuPont opened both palms in welcome. “*To the very end.*”

A tall athletic-looking guy handed him a shot of whiskey, which he took with them. Then the members began to chant. It started low and rose, growing louder and more fervent. The tension that had snaked its way through the room now pulled taut as a string.

My breath grew shallow as the men hit their fists against the tables, the walls. I couldn't make out what they were saying. Maybe something in Latin. It didn't matter—it all felt strange and surreal.

—

AFTERWARD, DAISY PULLED me aside and led me upstairs and down the long hall that led to the library.

I looked at her. “What’s with the Latin?”

“*Ubi amici ibidem sunt opes*. Where there are friends, there are riches,” she explained, pointing to where it had been carved into the marble fireplace.

When we entered, a guy I recognized from class was lighting a joint. He took a long drag before passing it to the girl at his shoulder. Daisy pinched my leg and did an excited dance. Soon the air was thick with wisps of smoke billowing around us. Daisy inhaled the joint and tilted her head back, exhaling a curtain of white.

“Tonight,” Daisy whispered, “is just the beginning.” The library felt strange, charged, electric, like a current was running through all of us. That was when what she’d said sank in: *Once you’re in, you’re in for life*.

With a loud thud, Professor DuPont pulled back the corner of an old Persian rug, revealing a trapdoor covered in what looked to be centuries-old gray stone, the kind you’d find in ancient ruins. My nerves pricked to attention as I looked around and realized there were only seven new members here. *Seven*.

He had us follow Lila—who must have been in Greystone too—down a spiral staircase, until we reached a black door at the bottom. After dialing a combination into the lock, she pushed open the door, revealing darkness behind it. Suddenly, I realized she had to have known I had been voted into

Greystone. She was warning me away from the Society, not from Sterling. Fear flared across my chest as if my body knew it was a trap.

As we entered, Daisy revealed a small dried mushroom in her palm.

“Trust me, you’ll want it,” she whispered.

I hesitated. “What is it?”

“Psychedelic mushrooms, but don’t worry, it’s only a micro dose...” She smiled in that way she had. Her smile said *These aren’t real drugs, not the kind people go to prison for. Not the kind people die from.*

She ate an identical mushroom, raised her eyebrows. With a deep breath, I took it from her, placed the bitter mushroom on my tongue.

Maybe that was the moment I became someone I wasn’t. I knew it at the time, though I wasn’t prepared to admit it. And so, despite my instincts telling me to run in the other direction, I followed her inside.

—

THE SEVEN OF US followed the dozen or so members as they fanned into the crypt and toward the bar. The room was windowless, with low ceilings and dim floor lamps that gave the space an unnatural glow. Someone turned up the music and soon a dark energy ran through the room, an animalistic hunger in the members’ eyes. They shouted and clanged cowbells and fed us champagne until my head swam.

At some point, Daisy pulled me forward. “Come here.” She wove her fingers through mine and led me down a narrow hallway. “As you’ve probably figured out, you’ve been tapped for Greystone Society.”

Tapped.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as she gave me a hug.

—

SHE LED ME into a small office and handed me a sweatshirt. It was cold, and the cement walls muted the noise of the party.

“Wait here,” she said, and before I could protest, she was gone. I looked around. The air reminded me of the air in a windowless basement. Cool,

damp. This was definitely belowground. That hidden stairwell must have been built into the wall to descend down from the far side of the library and continue downward.

I put on Daisy's sweatshirt and sat very still.

Fifteen minutes later, Professor DuPont entered the room and took a seat at the desk in front of me. He handed me what looked like an NDA.

As I looked down at the form and back to him, my head swam. I got the impression that signing wasn't optional.

After I signed, he clasped his hands on the desk and fixed his gaze on me. "Congratulations. You've been formally invited to join Greystone Society. Do you accept?"

The room stretched behind him as I tried to focus on his face, which swayed like a moving target. It all suddenly felt so real. *Greystone Society? Me?* How had Daisy pulled this off?

I nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Good." Professor DuPont sat back, and I was relieved to feel a rush of cool air on my face. From behind the desk, he looked at me with an amused expression. "So, Maya...you're from California?"

Professor DuPont, up until then, had, to me, been a sort of mythical figure—up on the McCosh stage, or behind an email—too distant to be real.

Up close, I could smell the woody oud of his cologne; I could see the faint stubble he'd missed along his jawline, the way his hair was slightly unkempt, a wavy, tawny lock escaping over his right eye, and the frown line between his brows that gave him a serious, intellectual, and gently resolute impression.

At the same time, he had a youthful quality to his movements that made it hard to believe he was in his midthirties. When he spoke to me, he felt familiar, as if we were old friends. And yet he was so ridiculously attractive that it was difficult to concentrate on anything else. My brain felt slow, my heart thudded loudly behind my ribs, and I didn't trust my words...but maybe that was more a result of the champagne and the mushroom I'd taken earlier.

"The Bay Area," I managed to say, after what felt like an hour-long pause.

He nodded. “I see you did well in high school.” His eyes stopped halfway down the page, and he raised his eyebrows. “Sacred Heart...I have a friend whose son went there. Are you Catholic?”

I shook my head. “They offered a good financial aid package and liked that my dad was a professor at San Jose State.”

“I hear it can be tough there, socially.”

I cringed inwardly, remembering all the times I’d eaten lunch alone. “It was fine.”

“How are you doing here? I hope you don’t feel it’s a challenge to make friends?”

I looked down at my hands. His directness was making me uncomfortable. “Not really...”

“Is that why you made up a story about a wealthy grandfather that doesn’t exist?”

I glanced up at him as heat rushed to my face. One corner of his mouth twitched as if he was trying very hard not to laugh. “I didn’t—”

“Don’t worry.” Professor DuPont smiled warmly, the blues of his irises shining. “Your secret’s safe with me.” He winked.

The flush lighting up my cheeks spread to my ears, shooting down my neck and tingling the skin on my chest. I must have looked like an overripe tomato.

Professor DuPont leaned back and let out a laugh. “I admire your tenacity. I read your application—a colleague in Admissions shared it with me, and”—his expression grew serious—“I know it couldn’t have been easy, what you went through. The essay on your mother was very moving.”

He’d read my application essay? I swallowed, thinking of how intimate it was. I’d written about my mother the day she died: her body hooked up to machines and tubes, too thin, too ashen. When I saw her, I remember thinking how ironic it was. Thinking she’d been so worried about the things that could hurt me—plastic, unfiltered water, wet hair—that she’d forgotten to worry about herself.

Professor DuPont’s smile faded, and he grew pensive, as if remembering his past. “I lost my mother at a young age too.”

“I’m sorry,” I managed to say, looking down at my hands. I thought of how I’d held my mother’s frail hand at the hospice, the first time I could remember holding her hand since I was a young child, and forced the tears down.

It was hard not to look at the black spots all over her body, visible because we’d pulled back the sheet—not bruises, though, cancer of the blood that had spread—and in that moment, I’d wondered whether it was my fault. My fault for causing her so much stress. My fault for pushing her away.

In the moments before my mother faded away she’d looked at me as if she could hear my thoughts and opened her mouth to say something. But then she’d grimaced and frowned her eyes shut. I’d squeezed her hand to let her know I understood.

To this day, I wonder what she’d wanted to say: *it’s okay*, maybe, or *don’t cry*, or what I wanted to hear the most—*I’m proud of you*—but I’ll never know.

The first thing I said to my sister when I got home was that I was sorry. Such an expected thing to say when a loved one dies, but for me it meant more than that. I was sorry that she’d been left with only me to take care of her. I was sorry that I’d been so selfish. My arms and legs were heavy as I sank down onto the floor of the house I knew we would soon lose. The house in which she’d spent her entire life. Gone. My mother’s fiery presence. Gone. I was scared for our future. At only eighteen, I had no idea how to raise an eight-year-old.

Naomi came over to where I knelt and put a loving arm around me, holding me as I fell apart. After I pulled myself together, I grabbed her small hand in mine and said, *It’s you and me now. I’ll be here for you, no matter what.*

Professor DuPont was waiting patiently as I quickly wiped away a tear. “I’m sorry you went through that. But these things make us strong. Daisy told me that you’re trying to support your sister, and I want you to know I’m here to help...in any way I can.”

I looked up at him, startled. He looked genuine, but why would he want to help me?

He must have read it on my face because he added, “Look, I was raised by a single mother too, before she passed. My father left when I was a kid. All I remember of him is how loud he was. How he’d get home late, after days of being gone sometimes, and the sound of him hurting her.” He exhaled, as if trying to expel the memory. “Anyway, we moved around. Spent a few years with her parents in the south of France, then upstate New York with her boyfriend at the time...” His voice trailed off, and I could tell it was a time he wanted to forget.

So maybe we were more alike than it seemed, I thought.

This man had a life I’d never dreamed possible for someone like me. And yet he too had started with nothing...Maybe being close to Professor DuPont was the way to a better life for Naomi.

“Your mother was a nurse at St. John’s. Is that right?” He looked up from the page, and my heart fluttered. *That wasn’t in my essay...* But I forced myself to take a steadying breath. Everything was online these days.

“That’s right. And my dad taught African American studies.”

At that moment, someone knocked on the door and Professor DuPont set down his notepad. “Come in.”

Lila entered. She looked pale, hair spooling around her face. Her normally poised movements were jittery and nervous.

She bent over and whispered something into Professor DuPont’s ear, and he handed her a manila envelope. It reminded me of the time I’d seen her in his office. The way she’d laughed and the way he’d looked at her. The comfortable intimacy they’d shared.

Before she left now, he touched her arm and said something to her that I couldn’t make out. She nodded and glanced at me, worry in her eyes.

When she turned to leave, I managed to read the name written on the envelope—*Marsden*. The mushrooms had left my head feeling strange. *Who is Marsden?*

Once Lila had left, Professor DuPont turned to me and handed me a small velvet box with what I would later discover was a signet ring inside. “You’d better get back to it—they’re waiting for you. Welcome to Sterling, and to Greystone.”

BY THE TIME I made my way upstairs to rejoin the Sterling initiation, my vision had softened. I forgot my nerves, and everything after felt like a dream.

Everyone was lively, candles flickered against the wall, and the air smelled sweet. After being drenched in champagne, I stood in a line at the top of the stairs with the other new members in nothing but our underwear as confetti floated down around us. My hair dripped onto my shoulders as I hugged myself, shivering with anticipation.

This was the moment Daisy had hinted at. The tradition I'd been waiting for.

Self-conscious, I looked down at my boy shorts and plain bra for a moment, until someone shouted excitedly, "You're next!"

One by one, members passed us over their heads as if we were queens and kings crowd-surfing through our palace, the rumble of a whole room cheering for us while we floated through the air.

A warm sensation spread through me, and every brush over my skin gave me goosebumps as they supported my body like the many hands of an otherworldly creature. I gazed up at the crystal chandelier as I drifted down the grand staircase ever so slowly, the edges of my vision soft, lights overhead glowing bright white and surreal.

Before I knew what was happening, a rush of wind and movement made me gasp. I was being tossed in the air by the strongest guys. They threw me up, up toward the ceiling. Time seemed to slow and the sparkling crystal chandelier rushed toward me as I rose higher until I was suspended in midair, the chandelier so close I could reach out and touch it. And I did. A soft tinkling of crystals like the sound of rain. Like a beckoning whisper.

I heard cheers below, and seconds later I was falling back toward the earth. Caught in their strong arms and set down on my feet. They whooped and high-fived me and someone handed me a full glass of champagne, which I was too excited and filled with adrenaline to drink. I couldn't remember a

time I felt so alive—so loved and welcomed and a part of something—ever before in my life.

AFTERWARD, I FOUND Daisy in the backyard. We sat with our feet in the heated pool as members partied. I twisted my new signet ring, admiring the engraved Greystone Society insignia, before glancing at the identical one on Daisy's finger. I'd never noticed hers before.

Daisy raised her glass. "Congratulations. You're in."

Beyond her, movement in the shadows caught my eye. Two dark figures huddled close together on a love seat on the patio. I could barely make out Lila's red hair, but I was sure the other was Professor DuPont. At first, the sight set off an alarm bell in my mind: *He has a wife.*

Daisy saw them too and said, teasingly, "Don't tell me you haven't thought about it; Matthew is handsome as hell."

So I considered it again—thought of his smooth voice and full lips, the attraction I'd felt when his eyes met mine. I remembered how Cecily had spent a summer in London and said men in their thirties were better in bed, and that's when I realized the feeling in my stomach, what I thought was alarm bells, was closer to jealousy, and if given the chance, I'd like to sleep with him too.

THAT WEEK IN class I noticed how Professor DuPont looked at me and smiled during his lecture, and the following week, when he handed back our exams, my heart nearly stopped. I had gotten an A, and along with the test was an envelope—with *five thousand dollars in cash.*

NAOMI

November 2022, six months before her death

THE WEEK OF THANKSGIVING BREAK, the temperature across campus dropped another ten degrees, and the cold in our room has crept in through the cracks in the stone. These buildings were built in the 1920s, and the rattling metal wall heaters do little against the frigid air.

Tonight Amy and I are alone. Zee is at Trey's, and we've ordered take-out pho and boba and are watching *Get Out* in our pajamas. I can't stop thinking about how she's been acting, though, unnerved by her recent jumpiness, her withdrawal from all social activities, her refusal to talk to me.

Before the opening credits are over, I turn to her. "Hey, is everything okay?"

I think I see a flicker of fear cross her eyes before she turns her face away. "Yeah, why?"

I shrug. After I'd pressed her about reporting the break-in again earlier this week, she'd been acting especially strange, totally avoiding me. Did she think I didn't notice the deep bags under her eyes? The way she wasn't eating? I've been oscillating between worry and frustration, and right now the frustration is getting the better of me.

"Ever since the break-in...you've been gone a lot. I get it, and I know you don't want to report it—" She flinches, and I soften my tone. "I just want you

to know I'm here...if you want to talk. If what you're writing has you this scared, I'm worried about you dealing with it all on your own."

Amy doesn't respond. Her hair falls over her pale cheeks and when I look down at her hands, they are twisting in her lap. "I'm fine," she says.

With an exhale, I turn back to the movie. If she won't open up, there's nothing I can do. I think the moment's passed, when, in the middle of the movie, as the unnerving sound of a spoon scrapes the edge of a teacup, Amy says something barely audible. "What do you think of Professor DuPont?"

I glance at her. "What?"

"Professor DuPont," she repeats, and I turn to face her. The light from the projector glows in her irises.

"I want to know what you think of him," she says, her voice thin.

"I don't know, I guess he seems fine? I've only interacted with him sporadically, though, so I'm not sure I'm really the best judge of his character, if that's what you're asking." I look at her. Why this sudden change of topic? Does he have something to do with her article?

"You know the Hunt article that came out a while back?" Amy asks. "The *Times* focused on the insider trading and fraud. But...there were some weird emails Professor DuPont sent to Theodore Hunt too. No one was interested in them because they didn't seem relevant to the financial crimes, but I wanted to keep digging, so the *Times* kept me on after my internship. The emails had some details about the Greystone Society. The reporter I'd been working with thought it would be a good story for a Princeton student, elite societies and all that. But I've found some other things too...I didn't know if I could talk to you about it or not since you're a member..."

My arms prickle. I never told her I was a member.

I pause the movie. "Wait, how do you know?"

"I've been working on this for months, Naomi. And frankly, once you know where to look, it's not that hard to find information."

"But you said you were working on something about water quality..."

Amy looks down, and my face warms as I fight feeling betrayed. "Why would you lie about that?" I remember the seemingly innocent questions she'd asked over the past months: *Where was I going? Who was I seeing?*

“So all the questions you asked about—”

“No, it wasn’t like that, I promise.”

I stare at her, furious, and fight to keep my voice even. “So tell me now, then. What’s going on?”

Amy hesitates, takes a deep breath. “Okay...Something happened about ten years ago—one of the Greystone members went missing during a Society ski trip, a girl named Lila Jones.” She swallows. “The official story was that she got lost in a snowstorm, and the next day her body was found in a ravine.”

The air suddenly feels thin. *Lila*. I know that name. I shudder as I make the connection. I’d heard my sister say it before. I think they’d been friends. But why wouldn’t she tell me she’d had a friend die while she was in college?

“The thing is,” she continues, “the timing is more than a little suspicious. Lila had been suing a member of the Society, but a few days before she died, the case was suddenly dropped.”

“What was she suing for?”

“Assault, apparently.” I go still as Amy continues. “No one else has been willing to talk and it’s been difficult to know who to approach about it, but I got ahold of her brother...”

“What did he say?”

Amy hesitates as if unsure whether to tell me. “You have to promise you won’t tell anyone. I know someone’s life means more to you than any Greystone-inner-circle bullshit, right?”

I lean in. “I promise.”

She nods and lowers her voice. “He said he didn’t believe her death was an accident.”

I sit back as if physically struck. Was I understanding correctly? Lila’s brother thought someone killed her? And if it was while she was on a Society ski trip, it meant he thought someone in Greystone killed her.

I feel lightheaded as I imagine the kind of trouble Amy could be in if this got out. If whoever hurt this girl was still around, they could be dangerous; they could come after her.

My chest seizes with concern. “Amy, why are you doing this?”

“I have to find out what happened,” she says.

“But poking around a potential murder could be dangerous—especially if whoever did it has a lot to lose.”

Amy blinks rapidly and shakes her head, then closes her eyes and breathes out as if trying to expel the same feeling of dread from her body. Her eyes are huge in the near-dark of our room. She looks scared, yes, but I think I see another emotion too, a flicker of determination. “If it’s dangerous for me to poke around Greystone, don’t you think it’s pretty dangerous for you to belong?” she says pointedly before continuing, “Look, I think it’s likely whoever assaulted her had something to do with her death. But I can’t find a complete public record with the details of the case. I’m going to see if the *Times* will let me petition the court.”

All the blood has left my face, my hands, and has pooled in my gut. There’s nothing I can say to stop her, so instead, I tell her what I know. “My sister was in Greystone ten years ago. With someone named Lila. I think they were one year apart.”

—

I REMEMBER BEING around eleven at the time I heard Lila’s name. Maya had brought me to Greenwich the summer after her junior year to meet Cecily’s brother and his wife, John and Margaret, for the first time.

That night, we’d swum in the pool, and I remember feeling so cool and grown up, hanging out with Maya and her friends, in awe of her new life.

After we’d dried off and had dinner, Maya and her friends disappeared into Cecily’s room. I was a kid, so I didn’t expect they’d invite me, but I felt left out downstairs by the fire. So, encouraged by Margaret’s knowing wink, I did what any younger sibling would do: I crept upstairs and peered in through the crack in the door.

That was when I first learned about Greystone Society.

They’d kept their voices low, and I could hear what I’d thought was excitement in their whispers, could feel the frenetic energy running through

the room, but when I saw their faces, I knew the tremor in their voices was fear.

I leaned into the door, and what I heard next would stay with me forever—*We have to remember Lila left on her own. It was an accident*—and they swore to one another they would never speak about it again.

—

MY MIND SPINS NOW as I make the connection, but as hard as I try, I can't remember which one of them had said it. "My sister mentioned her once," I tell Amy now. "I think it must have been the summer after she died."

Amy nods. "My theory is that Lila and Professor DuPont might have been having an affair. Last week in the library I overheard a couple of girls saying he's been divorced twice because his wives always leave him when they find out about his affairs. I'd been digging into everyone involved in Greystone in 2012 trying to figure out who Lila was suing. Well, it turns out Matthew's wife filed for divorce just a few months after the ski trip. And that's when the total lack of news coverage on Lila's death started to make more sense—if she'd been suing someone involved on the admin side of Greystone, rather than a student, it would be easier for them to shut it down. I even dug up the police report on her death. It claims she died of hypothermia, but they found her miles away from the cabin where she was staying. So my question is: Why was she out there alone to begin with?"

I take a deep breath, ignoring the chill running through me, trying to steady myself enough to think. "Okay, so what now? Your article comes out and names Professor DuPont as a suspect, and then what? Isn't there some kind of statute of limitations?"

Amy's eyes are locked on mine as she says, "Not for murder."

MAYA

November 2011

FROM THAT POINT ON, I felt different. I *was* different. Something changed in the way I carried myself, looked people in the eye. Heads turned when Daisy and I walked into a room, and I knew they were watching us with envy.

In the weeks following initiation, we spent languid days wandering to and from class, nights cross-legged on someone's dorm room floor spilling secrets by candlelight until our lips were stained purple with wine. We laughed hysterically, danced until sunrise, drank and studied and ate at Sterling, absorbed into her womb.

We had Greystone Society meetings every Sunday, the location and time of which would vary, where all twenty-one of us would gather around candlelit dinners in a sheltered corner of campus to discuss poetry, art, and politics, and ways in which we could benefit the Society. There was a hum running through everything, then. A feeling like we were living in a world within a world within a world, one to which only we had access.

Most important, I'd been able to send money to Naomi. My plan was to do whatever it took to make it, for her, for us. And Greystone Society was the start of it.

Still, at night when I was drifting to sleep, the question lingered—*Why had they chosen me?*—and because I couldn't answer, this new life felt

temporary. I suspected one day it would vanish, and I'd wake up and realize it had been nothing but a dream.

ONE NIGHT AFTER dinner, Daisy and I were walking back to her dorm when the sound of tires on gravel came up behind us. We turned to see Cecily and Kai in a decked-out golf cart.

"Get in, nerds, we're going out," Cecily said with a glint in her eyes. A thrill shot through me as we jumped in the backseat.

"Where'd you get the golf cart?" I asked as she whipped around a corner, streamers attached to the roof of the cart trailing in the wind.

"Nearly broke my leg doing a stupid keg stand at TI the other night," Cecily said, jutting a chin at her crutches, which were stacked beside her in the front seat. I pictured Cecily doing a keg stand and laughed inwardly.

Daisy shrieked. "Cecily St. Clair doing a keg stand? I'd pay to see that."

"She was trying to impress some guy," Kai said.

"Oh my god, did you sleep with him? What's his name? Nate?" Daisy asked, teasingly. Of course, I hadn't known Nate at the time, so the significance of this didn't register until it was too late.

"I was not trying to impress some guy," Cecily said, suddenly defensive. "I just wanted to prove I could do it." She shrugged, annoyed. "Anyway, can we not?"

Daisy shot me a wry look, and I suppressed a laugh as Kai turned up the music on the portable speaker.

We held on tightly as Cecily sped down toward a field at the south end of campus. The uneven ground threw us from our seats multiple times as Cecily spun donuts in the wet grass.

Once we'd slowed, Kai pulled out a tube from her bag and handed it to me. "Will you do the honors?"

I gazed down, confused, at the strange object in my hands. It wasn't until she passed me a lighter that I realized what it was. A firework.

We lit Roman candles off the back of the golf cart as Cecily sped across the field, the fireworks shooting fifty feet in the air and exploding against the black sky in brilliant glittering bursts of color.

Daisy screamed as a tight turn flung our bodies.

“Hold on, ladies!” Cecily shouted as she angled the cart down a steep hill.

A rush of cold air swept my face as we shot down the hill. Every inch of my skin tingled. This was it, I had made it. I was a part of their inner circle. I was friends with the most beautiful, successful, and envied girls on campus.

Out of the darkness, we heard sirens and the campus police loudspeaker. *“Public Safety. Stop what you’re doing immediately.”*

“Go go go!” Daisy said, hitting the back of Cecily’s seat.

Adrenaline shot through my veins as we raced across the field, Cecily swerving the golf cart like a NASCAR driver through the university. As soon as we’d lost the campus cops, we let out a collective exhale.

“Who taught you to drive?” I asked, dizzy.

Cecily smirked. “I learned how to drive in Manhattan.”

“Did you see them trying to run after us?” Kai asked as Daisy clutched her stomach in a fit of laughter.

As we threaded through the main campus, Kai turned up the music. Daisy and I stood, hanging off the cart and singing to the music as loud as our lungs would allow. Students leaned out of their second- and third-story windows and cheered us on.

“Y’all are insane!” a girl shouted from a window. From another, a group of guys cheered, holding up the Sterling Club flag.

Not only was I now a member of the most envied club on campus, I was one step closer to being with my sister again. Things were finally starting to fall into place.

MAYA

June 2023, Greenwich, Connecticut

THE DAY OF NAOMI'S FUNERAL, dark clouds hover overhead, and the air feels thick as paste. It's as if my inner state is so strong it's seeped out of my pores and into the air around us.

It's been two weeks since her death. Hard to believe, when it feels like just yesterday we'd talked on the phone—argued, really—and the thought sends guilt rushing through me again.

I wish I could redo that conversation. Go back to that moment and take a breath.

When I told Margaret about it, she'd said, *I suppose I was too hard on her too.*

It wasn't until she'd said that, the added *too*, that I realized how difficult it must have been for Naomi, having both of us worrying about her all the time.

I'd get nervous when Naomi would take the subway at night, kiss too many boys, spend money like the world was ending. I wished I could make decisions for her, so that I wouldn't have to watch her suffer the consequences of her mistakes.

But now I realize that making mistakes is a necessary part of growing up. Instead of complaining, I should have told her how I admired her spontaneity, how little she cared what others thought. How she lit up a room, and how much Dani looked up to her, how much I did.

“Do we get to see Aunt Margaret?” Dani asks sweetly. She calls all my friends *Aunt*.

“We get to see her, but she might be sad today, okay?” I explain. She seems to know we’re going to a funeral, but I don’t think she fully understands that her aunt Naomi is gone and never coming back, and I don’t have the heart to explain it to her.

The driveway rises through a row of cypress trees before bending around a stone fountain. The sight of Margaret’s house, a French chateau–style home that might have been plucked out of the pages of *Architectural Digest*, makes the grief swell again, and it takes every bit of strength to hold it together.

Don’t cry, I think, as the pressure builds. Naomi couldn’t stand to see me cry. But I’m older than her, ten years older. My funeral should have happened first. Not Naomi’s. Never Naomi’s.

*I don’t want to be trapped in a box like Mom. I want someone to scatter my ashes over the ocean...*she’d said one afternoon as we walked along the smooth sand shore in East Hampton. It was the summer she turned sixteen, and we’d both spent the week there with Margaret and John. *So I can be free.*

Nate parks in a space at the end of the driveway and turns to me. “You ready?”

I nod. “Come on, Dani.” After helping her out of the car, I grab ahold of her tiny hand and follow the sea of guests through the house.

—

THE FUNERAL is set up on the back lawn under the scorching sun. We take a seat in the front row next to Daisy and her family, fanning ourselves with the programs. Next to the urn sits a photo of Naomi, too glossy and perfect. It looks nothing like her. The urn, a blue-and-white hand-painted thing, is something I might have seen on my nga-bu’s shelves, where my grandmother might have stored rice or tea.

I guess it’s better than the open coffin around my mother. The strange, powdery makeup they’d painted on her cheeks, the too-pink lipstick she’d

never have chosen, the smell they'd tried to hide with tuberose perfume. My stomach turns with the memory.

"You okay?" Nate asks, reaching over to give my hand a squeeze.

I reach up to touch my cheek, and it feels clammy. Willing myself to relax, I concentrate on a slow, deliberate breath—*Am I okay? I haven't been okay for weeks*—and give him a nod.

Sometime after the pastor says a prayer, Daisy takes the microphone, and then Zalikah, and soon my cheeks are again wet with tears.

During Margaret's speech, my mind casts back to the note I found in Naomi's room. *Naomi, I'm sorry about last night. Let me make it up to you.* —M.

Was it from Matthew? And, if so, what had he needed to apologize for?

And Detective Simmons had said Naomi was in Manhattan the night before she died. Who was she with? Was she meeting someone? Running from someone? And when she came back to campus, how did she end up in the lake? Why had the police asked Matthew for an alibi? Why did they even interview him? It's not like they were interviewing any of Naomi's other professors, were they? What made them suspicious of him?

I scan over the familiar faces: her roommate Amy, her professors, fellow Sterling Club classmates. And then I see Liam, lingering in the background. His angry outburst still makes me think he could have done it. He could have killed my sister. And to think he'd have the nerve to show up here afterward. It makes me sick.

The mic crackles as a woman in her fifties clears her throat and starts to speak. She wears winged purple glasses, shoulder-length braids, and mismatched rings on every finger, and she introduces herself as Naomi's thesis advisor, Fiona Williams, a professor in the English department. The name sounds familiar...Fiona Williams...

"Those of us who were fortunate enough to know Naomi mourn the loss of a brilliant young woman," Fiona says, her voice strong. "Over the course of the year, we would meet weekly, so I got to know her well. Naomi's thesis was about how women have been silenced throughout history for upsetting the status quo." She pauses, hawk eyes scanning the crowd. With a sharp

inhale, I realize the weight of her words. “As Naomi’s mentor and friend, I vow not to let her memory be forgotten. May all of us who loved her continue to support her mission and not permit another young woman to be silenced in her grave.”

A shiver passes through me. Was Naomi *silenced*? It sounds so cruel, so evil, when said like that. I glance at Nate, who looks equally disturbed. Murmurs trickle through the crowd as Fiona finishes, gives a pursed smile, and ventures back to her seat.

Next, the pastor calls me to the stand. A knot forms in my throat as sweat beads my brow, collects on my neck, my lower back. There are so many people here. So many faces.

When I arrive at the podium, I look down at the speech in my hands and swallow the sudden desire to run. The ink-stained paper is a crumpled, smeared mess. I clear my throat. “Naomi—” Oh god. I don’t think I can do this.

My eyes land on Nate in the crowd, and he gives a small supportive nod. I try again. “Naomi was my sister. We were ten years apart, but it only made us closer. Her laugh—it’s—I can’t stop hearing it everywhere—”

My eyes drift over the crowd, glancing over the onlookers before catching on a face: Matthew DuPont. His fiancée is next to him—long strawberry-blond hair, sun-kissed complexion, a little too much cleavage for a funeral—I’d met her before, but hadn’t given her a second thought.

Did this woman know what kind of man she was marrying? The things he did that ended his previous marriages?

I think again of how some people are so eager to have the perfect relationship, the perfect life, that they’re willing to overlook the obvious flaws, the red flags right in front of them.

I glance back at Matthew, and he gives me a polite smile.

When I return to my speech, the words blend together. My hands shake as their eyes watch me, slicing into me like the edge of a knife.

I set down the paper. Maybe someone here knows something. Maybe they can help me figure out what happened. I have to find a way to let them know I’m looking for answers.

“My sister’s death,” I say, forcing my voice to be strong and clear, “was not an accident.”

Shocked whispers. I find Matthew among the guests and keep my eyes on his. He sits very still, his smile now gone. “Someone did this to her. And I’m not going to stop until I find out who it was. If you think you might have any information about Naomi’s last weeks, please reach out.”

I duck my chin and rush away from the podium, tears stinging my eyes. Heads swivel as I pass, mouths agape.

“Maya.” I hear my name, but I can’t tell who’s said it. It’s a chorus of “Maya, Maya, Maya.” *Stop!* I want to scream. *If you’re not going to help me, leave me alone!* The world is a blur of colors and shapes through my tears, but I can feel their eyes. Dozens of eyes. All staring at me. Wondering what’s wrong with me. *Poor Maya. So awful what happened. She needs help.* I don’t care what anybody thinks right now.

My ears ring as I rush in the direction of the house. *Please just leave me alone.*

—

MY HANDS TREMBLE as I reach for my anxiety medication in my purse. Pouring a pill onto my palm, I knock it into my throat and swallow it dry. *What was I thinking?* The adrenaline has begun to fade, embarrassment settling in its place.

In the kitchen, I fill a glass of water in the sink and gulp it down before making my way upstairs. I round the landing to the familiar hallway, remembering when Naomi first moved into this house. First walked down this hall.

—

I’M SURPRISED TO find Naomi’s bedroom looks exactly as it was when she was a teenager. Canopy bed. Blue toile wallpaper with cranes and flowers. Poems and sketches of New York City taped to the walls. A sketch of the two of us

holding hands at a beach in Santa Cruz. Another of both Margaret and me over Thanksgiving. On a sailing trip. My heart squeezes.

As my fingers wander over her things I can almost hear her raspy voice, chattering, laughing, see the freckles dotting her nose, the tiny crooked tooth, and her mass of brown curls cascading over her shoulders, beautiful and free.

Sinking onto the edge of Naomi's bed, I put my head in my hands and squeeze my eyes shut. Before I know it, the sky has turned to ink outside the windows.

I'm about ready to either face everyone downstairs or go home, but as I turn to leave, something catches my eye. The bottom drawer of her desk is slightly askew as if the drawer had come off its track. I try the handle, but the drawer doesn't budge. It seems to be caught on something. I fixate on it, thinking that at least I can repair this one thing.

Prying the desk from the wall, I run my fingers over the back, feeling over a thick layer of dust. Something moves and I yank my hand back as a long-legged spider scuttles away. I shudder.

When I work up the nerve to stick my hand back in there, my fingers brush the corner of something hard. Pulling the desk farther from the wall, I dislodge a leather-bound notebook, and flipping through the pages, I recognize Naomi's messy handwriting. Notes have been scrawled quickly. Pages torn out. Bullet points with news articles to read and strange notes like *Gift money sent? Down payment? Who else knows? Securities Investigation.* And a list of names I don't recognize under *Hunt Investment Group Sources.*

Was she looking into the Hunt scandal? When had she hidden this notebook? *Why* had she hidden it?

I'm scanning the pages when I come across a question written in all caps and underlined twice: *WHO KILLED LILA JONES?* I gasp and nearly drop the notebook.

Suddenly, I sense there is someone else in here and look up: a woman stands in the doorway. Matthew's fiancée, Sara, I realize.

We'd met briefly at a Legacy Foundation event but I'd never seen her up close. Even in the dim light, she's striking. She has on very little makeup, just a bit of mascara over her thick lashes, and has thrown a V-neck sweater over

her low-cut black shift dress. Her hair is pulled back off her face and the tops of her cheeks and collarbones are slightly sunburned.

“I came to make sure you were okay,” she says. Her voice sounds sincere, but then I notice the way her lips curl down at the edges with something like disdain. The way she’s watching me is off-putting.

I hide the notebook behind me as she takes a step into the room. I’m not sure what her intentions are...and I doubt she knows my history with her husband, but either way I sense something isn’t right.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I tell her.

She takes another step toward me, and I press myself back against the desk. “Your speech was...unexpected. I’m sure it wasn’t easy, getting up there like that.” Her voice is slow and measured.

My mouth goes dry as I remember my speech—I shouldn’t have stared Matthew down like that—but then I grow defensive. She has no idea what it’s like to lose a sister like this. She has no right to judge me.

“No,” I say, after a pause. “No, it wasn’t.”

Sara shuts the door behind her. “I was hoping we could talk. I wanted to ask you something.” As she approaches, I notice that her hands are clenched into fists. When I notice, she relaxes them. Stops a few feet away. “I have a sister, and I couldn’t imagine how it would feel to lose her.” Her voice trails away.

My guard rises and my heart beats faster. “But,” she says, her tone changing, “I noticed you were looking at us when you asked for help, and I want to make sure you know that Matthew and I would like to do what we can to help your family. If there’s a fund we can contribute to...please let us know.”

I’m taken aback. Had she not been listening when I said *Someone did this*? I wasn’t asking for money. Both Nate and I work, and it’s not like losing Naomi will force us to stop. And what’s more strange is her tone, the false sincerity.

I’m about to respond when someone knocks on the door. “Maya? Everything okay?” Nate’s voice. Relief washes over me.

Nate takes a step into the room, and when he sees Sara, he frowns. “Uh, hi, I didn’t realize anyone else was up here. Can I help you with something?” He doesn’t seem to recognize her.

“I was just leaving,” she says quickly, turning and giving him a warm smile. The sudden way her features rearrange is unsettling.

She touches my shoulder gently before leaving, and on her way out, she pauses at the door. “Again, Maya, my deepest condolences.”

NAOMI

November 2022, six months before her death

SATURDAY MORNING, AFTER REHEARSAL, I take a shower in the shared bathroom down the hall. Gripped by the sudden urge to call someone, I scan through my old text messages as the hot water fills the room with steam.

My finger hovers over my sister's name. I want to talk to her, but I can't tell her about the *Times* investigation, or the break-in. She'd panic. Who else...I think about Liam, but he'd gone quiet since the night I showed up at his room.

I was hurt, but I wasn't surprised. He always did this—one minute he'd open up, and the next he'd act like I didn't exist.

Setting my phone on the edge of the sink, I step into the scalding-hot shower. As the knots in my back loosen, my mind drifts to the night I was tapped for Greystone Society. The night I met Liam.

—

IT WAS ONE of the best nights of my life. It was February of my sophomore year and the night was unusually warm. Overhead, the moon was full and bright, and a hum was running through my bones.

I'd come so far that year: the depression I'd struggled with for years had lifted. I didn't even need the pills to sleep. And the low simmering anxiety I

always felt had nearly gone away completely. I had friends, I was doing well in classes, and I'd been accepted into Sterling Club, which I'd dreamed about joining since I was a kid.

I had gone to the terrace to get some air when I felt a hand touch my back. I turned around to find the guy I'd seen earlier. The one who was watching me dance. He was so beautiful, I could hardly stand to look him in the eye. I remember my heartbeat in my chest and the thrill that shot through me when he bent over and whispered: *You've been tapped for Greystone Society.*

It took a second to breathe, but when I recovered, I raised my chin. *I'm in.* He told me to follow him and led me to the crypt.

After the initiation, he introduced himself properly—Liam Alexander. I remember thinking his name was wildly sexy and somewhat dark and really suited him. I learned he was from Rye, New York, and grew up in country clubs, training with the best tennis coaches in the country, a fourth-generation Princeton legacy.

Liam, who was a junior while I was a sophomore, had been so warm in that initial meeting, I was surprised when he was cold and unfriendly in the following weeks. He'd ignore me when we passed in the halls, avoid eye contact.

But occasionally, when we were both studying in the library, or eating dinner on opposite sides of the room, I'd catch him watching me.

—

ONE COLD NIGHT in April—I remember it was cold, because I didn't want to make the trek back to my room—I was studying in the Sterling Club library. I was hunched over a dense section of *Paradise Lost*, when someone slid into the chair across from me.

"Mind if I join?" Liam asked.

I looked up. Shrugged. "Uh, yeah, sure. I'm leaving soon."

Liam brought out his laptop and began tapping away at the keys, and I returned to my work. Liam looked like your typical Princeton boy, like a

Brooks Brothers model, so I ignored him, assuming we had nothing in common.

But then he did something that surprised me. I was underlining a passage when he stopped typing and looked up. “You like Min Jin Lee?” He’d seen the copy of *Free Food for Millionaires* I’d set next to my stack of required Milton, Hemingway, and Shakespeare. My sister had given it to me for my birthday.

I looked up at him. “You’ve read it? I wouldn’t have expected you to be into this kind of story.”

He nodded and revealed the book he was reading, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, which had been hidden behind his laptop. Another one I’d read.

I hadn’t expected him to be into something that tender. Clocking my surprise, he admitted, “I just started it. But...” He smiled. “I’m really enjoying it.”

I smiled too. “My sister and I always give each other books for our birthdays.”

I felt closest with my sister through this shared practice of ours. Within the pages of these books were the things we couldn’t discuss, didn’t want to. In *Free Food for Millionaires*, a Korean American Princeton graduate navigates her early twenties in New York City—she never feels like she fits in either.

“My mom’s a writer,” Liam said. “That’s one of her favorites.” His eyes, which were usually cold and intense, were softer in the low light and seemed to glow with interest.

In them, I felt a familiarity that wasn’t there before.

Liam leaned over, breaking the tension, and retrieved a half-empty bottle of wine from his bag. “My father sent me this bottle from the winery. It’s honestly not that good.” He raised the bottle of wine with an ironic flourish. “A full-bodied Cab with aromas of vinegar, shoe leather, and a hint of wet dog.” He stopped abruptly and grinned. “Want to help me finish it?”

I laughed, finding myself charmed by him. “The wet dog really sold it.”

OVER THE FOLLOWING weeks, I got to know Liam as we'd study together in the library until late into the night. Sometimes he'd walk me back across the dark, misty campus, and other times we'd run through campus in the pouring rain. There was always this tension between us, so taut it was nearly unbearable, but neither of us wanted to be the one to make the first move.

One night, when he'd walked me home and was getting ready to leave, I couldn't stand it anymore. I leaned in, grabbed his coat collar, and kissed him. He froze for a second, and then he kissed me back. His lips were soft and his breath tasted like peppermint mouthwash. The kiss was better than I'd imagined and it felt like my entire being was melting into him.

—

FOR THE REST of my sophomore year, we spent more nights together than we did apart. I became used to the soft cotton of his sheets, the feeling of being tucked under his arm, curled on the perfect groove of his chest.

I spent the summer after sophomore year working at a bookstore in the West Village, while he worked downtown at his dad's fund, and we'd meet up every night after work, checking out new restaurants or going to see whatever classic film was playing at his favorite theater on Ludlow Street.

Over the course of my junior year, Liam and I fell even more in love, though we still had never said those words to each other. Still, I could hear it in his voice when we'd talk late at night, feel it in the way he'd hold my hand or brush my hair away from my face, or when he'd sit quietly in the audience at my dance shows.

But one day in mid-March, everything changed. I hadn't heard from Liam all day, and there was a growing unease in the pit of my stomach that wouldn't go away.

It was raining when I got to his place that night, and I found Liam sitting on the fire escape with his head between his knees.

I held the hallway door open and had to shout over the rain. "Liam."

He looked up at me, hair plastered to his forehead, eyes rimmed red, and hung his head again.

He wouldn't tell me what was wrong at first, but after gentle prodding, he opened up: his younger brother, Gabe, had gotten a concussion during lacrosse practice. The most important game of the season was the next day, and the coach had asked him if he was good to play. Being a sixteen-year-old kid, of course he'd said yes.

He'd gotten hit again, had a seizure, and died on his way to the hospital.

I froze, my heart breaking, and the knot in my throat twisted. He loved his brother, talked to him all the time. How could he be gone?

I could hardly stand to look at him. I could tell he was in so much pain.

Suddenly, Liam stood and pushed past me.

"Where are you going?"

"I just want to drive," Liam said. His voice was hoarse, and I could tell from the distant look in his eyes he'd been drinking.

"Then I'm coming with you." I followed him through the rain to the parking lot.

"Please don't. I want to be alone." He tried to get into the car and I stopped him.

"Look at me!" I yelled, blocking his path to the driver's seat. "You can't drive right now."

"Move."

"I'm serious. I'm not letting you do this." It was raining harder now, raindrops beating on the metal roof. His Jeep was old. The tires probably hadn't been changed in years. If he tried to drive in this rain, and as drunk as he was...

"Fuck." Liam slammed the hood of the car, making me jump. "I said *move*." He had the look of someone pushed to his edge. And it scared me.

Liam yanked the door open and crashed into the driver's seat. Adrenaline spiking, I ran around the car and jumped into the passenger side. I don't know what I was thinking. I *wasn't* thinking. All I knew was I couldn't let him hurt himself. He'd said these things before...and I knew if he drove right now, he might try to kill himself.

But he wouldn't do it with me in the car. At least, I hoped he wouldn't.

My heart beat hard in my chest as he sped down the winding road. Rain and wind threw itself against the windows, rattling the car. The landscape was dark and unfamiliar. I didn't know where Liam was going. I doubted he knew either.

"Liam, slow down." My voice was pinched and thin. I swallowed hard and tried again, but he didn't listen. His eyes were focused on the road, his knuckles white as he gripped the wheel harder, the pavement slippery beneath us. "Liam! I'm serious!"

"I told you not to come. Damn it!"

I heard a horn up ahead, and when I looked up, a semitruck was raging toward us: we were on the wrong side of the road's dividing line. The rain was beating down so hard, the windshield wipers couldn't keep up.

It happened so fast.

Liam braked hard, and my chest seized. My body collided with the center console as the car swerved to the right, tires peeling out with a terrifying screech as I held my breath for what felt like minutes until finally it skidded to a stop in the middle of the road.

Liam was breathing hard, ragged, animal breaths. My heart was pounding out of control. To my relief, the truck rumbled past.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. You?" My whole body was shaking, blood rushing in my ears. My throat hurt. I could barely think. Barely get out the words.

After a moment, I caught my breath, and the anger came. I screamed at him. *What were you thinking? You could've gotten us both killed!* I made him give me the keys and drove us back to campus in silence.

—

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Liam left school for his brother's funeral. He came back for a few weeks in April, and I thought he was doing okay...but one night, after finding him drunk and bruised at the bottom of the stairs, we got into our worst fight yet. While trying to convince him to get help, the words slipped from my mouth—*I love you*—and he froze.

I can't do this, he muttered on his way out the door. And that was it.

THE NEXT MORNING he left and wouldn't answer my texts or calls. After trying to reach him for months, I gave up, to find out later he'd gone to rehab. I didn't realize that we'd officially broken up until I saw him in a picture he'd been tagged in with a girl from his hometown.

When he came back in September to start his senior year again, we tried to talk about what happened, but he was easily triggered. Aggressive. Everything I said set him off, and when I met his eyes, he wasn't there. It was like looking into the eyes of a stranger.

THE SHOWER IS running cold when I snap out of the memory, and after turning off the water, I realize my cheeks are still wet with tears. Stepping out of the shower, I wrap my hair and return to my room, changing into sweats and settling into bed with a book.

But finding myself rereading the same sentence again and again, I set the book down and check my phone. It's one A.M. When I look at the screen, I'm surprised to see a text from Liam. It's a simple response, but it makes my heart leap: *Hey*. I want to be mad at him for ignoring me.

But after the last few days, I crave the warmth of his arms. I want to be held. I want to feel safe.

Burying my face in the pillow, I try to ignore the feeling, but then my phone vibrates again, and when I look at the screen, my entire body gives in: *Come back*.

MAYA

December 2011

ONE THURSDAY EVENING IN DECEMBER, I ran into Lila outside the library. It had snowed, and the campus was strangely quiet.

When Lila approached, I noticed that her eyes were lined and she was wearing her hair differently, pulled back to expose a scattering of freckles over her high cheekbones. It revealed something else too: a discolored spot of what looked to be concealer, layered over an angry purplish bruise near her temple. When she caught me staring, she quickly untucked a lock of hair from behind her ear and let it fall over her face.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight?” she asked, which took me by surprise because we weren’t exactly close.

“I’m supposed to go to some lingerie party in Daisy’s room. Why, what’s up?”

Lila raised her eyebrows. It took her a beat to answer, as if she were going to say something important, but then, as if she changed her mind, she said, “My friend’s band is playing at Terrace tonight. They’re pretty good. Wanna come?”

I told her it sounded fun, but I promised Daisy I’d be her wingwoman for the night.

Lila shrugged. “Well, let me know if you change your mind. We’ll be there all night.”

BY THE TIME I set off for the party, the temperature had dropped. The campus was frozen over, still and quiet, a glittering mix of snow and rain sweeping down from the sky, but the inside of Daisy and Kai's suite felt like a sauna.

The scene was bacchanalian: the music dark and pulsing, the common area swarming with beautiful people in elaborate outfits: lingerie, slip dresses, unbuttoned shirts. It made me feel out of place in my black dress and heels.

"Maya," Daisy slurred, and threw her arms around me. She was in a bustier with some sort of tutu on the bottom. "Take a picture with me!" She shoved a digital camera in a guy's hands and we squeezed our faces together for a picture.

After a short exchange about how excited she was about tonight, Daisy giggled and ran off to greet someone else.

Spotting Kai in one corner of the room, I wandered in her direction, but it was hard to push through the tightly packed bodies. She turned away, and I realized she was talking to the guy I'd met, well, made out with on the dance floor on Gatsby Night. What was his name? Kevin? Their heads were bent close and he handed her something, which she quickly stuffed in her jacket pocket. Right, the Adderall dealer.

"Kai," I shouted, and she looked up at me, surprised at first, but then her face spread into a grin.

"Hey, glad you made it." She approached and raised her voice over the music. "A group of us are going to dim sum in the city next week. Are you around?" I was caught off guard. I knew about her monthly trips to the city with her closest friends, but this was the first time I'd gotten an invite to join.

"Oh, thanks," I replied. "That sounds fun."

Kai was telling me about the place they'd found, when over her shoulder I saw something strange: Alex Bain was sitting close to Cecily, his arm around her but in a possessive, domineering way...and...*what was he doing?* Lines of white powder were sectioned in front of him, a collection of pills nearby.

I went still as I watched them and time seemed to slow. Cecily leaned over the table, each vertebra protruding from her exposed spine. Was it me, or was there something depraved in the way Alex was watching her?

Now Daisy was with them too. My heart was racing. I wanted to go over there and yank her away. *What was she thinking?*

But I was frozen. My head spun. It was too hot in there.

“Woah.” A hand touched my arm, and I jumped. “Are you okay?” Kai asked.

I stared at Cecily and Alex, and then back at Kai, unsettled by the way she’d shoved something into her pocket minutes ago. I knew that some of the Sterling kids occasionally experimented with drugs, my friends included, but the amount out in the open at this party was way more than usual. There was a loud buzzing in my head. A warning. Whatever this was, I didn’t want any part of it. They could do whatever they wanted and if they got caught, their families would pick up the pieces, but if I was kicked out of school for something like this, it would ruin my life. Ruin Naomi’s.

I backed away from Kai. “Sorry—I need to go. I—”

“Maya, wait—where are you going?” she asked, but I was shoving my way toward the exit.

—

OUTSIDE, I EXHALED a breath and leaned against the side of the building. It felt better to be out here, inhaling the crisp, cold air.

Pulling out my phone, I texted Lila: *Is it too late to come to Terrace?*

She responded right away. *Not at all!* So I pulled my jacket tight and ran in the direction of the eating clubs.

—

THE VERTICALLY BROWN-STRIPED tudor mansion was older-looking than some of the other eating clubs, and there were three flags flying over the door—a Pride flag, a skull and crossbones, and a peace sign. As I approached, Lila came into view, waiting for me outside. She was wearing a leather jacket and

dark black eye shadow that made her green eyes look even more intense. Her hair was pulled back off her face, but I noticed she'd applied more concealer over the spot on her temple. I wanted to ask her about it, but something stopped me. We weren't that close. It felt nosy. Intrusive.

"You made it just in time," she said excitedly. "They're starting."

We entered the Terrace foyer, and I was struck by how different it was from Sterling Club. The White Stripes was playing, and the pungent smell of weed floated through the air as an eclectic mix of people milled about the space. We passed the living room where a guy played an acoustic guitar, and a girl with an Afro and tattoos sat on the lap of another girl, their fingers lovingly intertwined.

—

I FOLLOWED LILA down a steep flight of stairs into the basement, where a band was playing. The space was small and tightly packed, the floor sticky with spilled beer, and the air humid, which made it feel even tighter and more intimate.

"That's my friend," Lila whispered, pointing at the girl on drums in an oversized plaid flannel. "Wooo, get it, Austin! Hell yeah," she cheered loudly, and Austin gave her a smile.

They played a mellow alt-rock song, and a small crowd nodded to the beat. There was a guy on bass with long blue hair and a good-looking Black guy I recognized from my econ class on electric guitar.

The guitarist tossed his head back, letting his locs fall out of his eyes, and looked right at me. I felt a flicker of something before I averted my gaze. He was without a doubt the most attractive guy I'd ever seen. I studied his fingers as they moved effortlessly over the strings, trailed his strong forearms up to his broad shoulders.

I was watching the singer, a white girl with tattoos and a nose ring, as she leaned into the microphone and sang, "*If I had one night with you...*" when I sensed someone was watching me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that the guy on guitar was still looking at me, and when I met his eyes, he smiled.

I felt my face flush. Every week, he sat in the back of the lecture hall and didn't say much, but he was always early, always typing notes on his laptop. One time a few weeks ago, he'd caught me staring at him and smiled, but we'd never spoken.

As snow fell outside, and his hazel eyes held mine, I felt a thrill that I'd never felt before.

"They're good, right?" Lila asked.

"Yeah." I took a sip of my beer, keeping my eyes on the guitarist, who'd looked down at his fingers to focus on a complicated riff. I couldn't take my eyes off him. The way he played, the depth and precision of his movements, it was like he was pouring his entire soul into the song, and through the deep bass of the speakers, like it was pouring straight into me.

I pointed him out to Lila. "Do you know the guy on guitar?"

"Nate? Yeah, he's a junior in Terrace." She grinned as if reading my mind. "He's really good, huh?"

—

THE BAND FINISHED their set and were by the bar when Lila and I approached. When she saw Lila, the drummer's face lit up, and she swooped her into a hug.

"This is my friend Austin," Lila said to me, grinning, an arm still around her friend's waist. Austin was Lila's opposite: curvy and broad-shouldered with olive skin, dark hair, and a nose piercing.

"Hey, I'm Maya," I said, and Austin nodded at me with a knowing smile.

"You want one?" Nate held out an overflowing cup of beer. I wanted to reach for it, but I couldn't move—I wasn't prepared for how it would feel to be right next to him. I became aware of my heartbeat, my breath. Up close he was so good-looking it was hard to think straight.

"Sure," I said, finally, and when he handed me the cup, our fingers brushed and I felt a rush of energy. He smiled warmly.

"Thanks," I said, noticing how my skin felt hot where he'd touched me. I stared into his eyes: flecks of gold in a sea of green, swirling into a stunning

hazel. Trying not to seem so obvious, I took a long sip of the beer, the crisp cold bubbles sliding down my throat. And, *Oh jeez. Was there foam on my upper lip?* I wiped at it with the back of my hand.

“Hey, Nate Banks. What’s good?” He extended a hand. His hand was warm and strong around mine. “I know you. You’re in Behavioral Econ, right? You sit in front and wear that same scarf every day. Went *in* on that dude last week.” He laughed.

I flushed, remembering how I’d gotten defensive about the topic—education and government spending. “Sometimes I wish someone would tell me to shut up,” I muttered, more to myself than to him.

He looked amused at my embarrassment. “No. He deserved it.” He touched his cup to mine in a toast. “It’s nice to officially meet you,” he said, and finally broke eye contact. I exhaled the breath I’d been holding.

“You too,” I said, and somewhere deep within me I felt a strange fluttering.

For the rest of the night, we danced near one another. We were so close that I was aware of the space between us, the warmth of my breath, and the way my skin tingled whenever our arms would brush. I closed my eyes, drinking it in. Whatever this was, I wanted more.

NAOMI

December 2022, five months before her death

EVERY NIGHT THAT WEEK, I'D show up at Liam's doorstep, and he'd answer the door with that sexy half grin. "Hi."

"Hey," I'd reply, sliding past him into the room, trying to hide my smile. I knew I was avoiding thinking about Greystone and felt guilty.

But once I was in his bed, the night was a blur of tangled sheets, his body pressed against mine, every inch of my skin humming, and the next morning when I woke up next to him, I'd feel lit up inside.

—

ON FRIDAY, LIAM and I are walking home from Sterling, where we met for dinner. He's carrying his tennis gear because he came straight from practice, and he's in one of his moods again.

"I'm this way," he says as we round a corner.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got a meeting. I told you about it yesterday," he says. I don't remember, but I nod anyway.

When I think he's going to leave, he pulls me toward him, wrapping his arms around me. "You're coming over later, right?"

"Probably not until ten-ish. I'm meeting Amy at Firestone."

“What are you working on?”

I haven’t told Liam about Amy’s research. I trust him, but he’s a member of Greystone, and close with DuPont too. I can’t tell him for the same reason I can’t tell my sister: I don’t want to get them involved. I don’t want them to try to stop me. “We’re working on a paper on *Macbeth*.” I can’t meet his eyes.

“Okay...” His face changes as if he’s remembered something. “Oh shit, I think I left my phone in your room, can I borrow your keys? I’ll give them back to you tonight.”

“Oh, sure.” I hand him the keys and watch him take off down the sidewalk. He looks back, and when I wave, a strange look flashes over his face, but a second later, it’s gone.

—

“YOU WON’T BELIEVE it,” Amy says once we settle into our study spot in Firestone Library. “I convinced one of the English professors, Fiona Williams, to talk to me off the record.”

I sit back, surprised. “Professor Williams is my thesis advisor.”

Amy nods. “Right, I forgot about that. She’s taught here for twenty years. She knew Lila, and, apparently, just before she died, Lila was collecting information for a reporter at *The Prince*.” She turns her laptop so I can see the screen. “Unfair admissions practices—bribes, gifts, information. Did you know kids of Greystone alumni were getting an unfair advantage? Like more unfair than regular legacy applicants. She found emails from the dean of admissions—Greystone was straight-up paying him to let their alums’ kids into the school...Greystone covered up their part, they were never named in the scandal, just let the dean take the fall for it. Probably paid him to keep his mouth shut.”

I swallow. On her screen are articles and quotes about various public scandals that she suspects former Greystone members were involved in over the years. She has a list of their names and lines pointing to the scandal: *BP Oil Spill*, *Bernie Madoff*, *Bear Stearns*. Words circled in red: *fraud*, *bribery*,

insider trading. I was starting to realize that this perfect life lived by Greystone members wasn't so much given to them as it was taken from others.

"These are just the ones that made it into the news. For the most part, they managed to keep their crimes quiet. They resorted to everything from threatening to sue to blackmail, whatever it took to preserve their members' reputation," Amy tells me. "Professor Williams tried to help Lila with the *Prince* investigation, but when Lila died, Professor Williams worried about her own safety and went quiet."

I feel my head spin and place my hands flat on the table to steady myself. I wasn't totally naïve—I was aware that some members used the gray areas in the law to their benefit. Tax-related laws, mostly. Loopholes. Life insurance policies and charity write-offs. Giving their kids inflated salaries or bonuses. But this was worse. These hurt people. In the best cases, they were stealing from innocent people. And in the worst, their selfish decisions left people dead.

There had always been things I thought were odd. Sophomore year, Zee had been asked to give an interview vouching for a man's character she'd never met. A few months after that, Liam had received an anonymous phone call, telling him to tell his father to sell ten million dollars' worth of a certain stock.

But I'd convinced myself that belonging to this group didn't mean *I* had done anything wrong. The Society had done so much good too—the Legacy Foundation, the nonprofit organization, financed children's hospitals and cancer research, community initiatives. Philanthropy was one of the things Greystone stood for.

"I reached out to Lila's brother again," Amy said.

"What did he say?"

"He doesn't think Lila would've wandered off alone, certainly not with a storm coming. Lila was on the brink of exposing all of Greystone's secrets to the world. I think she was murdered."

Amy shows me a picture of Professor DuPont and Lila Jones that looks like it was taken at Sterling. Lila is not smiling but staring straight into the

camera with the look of someone with a secret.

I go cold. *Who killed you?*

“You have to be careful,” I insist. “If your article isn’t airtight—”

“—they could come for me.” She nods, then looks down at her hands. “I know.”

“Amy.” I grab her hand and give it a squeeze. “I’m not going to let that happen.”

Amy’s eyes tear up. She nods.

I turn back to the picture of DuPont and Lila, resolute. “All right. Let’s burn this place down.”

MAYA

December 2011

OVER THE NEXT WEEK AND a half, I fell hard for Nate Banks. He was from Chicago—a family of boys. He introduced me to Roots Manuva and Timbaland and Kendrick, and showed me how he looped samples and mixed tracks in his room for his friends to rap on. Every time Nate entered a room, the air felt charged. It was like we were revolving around each other, brought together by a magnetic pull.

So why hadn't he asked me out? I was sure the night we met at Terrace there were sparks between us.

—

THE LAST FRIDAY before the winter break, Daisy and I met for breakfast at Sterling Club, and it all came crashing down.

“He’s what?” I asked again, unable to process what she’d said.

“Yeah,” she said. *“He’s Cecily’s boyfriend. Well, not boyfriend, I guess, I think they’re just hooking up. I don’t think she’s serious about him.”* She reminded me of how Kai had mentioned him the night we rode in Cecily’s golf cart.

Daisy pointed to the other side of the dining room, where Cecily and Nate sat next to each other at the end of the long table—she must have brought

him to eat here after they'd spent the night together. Seeing them was like a blow to the chest: she was grabbing his arm and laughing like whatever he'd said was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. My heart broke.

—

IT WAS SNOWING that afternoon when I ran into Cecily on our way to class. Her hair was rumpled, little flakes of snow landing on her hair and eyelashes, and she was wearing a plaid button-down. *Was that his shirt?*

"Hey, Maya," she said, grinning.

"Hey."

"I have news." *No*, I thought. *Please don't say it.* "I hooked up with Nate in the Firestone stacks last night. We knocked over a row of books and terrified a poor librarian!" I winced.

Trying to hide my disappointment I said, "That's hilarious," but I wasn't laughing.

"What's wrong?" Cecily gave me a confused look.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "It's just—it's been a long week."

"Oh, it has, hasn't it? Well, I think I'm going to bring him home for Christmas to meet my parents. I hope my dad goes easy on him. I've never introduced him to a Black guy before." I frowned at her. She studied me. "This time of year must be hard, being so far from your sister. You're more than welcome to join us for Christmas if you want. You could bring someone too. Maybe Kevin Francis? What do you think?" Cecily asked. The thought of being at the St. Clairs' Christmas with Nate and Cecily made my head spin.

"No," I said quickly. "I mean, thanks, but I have a lot of reading to catch up on over the break. I'm actually looking forward to staying on campus this year."

"Okay, well, let me know if you change your mind."

Holiday break came and most people went home to visit their families, leaving the campus quiet and the snow-covered quad undisturbed. Having sent all my extra money back to my sister, I planned on watching Christmas

movies to pass the time. I was watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas* on my laptop and popping a bag of popcorn in the microwave when I heard something hit my window. *Tap*. I ignored it and had turned back to the movie when I heard it again. *Tap*. Annoyed, I paused the movie and walked over to the window.

To my surprise, waving from the ground below was Nate Banks. He threw another snowball at my window and it hit the glass with a *clunk*. My heart gave a little leap at the sight of him.

“What are you doing?” I yelled down to him.

“Change of plans, I’m back. Come down!” He grinned and threw another snowball. This time it hit the screen, spraying shards of snow into the room.

For the next two weeks, Nate and I saw each other every day. We shared hot apple cider in his dorm room, sledded down Whitman on dining hall trays, and ran to town in the middle of a snowstorm. Cecily would’ve been furious if anything happened. *But we’re just friends*, I told myself. *We’re doing nothing wrong*.

On the last night of winter break we were watching *SNL* and sharing a bottle of cheap wine when Nate moved his hand so it was barely touching mine. I could no longer focus on the screen.

Nate leaned over and whispered in my ear. “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Realizing my jaw had dropped, I closed it slowly and turned to face him.

Nate looked embarrassed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have—” He moved back and pulled his hand away.

“No, no, it’s not—” *I like you too*, I wanted to say. But I couldn’t. I could barely breathe.

Was it my imagination or had he moved closer? He smelled of soap and sandalwood. His hazel eyes had tiny streaks of gold, and there was a tiny scar on his chin the shape of a fingernail-sized crescent. He was leaning in, about to kiss me, when without warning, I blurted out, “What about Cecily?”

“What about her?”

“Aren’t you guys dating?”

Nate shrugged. “We hooked up a few times, but we were never dating.”

I pulled away from him. “Didn’t you go home with her for Christmas?”

“I went for a night, because she told me it was a casual party with a lot of people. And when I got there, she acted like I was some kind of trophy she was bringing home to piss off her folks. I didn’t appreciate being used, and I told her that. Trust me. She knows it’s over.”

I hesitated. Even if that was the truth, I didn’t want to hook up with a friend’s ex...but on the other hand, I’d seen Cecily flirting with other guys. Daisy had said she wasn’t serious about Nate, and if things were reversed, would she really think twice about me?

Nate took my hand. His was warm and comforting. “Let me talk to her when she’s back. It’s going to be fine. I promise.”

Nate touched my bottom lip, and before I could stop myself, we were kissing. For a moment, the walls of the room seemed to vanish, and it was only the two of us, on this old futon in the middle of the snow-covered campus, and by the time my mind caught up to what my body was doing, it was far too late to stop.

NAOMI

January 2023, four months before her death

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT, AND I'M alone at my desk, researching the list of Greystone alumni involved in the Hunt scandal to see if any of them are connected to Lila Jones. I've started to grow paranoid that they'll find out what we're doing. That they'll find a way to listen to our conversations. Zee is out, Amy is still not back, and I can't do this anymore. I've been helping Amy all week, reading articles, talking to alumni under the pretense of "informational interviews," and now my head hurts. An hour ago, I texted Liam asking if he wanted to get dinner, but he still hasn't responded, so instead of waiting, I decide to go for a run.

—

OUTSIDE MY DORM, the air is so cold I can see my breath, and several feet of snow blanket the ground. Trying not to think about the investigation, I focus on the blood pumping through my veins, the oxygen filling my lungs. I want to forget about everything, forget the article, and most of all, forget the fact I'd failed to do the one thing that might help Amy—talk to my sister.

—

THIS MORNING, I'D called Maya. I wanted so badly to ask her about Lila, but the question got caught in my throat. She'd refused to talk about Greystone for my entire life because she didn't want me to be a part of her world, and because of this, I'd never told her I was in it myself. Why would she help me now?

Instead, I'd asked her if she was coming to the BAC show.

"Of course I am," she said, somewhat defensively. I heard Dani and Nate in the background getting ready for school. "Why are you asking me that? I told you I was coming months ago." I hated when she got like this. It probably came from all the times I'd asked her to come to things that she had to miss for one reason or another.

That's when I got an idea.

I tried to sound relaxed. She could always pick up on even the subtlest tremor in my voice, and I wasn't ready to deal with her questions. "It could be fun if you stayed afterward. The show ends at eight, but we could get a late dinner? Maybe you could even stay over in the dorms. Go out to the Street?" I thought about how she used to visit Margaret and John's place over Thanksgiving after I moved in with them, how we'd have sleepovers in my room, and felt hopeful as I waited for her response.

But Maya said something to Nate or Dani, and I could tell she wasn't listening. "Sorry, what was that? Dinner?"

"Yeah..." I wanted to say *Listen to me!* To tell her about the investigation. The break-in...See if she remembered anything about Lila. I had so many questions, and I knew that if I could just talk to my sister, this could all be solved.

But...what if she tried to stop me?

I could imagine the raised pitch, the alarm in her voice that I'd heard so often in the years after Mom died: *What are you thinking? Why don't you listen?*

"Thanks for calling," Maya said, interrupting my thoughts. "It's always nice to hear from you." Her tone was distant. Nate was saying something to her. It was my cue to let her go.

I sighed. "Yeah, you too. I'll visit soon."

“Will you?” Her voice lifted. “Dani’s been asking about you. She wants you to braid her hair again.”

“Yeah?”

“Every time we get a sitter, she whines and throws a fit when she finds out it’s not you.”

Of course she’d say that, because that’s all I am: my sister’s favorite sitter.

A new wave of panic hit me. What if Amy and I were getting ourselves into something we couldn’t get out of? “Hey, wait.” I wanted to tell her that I was scared. That I needed her help. I needed her here.

“Yeah?” She was listening now.

“No, nothing,” I said, my voice pinched. “I’ll tell you when I see you.”

“Okay...” Maya said. “And don’t forget about Cecily. She went out of her way to get you that Hunt internship. I know they’re having some difficulties right now, but you should reach out and tell her you appreciate everything she did to help you.”

“Right.” I closed my eyes. I still hadn’t told her I’d both gotten a job offer from Hunt and turned it down as soon as Liam told me about the *Times* investigation. Whatever was coming for the fund, I didn’t want to be a part of it.

Dani was crying in the background, and I heard some shuffling sounds on the other end of the line.

“Dani, stop,” she said to her daughter. Then to me: “I’ve got to go, Dani is having a meltdown. Talk soon.”

“Okay. Love you,” I replied, but she’d already hung up the phone.

—

WINDED, I SLOW to a walk to catch my breath. the cold is making my lungs raw—maybe I’ve run enough for the day. Surrounded by mist and unable to see fifty feet in either direction, I suddenly feel nervous. The fog seems to have blocked the sun, closing in on me from all sides.

I’m heading back toward the university when I hear a rustling sound.

I stop, concentrating on the spot where I heard movement. My skin tingles with a horrible feeling. That feeling of certainty, that gut feeling you get when you *know* someone is watching. Following.

But no. I stare at the empty path. The leaves rustling in the breeze. No one is there.

I hadn't been sleeping well lately. Ever since I'd begun helping Amy look into the murder. Was I being paranoid?

I'm staring at the empty dirt path, the thick foliage lining the lake's edge, when a squirrel's furry head pops out of the bushes and looks right at me.

A nervous laugh escapes my chest. Yep. Paranoid. *Get a grip.*

I run faster on the way back home, just in case. Overhead, the sky has grown dark. Long, twisting shadows dart in and out of my path, and tree branches reach across the sky like skeleton fingers. I'm slowing to a walk to catch my breath when I hear another sound behind me. Footsteps.

I whip around, my heart lurching with fresh panic—*that* was not an animal—but when I look behind, no one is there. Nothing but a thick haze.

It's nothing, I convince myself. *Just go home.*

But when I'm nearing the bridge, I get the unnerving sense that someone is behind me, their breath tracing the back of my neck. I reach up and touch the skin, shuddering.

I walk faster, but there it is again. The crunch of boots over icy ground. I pause. The footsteps stop too.

I consider my options: I could scream for help, but there's no one out here. Or I could run. I'm not that far now. Yes. I could run. Or...I could see what he wants.

I turn slowly. Behind me, I think a figure stands in the path, hidden in shadow.

"Hey!" I shout, but before I can get a good look, they slip off the trail. Are they on to us? Have they been following Amy too? What exactly do they want from me? Not wanting to find out, I break into a sprint back toward campus.

After catching my breath, I look back the way I came, unsettled, and wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing.

MAYA

January 2012

I RAN THROUGH THE DARK wintry campus. it was hard to focus on anything but the secret I shared with Nate, and on the evening of Winter Formal, I'd been so distracted I'd completely forgotten to turn in a problem set, which was a large percentage of our grade.

Rushing through the halls, I arrived at Professor DuPont's office out of breath, problem set in hand, and what I saw past the open door made me stop. To my surprise, Lila was leaning over his shoulder, pointing to an open book on his desk. Her mouth was so close to his neck, he must have felt her breath on his skin. Our eyes met, and something flashed across hers, though she didn't back away, and instead held my gaze like a deer caught in headlights.

"Oh, sorry. I can come back." Sensing I was interrupting an intimate moment, I looked away, embarrassed.

"No, it's okay," Lila said. "I was just leaving."

She gathered her things and, on her way out the door, her arm brushed against mine. She paused, and when our eyes met, hers were filled with warning. She looked for a moment as if she was going to say something, but she averted her eyes and continued out the door.

I frowned, my heart beating faster as anxiety rose within me. I remembered the times I'd seen them together before. But this felt different. This time he hadn't been watching her with admiration, but with something

darker, like he wanted to possess her. I thought of what she'd whispered in my ear in the library: *Be careful*. Of what? Of him?

When I looked back at him, he was watching me with concern. Handing him my problem set, I avoided his eyes, trying to hide my unease.

"Maya." Professor DuPont's voice was more stern than usual. "I'm concerned about your performance the last few weeks."

I swallowed. It was true, I'd been distracted and let my grades slip. "I don't know what happened..." *Nate. Nate happened.*

Professor DuPont drew out a piece of paper on his desk—the test I'd taken last week—so I could see it marked up in red. "I'll let you redo this one. But next time, I'm marking you down."

I mumbled some incoherent response and was on my way out the door when he said, without looking up, "And...this isn't my place to say, but I'd like you to be cautious around Nathaniel Banks." My skin prickled. *How did he know about Nate?* "You've been a straight-A student until now. It would be a shame if he were the reason you failed my class."

NAOMI

January 2023, four months before her death

THE NEXT MORNING IT'S DRIZZLING outside and freezing in my dorm room. After throwing on a sweatshirt, I try calling Liam to tell him about the person following me yesterday, but he doesn't answer. His lack of communication is making me worry that he's either ignoring me again or out of his mind on some kind of bender. I check his Instagram, but he hasn't posted in weeks.

Sensing a stare on the back of my neck, I anxiously glance over my shoulder, half expecting to see him behind me, but he's not there. I'm turning back around when, out of nowhere, a bike whizzes past, and I lurch back, my heart pounding out of my chest.

—

AFTER BREAKFAST, I receive an unexpected email from Professor DuPont asking me to come to his office because he “wants to have a quick chat.”

Do I go??? I text Amy.

YES, she replies. Then...*It wasn't him yesterday, right?*

I try to picture the man, or what I thought was a man, on the towpath but can only conjure a dark, shifting figure. *I don't think so...I still don't know if it was anybody at all.*

Don't worry, she writes back. He can't do anything on campus. See if you can get him talking. This is our chance.

I REACH THE door to DuPont's office, take a deep breath, and knock.

"Come in," he says after a moment, and I find him turned away from me at his desk, talking on the phone. Without looking at me, he holds a finger up for me to wait, and so I stand awkwardly by the door.

A minute later, he hangs up the call and gestures for me to have a seat.

"How well do you handle pressure?" he asks, and after I give a confused shrug, he continues. "I spoke with Calum Fuller at Omnis Media. He mentioned they have a job for you."

"What kind of job?"

"They're looking to add more diversity at the hiring stage. You could work in the newsroom, eventually be an anchor. Cover important stories." He pauses. "It would be better, though, if you chose one, uh, *side* to lean into. Your ambiguity might confuse them."

I have to clench my jaw to keep it in place. So first he implies that I'm only being offered the job to up their diversity ratio, but if I take it, I'd have to pick which box to check? Sounds like a *great* fit.

My whole life, at an upscale store, a restaurant, my own apartment building: that itchy feeling of someone staring. The realization that, even before I look, I won't like what I'll find: The coldness in their eyes. The set of their mouth. And their whispers: *What is she doing here?*

The moment I'd look, they'd turn their gaze away. There'd been worse, of course, than stares and whispers, but those seemed to penetrate the deepest.

"The starting salary is low, thirty-five to forty K a year, but keep your head down and work hard. They'll take care of you."

"Thanks for thinking of me." My breathing is shallow, but I force a smile, trying to refocus my attention and get him talking. "You know, my sister wanted me to work in finance."

“Well,” he says. “HBS is always an option.” *Was he suggesting he could help me get in?*

“Do you remember my sister? Maya Mason?”

DuPont’s brow lifts, almost imperceptibly, as if trying to read me. “I do.”

He sits back in his chair, watching me closely, and I’m suddenly put on edge, but remembering my promise to Amy and realizing this may be my best chance, I press on. “She graduated in 2013...isn’t that the year you went on sabbatical?”

A pause. “It was.”

“Did something happen?”

He narrows his gaze at me, and I falter.

“I’m not sure what my sabbatical has to do with your job prospects, Naomi,” he says coldly.

I clear my throat and continue. “Maya told me recently that a Greystone member died her junior year. It was hard on her—on you, too, I’m sure. I didn’t know if that was why you left, or...I see how much you care about all of us here, so I just wondered...” His eyes darken, and I drop my gaze.

Shit. I’ve gone too far.

I’m mentally backpedaling, my thoughts spiraling through the thick silence. *Now what?*

“You’ve looked it up, I assume?” he says, more a statement than a question. His gaze on me is almost unbearable.

“Not much, just a quick search after Maya mentioned it.” I swallow. Glance toward the door.

In that moment, DuPont’s phone rings, the tension between us snapping.

As he turns away to answer, my body slackens with relief. While he’s occupied, slowly, carefully, I back toward the door, hoping to escape.

But when I turn to grip the handle, his voice booms across the space. “Naomi.”

I stop, my heart lurching to my throat.

“If you really want to know what happened, why don’t you ask your sister?” he says, and when I turn around, he’s staring at me intently. “After all, she was one of the last people to see her alive.”

MAYA

January 2012

ON THE WAY TO CECILY'S room at Sterling, I tried to shake the strange feeling I'd had when I'd run into Lila in Professor DuPont's office. To try to stop wondering how he knew about me and Nate. When I opened the door, Cecily, Daisy, and Kai were in pajama shorts and bras, dancing as they drank and did one another's makeup for Winter Formal. Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" pulsed from the speakers and masquerade masks lay scattered on the bed and floor next to gowns with labels like Balenciaga, Tom Ford, and Chanel, open bags of Haribo cherry candy, and copies of *Vogue*.

They looked at me when I walked in, and I feared they could see it on my face: the shame of what I'd done with Nate over winter break. I was a traitor.

"I want to get seriously messed up tonight," Cecily said, sitting at her desk as she threaded an earring through her earlobe.

"What happened?" Kai asked.

But Cecily dismissed her with a quick shake of her head. "I don't want to talk about it."

I felt a stab of guilt. Was it about Nate? I had to say something.

I opened my mouth, ready to come clean, but just then there was a knock at the door and Marta popped her head in. "Excuse me, ladies, they would like you to please lower the music."

"Marta," Cecily snapped. "Can't you see we're getting ready?"

Marta shook her head and muttered something to herself before disappearing once again, but she shut the door hard enough to make the desk shake and to make Cecily, who'd been holding a mascara wand up to her face, stab herself in the eye. "Damn it."

"Do you have to talk to her like that?" I said. Marta had been kind to me since I'd joined. She seemed to understand I was different from the others.

"Relax," Cecily said as Kai handed her a cotton swab to fix her eye. "She's worked for us for years, she's like family."

Kai nodded. "She can pretty much do whatever she wants, and she's paid more than any housekeeper I've ever met."

—

I TRIED TO calm my nerves as we put on our masks and wandered down to the party at Sterling. I regretted inviting Nate—it would be the first time all three of us were in the same room. I glanced at Cecily. *I'll talk to her tomorrow.*

We paused at the top of the stairs. Below us, the front hall was filled with members and their guests in tuxedos and gowns, flickering candles dancing across their masked faces, feathers, and gold filigree. Around them, every surface was adorned with flowers, decorated for the masquerade theme.

As the four of us descended, a hush fell over the space as heads turned one by one to take us in. A girl at the bottom of the stairs whispered to her date—*That's Cecily St. Clair.*

I didn't rush to find Nate, and half an hour later the champagne had gone to my head and the room was pulsing with a warm glow as we danced. As the four of us swayed to the music, the room and the chandelier and the rest of the party seemed to sway with us.

Later, I found Nate standing alone by the fireplace.

"You look amazing," he said as I approached. He gave me a hug, and the brush of his fingers on my arm made me shiver.

When he stepped back, I took in the rest of him. He was wearing a tux that fit him nicely, and his eyes glowed next to the fire. "You too."

I liked him, I really did, and it was impossible to hide. He smiled as if he could hear my thoughts, and a warmth spread over my chest followed quickly by a jolt of guilt. As if she had heard them too, I looked up to find Cecily staring in my direction. She and Kai had left the dance floor and were making their way toward the dining room. She gestured for me to follow, and I nodded.

“It’s been weird with Cecily,” I admitted, once they’d disappeared into the other room.

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to her,” Nate said, his face settling into a frown.

“She seems upset, and I’m worried it’s about you.” I felt my cheeks warm with frustration—I wanted him to share the guilt weighing over me, the fact that Cecily might never forgive what I’d done. I shook my head and walked away from him toward the dining room.

He followed. “Hey, wait.”

When we got to the dining room, I turned back to him. “This was a bad idea, you being here. We shouldn’t even be talking right now.”

“Then let’s tell her, get it over with.” He grabbed my hand and began guiding me toward the table where Cecily and Kai sat.

My heart fluttered with panic. “No. Wait—”

But it was too late. Nate had already called out her name.

—

MY CHEEKS FLAMED as we sat down at the long dining table. I’d never wanted to disappear as badly as I did right then. Nate slid into the chair next to Cecily, who had Kai on her other shoulder and cozied up to her as I sank into the chair next to Daisy.

As Nate and Cecily spoke in hushed whispers, sweat accumulated on my back. I tried to calm myself: *Relax, everything’s fine. Nate will tell her the truth, that we didn’t mean for this to happen, and—*

“Is it true?” Cecily was staring at me. The air grew still around us, everyone’s conversations quieting.

I looked at her, my mouth open, and said nothing.

She stood, her chair skidding back with a screech. “Are you serious?”

More heads turned. Shocked inhales. She was standing over me as Nate stood behind her, trying to calm her down.

“Woah, just chill, all right? It’s not her fault,” Nate said, but I put up a hand. He was wrong, it *was* my fault.

I stood and forced myself to meet her eyes. She was furious. “Cecily. I—”

“Wow, Maya. How dare you—to think this whole time you’ve been hooking up with my ex behind my back.”

“I thought you ended things. That it wasn’t serious—”

“I can’t even look at you right now,” Cecily said, before knocking over my champagne. She swore under her breath and marched away.

I melted back down and dropped my face into my palms.

“Don’t worry about her,” Daisy said, moving to clean up the spilled drink. “She’ll get over it.”

“That went well,” Nate said sarcastically. He touched my arm, but I drew back and glared at him before storming away.

—

I FOUND CECILY outside by the pool, dragging one hand across the water. She’d clearly been crying, and when she saw me approach, she turned her face away. I stood behind her awkwardly, looking down at my hands.

“I came to say...I’m sorry.” When she didn’t move, I cautiously sat down next to her, leaving a few feet between us. I tried to meet her eyes. “I should have told you.”

We sat in silence, steam peeling off the surface of the pool, currents whipping around us in the cold night air. I braced myself for her fury, but when she turned to me, all I saw was hurt. “I thought I could trust you.”

“I know.” I looked down, filled with shame. “And you can.”

“It’s not even about him, it’s about you. That you’d do something like that,” she explained. “I was just distracting myself with him anyway. I would never date *Nate Banks* in the real world.”

I sat back, confused. “What do you mean? Why not?”

She laughed again. “Could you imagine? My mother would have a heart attack.”

Because he’s Black?

I thought of so many things—how uncomfortable it had been to meet my high school boyfriend’s aunt and uncle, how my mother’s Chinese parents threatened to disown her when she got engaged to my dad, how people had treated me and my sister because of the particular blending of genes that made up our DNA—and felt my cheeks go hot. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, don’t. If anyone gets to be upset here, it’s me,” she said. “Besides, I’ve already moved on...college boys like Nate aren’t for me.” She finished the rest of her drink.

“I’m so tired of all this,” Cecily said. “Everyone needs to stop acting like the world is against them. Men have treated women like that for centuries.”

What was this, the oppression Olympics? Did we have to compete for last place?

“Forget about it,” Cecily said now, standing and adjusting her dress. “You can have Nate Banks. Let’s go inside—I want another drink.”

—

WE FOUND DAISY and Kai on the dance floor, and I forced myself to drink, to dance, to forget. The DJ turned up the music and bass throbbed low and steady from the speakers. Girls removed their heels, twirled by tuxedoed young men. I could sense the unresolved tension between Cecily and me, her comments burrowing under my skin like a tick, until to my relief, she left the dance floor and disappeared into the crowd.

I took a deep breath. Across the room, I caught sight of Nate standing alone off to one side. He looked handsome in his tux, locs pulled back from his face, eyes scanning the crowd, and when he saw me, he smiled and a warm sensation tingled through me.

I went to him and leaned in close. “Sorry about earlier. I think I’ve smoothed things over with Cecily. Come with me, I want to show you something.”

—

ON OUR WAY out, Nate draped his blazer over my shoulders, and I looked back one last time at the party. It had devolved into chaos. Daisy was leaning over the railing, pouring champagne into a boy’s mouth below. Kai was barefoot, the skirt of her dress hiked up, sliding down the banister with a shot glass in her mouth. And Cecily was nowhere to be found. Nearby, a wineglass shattered.

I turned to Nate. “Have you ever skinny-dipped in Lake Carnegie?”

“Uh. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but it’s snowing outside.”

“Scared of catching a cold?” I teased.

Nate raised an eyebrow. “You can’t be serious.”

But the fight with Cecily had made me reckless, and I was already running for the door. “Don’t be a loser!”

—

AS WE STOOD side by side on the ledge overlooking the lake, flurries of snow dancing around us, it felt like we were far away from reality, the only ones left in the world. I was shivering, but I didn’t care.

He handed me a bottle of wine he’d stolen from the bar, and I took a long swig. Nate cupped a hand over his mouth and shouted into the dark. “Woooo!” His voice echoed across the vast space.

I shouted too, relieved to release the heaviness in my chest.

“I needed that after tonight,” I said to him, relieved to be feeling better.

When we sat down, Nate turned to me. “Why do you hang out with those people?”

“What do you mean?”

“Cecily, Kai, even Daisy...I don’t get it. They’re nothing like you—just spoiled trust fund kids.”

I frowned. "You're the one who hooked up with her."

"At least I don't follow her around like a lapdog."

A lapdog? His words were like a blow to the center of my chest. "I don't do that." And what did he know? "We actually have more in common than you'd think."

"Oh yeah?" Nate laughed, sarcastically. "Like the fact your ancestors were owned by hers?"

My cheeks flamed. "Don't do this. Just because you're not in Sterling and all you do is make music with a bunch of stoners—" I stopped myself when I saw his hurt expression.

Nate took a minute to answer. "Hey, look: what Princeton means to me and what it means to you, those are two different things..." I opened my mouth to take it back, but he put up a hand. "Those *stoners* who are my friends?" His eyes flashed with what I could tell was hurt and anger. "Jamal's pre-med and volunteers at a hospital on the weekends. AJ works a full-time job to support his family while going to school, and he's still going to graduate with honors. So yeah, all we do besides *school and work* is make music and smoke a little weed on the weekend. Give me a goddamn break." He was breathing hard.

"I didn't mean—"

"That society you're in, *Greystone?*"

I looked at him, surprised. I hadn't told him I was in Greystone. Had Cecily?

"—bunch of power-hungry pricks. They let you in because right now it's a good look to have one light-skinned Black girl around."

It stung with truth.

But at the same time, he didn't understand how much I needed Greystone to make something of myself. How much *Naomi* needed it. I had a level of privilege, there was no denying it—but Nate's mother was still alive, his brothers in Chicago, not on the other side of the country. Naomi and I didn't have anyone.

"Look, I don't have the luxury to turn down an opportunity like this. Maybe you would've turned down Greystone...but some of us have to make

compromises to survive.”

I was pushing myself to my feet when he reached out and grabbed my hand, held it tight. “Hey,” he said, and when I looked at him, his eyes were filled with emotion. “Forget it. Sorry, this shit—gets me heated.”

He draped an arm around me, and we sat in silence, the air heavy between us. Nate moved his other hand onto my thigh, and when I met his eyes, he was looking at me differently. His eyes were darker, more intense, and before I could say anything else, he pulled me toward him and kissed me.

A few seconds later, I pulled away, tore my dress over my head, and pushed myself off the ledge.

And with a rush of wind, I was falling. Down. Down. Plunging into the ice-cold water, air whipping from my lungs, and for a moment, everything went dark, and I wondered if my body was having an adverse reaction to the cold. I heard my blood rushing in my ears and felt the weight of Nate’s words as they circled around me. I wondered if I was the awful one, being with him, or being in Greystone, or whether I was going to drown in this ice-cold water and none of it mattered.

When I finally breached the surface with a gasp, I caught my breath and looked up to find Nate standing on the ledge, shirtless, shivering. I laughed at the sight of him.

“Water’s perfect!” I shouted as I swam for the shore.

“You’re full of shit!” he replied, and with a howl, he jumped too.

Part Three

Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering self, and the experiencing self, who does my living, is like a stranger to me.

—Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

MAYA

June 2023

AFTER THE FUNERAL, NATE, DANI, and I return home to our apartment—a two-bedroom, fourth-story walk-up in Brooklyn. I’m exhausted, body depleted from the lack of food and sleep, the intermittent tears, muscles aching with a dull throb that seems to have started in my head and worked its way down my spine, through my limbs, all the way to my fingertips.

—

ONCE SETTLED BACK inside, Nate and I both sink onto the couch in the living room and sit there in silence. Why hadn’t the police searched Margaret’s house? Presumably because Naomi hadn’t lived there for four years...and yet it seems like her high school bedroom would be a logical place to look—if *they thought it was a murder*, I remind myself. But an accidental drowning, it seemed, required much less investigation.

I’d told Margaret what I suspected about Matthew’s involvement, that I hadn’t trusted him since I was at school, and about the note I’d found in Naomi’s room, and how the police weren’t taking this seriously. “I hate that man with a passion,” she’d said.

—

MARGARET KNEW HIM well, better than I did in some ways. They were both involved in the Legacy Foundation, and she'd seen through him from the start. "He's a narcissist, that's what it is," she'd said one day, after returning from a board meeting. It was a Friday, a few weeks before my sister's death, and we were having a glass of wine by the pool. "He cares about nothing but himself, really. I can't believe he's managed to find a third woman who wants to marry him."

I took a sip of my wine. "She must be in love with the lifestyle."

EXHAUSTED, I BURY my head in my hands. Normally, I'd be curled against Nate at night once Dani had gone to bed, reading a book while he watched *The Daily Show* or read *The Atlantic*. But going through our normal routine feels wrong after my sister's funeral only a few hours earlier. Nate sets down his phone and stands. "It's been a long day. I'll put Dani to bed."

I give him a grateful smile.

He looks tired too, stubble covering his jaw, the lines around his eyes and forehead deeper than usual. When was the last time I'd looked at Nate? When was the last time we'd kissed? Or worse, had sex? Weeks? Months? God. I'd been so busy with the gallery and Dani's summer activities before Naomi died, and now I barely have the energy to feed and bathe myself.

WHILE NATE HELPS Dani get ready for bed, I pour myself a glass of wine, hoping it and a bath will numb some of this sharp pain.

In the upstairs bathroom, as eucalyptus-scented steam fills the space, I peel off my clothes: the black sweater that was itching my arms, my too-tight black pants. I unhook my bra and let it fall to the floor. Turning toward the mirror, I catch a glimpse of myself—deep bags under my eyes, lopsided mess of curls, body soft and hollowed out—before the steam fogs up the mirror.

Sighing, I sink into the hot water, inhaling the scent of eucalyptus as the heat seeps into my muscles. Closing my eyes, I sink down lower until my

face dips under the surface. If only the water could swallow me whole. *One two three*, I count, holding my breath, sinking deeper, deeper, until my head rests at the bottom of the tub. I stay there until my lungs burn and instinct sends me lurching to the surface, gasping for air.

After catching my breath, I place an Advil on my tongue and chase it with a sip of wine. Steeling myself, I open Naomi's notebook and begin to read.

MY FINGERS ARE numb and pruned by the time I finally pull my face back from the page. I have no idea how much time has passed. An hour? Two? Despite the lukewarm water, I feel cold.

Naomi seemed to have been investigating something related to Greystone. She was working with a reporter she calls *AL*—it couldn't be Amy, her last name doesn't start with an *L*—and she must have been providing them information. There were notes about Greystone alumni, a list of questions for Lila Jones's brother...and on the last page:

- TREVOR JONES
- NEED HARD EVIDENCE
- **SHOW AL WHAT WE FOUND!!**

And underlined at the bottom, the most terrifying of all: DONE

MAYA

January 2012

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AFTER winter formal, I was studying in my room when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Maya, this is Professor DuPont. I have an opportunity I’d like to talk to you about,” he said.

“What kind of opportunity...”

Since Winter Formal, when I saw Lila in his office and he’d expressed his disappointment in my grades, I’d avoided his weekly office hours. His criticism especially hurt because I’d come to see him as a sort of mentor. Apart from the past couple of weeks, I would spend every Thursday evening at his office hours, and after we finished talking about class, he’d sometimes pour us a glass of wine and go off on a tangent about his upbringing.

It turned out, as different as we were, our upbringing was quite similar—he came from a middle-class background and was deeply affected by the loss of his mother too. From these conversations, I began to form a connection with him deeper than that of a professor and student—not in an inappropriate way, though I did find him attractive, but like a mentor and advocate. I began to see a future for myself where, if I worked hard and met the right people, I could someday be as successful as he was.

“You need a job,” he said. “I have some friends who could use your help.”

—

THE ADDRESS PROFESSOR DuPont gave me sent me to a nice house a few blocks from campus. He’d offered me forty dollars an hour, triple what I normally made at the restaurant.

But something felt off...why did he want *me* for this job?

When I arrived at the house, a cold sweat ran down my back. I rang the doorbell, and a woman with large eyes and a windblown appearance opened the door. She looked surprised at first, giving me a quick up and down, but quickly recovered.

“You must be Maya. I’m Suzanne Fuller. Please, come in, come in.” Before I’d walked through the door, Mrs. Fuller yelled into the house. “Calum! The tutor’s here!”

A golden retriever ran up to me and began licking my hand. Pleasantly surprised, I reached down and ruffled his head.

“Oh, that’s Gus. I’m sorry. Goodness. Gus!” Mrs. Fuller pulled the dog by the collar and I got a whiff of her heady perfume.

“It’s okay, I love dogs.” I brushed myself off before taking a look around. It was an older house and had a homey feel to it, with a wreath over the fireplace and the smell of freshly baked cookies wafting from the kitchen.

“I don’t know where he is,” she said, flustered. “Calum! Get down here, now!”

Mrs. Fuller gestured for me to follow. When we reached the kitchen, she told me to sit. “Can I get you anything? Some water?”

“Oh, I’m okay, thank you.” I set my bag down on a chair.

After scurrying around the kitchen, Mrs. Fuller brought over a plate of cookies and a glass of water and disappeared into the hallway. I nervously set my books and supplies on the table.

When Mrs. Fuller returned, a dopey-looking teenager followed, with deep bags under his eyes, acne, and a swoop of white-blond hair. His mother

pulled out the chair next to me and the boy slumped in, neck hunched so far over his phone I thought it might break. His skin was such a pasty white, like he'd never seen the sun.

"Give me that." His mother snatched away his phone. "I told you no more games." He shrugged and looked down at his hands. "Say hello."

"Hello," the boy said as he picked loose skin from his thumb.

"Hi there," I said. "I'm Maya...I know you'd rather be hanging with your friends. But we'll make this fun. Promise."

The boy looked up at me; his eyes were big and green like his mother's. I sat up straighter. "Well, what's your name?"

"Calum."

This seemed to satisfy his mother, who gave a little nod and left the kitchen. Calum eyed the chocolate chip cookies sitting in front of us.

"Pretty nice of your mom."

He shrugged. "I guess."

I opened the notebook. "One thing I like to do before starting these personal essays is to make it a sort of game." I drew a line on the paper and wrote *FUN*. "What are some things you like to do?"

Calum shrugged, grabbed a cookie, and started picking out the chocolate chips.

"Oh, come on. Music? Sports?"

He ate the chocolate chips one at a time. Once they were all gone, he set the cookie on the table and licked his fingers. *Gross*. When the dog came over and started sniffing, Calum stroked his back, running his hand all the way down the dog's tail.

"I like the way his tail feels after he comes back from the groomer's," he said, gripping onto it tightly until the dog whimpered. I swallowed, forcing myself to look away.

After a half hour, Calum grew distracted and pulled out his phone, like he thought I was going to write the application for him.

Frustrated, I went to the other room where Mrs. Fuller was on the phone. "Are you sure she's the most qualified person for this?" she said in a whisper, obviously talking about me.

When I got back to the kitchen, I said firmly, “All right, Calum, enough of this. Time to get to work.”

An hour later, Calum had written a few activities he enjoyed—a video game called *Halo*, golf, and Tarantino movies. It was a start. When we were wrapping up, I noticed that Calum was staring at me with a peculiar expression. “You have really nice eyes.”

I sat back, disquieted. “That’s...nice. Thank you.” I forced a smile and focused on packing the notebooks and pens.

But Calum kept staring. “So you’re the one taking the SAT for me in March, right?”

“What?” I looked at him, confused. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” DuPont had never mentioned an SAT. Plus we looked nothing alike. And also, that would be wrong. And illegal.

“My mom said they have special testing centers where the proctors work for us.”

I went still. I could feel my heartbeat in my chest. “No...um, no, that’s not something I’m doing.”

Calum shrugged, pushed his chair back, and left the table. Disturbed, I went into the other room to find Mrs. Fuller, but she was facing away. “What’s *unfair* is what they do for these athletes,” she says into the phone. “I mean, the football team? What a bunch of *Neanderthals*.”

I shrank back, but she kept chattering on, unaware of my presence. “Can’t we say he’s a golf recruit or something? Squash?” Who was she talking to? It couldn’t possibly be Professor DuPont. He wouldn’t be okay with this kind of thing. Would he?

I turned to leave and my foot bumped a side table, sending a delicate lamp rocking. I quickly reached out to catch it. Mrs. Fuller spun around. Her eyes went wide, and she dropped the phone to her side.

“Oh! You’re done! Here, let me write you a check.”

“That’s all right, Professor DuPont will—”

“Nonsense.” She pulled out her checkbook and was scrawling with a pen. “A little something extra for the hassle.”

She came over and handed me the check. I wanted to tell her I would not take the SAT for her son, and I was done helping him write his application—he clearly wasn’t interested in doing so. If Professor DuPont knew they were cheating to get into Princeton and through their involvement with the foundation, he could get fired. The school took academic dishonesty very seriously. I could get expelled.

“Thank you so much, Maya.” She ushered me toward the door. “Matthew tells me you’re one of his brightest. He’s a good man. He’ll take care of you. Anyhow, I look forward to seeing you next week. Oh, and while you work on the essay—feel free to call me with any questions.” She gave my shoulder a squeeze. “I expect you’ll do a stellar job.” I felt dizzy from her perfume.

After we parted ways, and I was halfway down the walkway, I glanced at the check in my hands. The amount was for *ten thousand dollars*.

My hand flew to my mouth.

Though it was only a piece of paper, it felt heavy. I remembered how hard I’d worked to get into this school, raking through thick prep books, taping sticky notes with vocab words on the bathroom mirror. But this kid—this little shit who had clearly never worked a day in his life—was going to pay his way in? And they wanted *me* to do all the work for him?

I wanted to tear up the check. I hated that they thought—that *Professor DuPont* thought—I could be bribed. I had to prove them wrong.

But then I thought of my sister and firmed my jaw. *It’s not my fault the world is unfair*. People like the Fullers had the money to donate a building if they wanted to. They’d get that kid into the school with or without my help. But I’d only be able to help Naomi if I helped Calum. Besides, one more legacy applicant wasn’t going to change anything.

Drawing a breath, I delicately placed the check in the zippered pocket of my bag. *Oh, I am the most qualified person, Mrs. Fuller, and this’ll be the best damn essay you’ve ever seen.*

—

I TOOK THE sat for Calum the following week and aced it.

It gave me a sick sense of pride, knowing that I belonged here more than a kid like Calum Fuller. That I, a girl from nowhere, with no parents, no money, could get into a place like this on my own, and *Halo*-playing-Tarantino-loving-pimple-popping Calum Fuller needed all the help he could get.

This wasn't a meritocracy, not at all; it never had been. Life wasn't fair. Unlike what my mother believed, hard work alone wouldn't make me successful. Like my mother, I'd held the Ivy League schools up on a pedestal since I was a child, thinking only the best and brightest, only the *hardest workers*, were blessed with the opportunity to study here.

But boy was I wrong. This school, with all its prestige, was a system run on favors, big and small, like every major institution in this country, and, you know what? I could play this game too. I was a small, a very small, piece of the problem. I had my sister to take care of. My promise to her superseded everything else.

In the weeks after, I met with Calum twice weekly and filled out the rest of his application while he played *Angry Birds* on his phone. His mother had given me the content for it—Calum took care of her when she was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Though I saw no evidence of the cancer—in fact, Mrs. Fuller looked exceedingly healthy, her skin rosy as ever, as if she'd just come back from the spa—I convinced myself it was true and wrote the essay while thinking of my own mother.

Whenever I'd feel guilt creeping up my throat, I swallowed it, tamped it down. This was a job. That was it. I was doing this for my sister. If I didn't do it, someone else would.

The week after I'd turned in Calum's application, I got a call from Goldman Sachs and nearly leaped with excitement: Mrs. Fuller had gotten me an internship with her friend, a managing director. It paid well and would be essential training for a future analyst position.

ONE NIGHT THAT week, I was in the Sterling Club library after everyone else had left, surrounded by textbooks. I was days behind on studying for our upcoming exam, but my bank account was full—with twelve thousand dollars.

But my tutoring job also meant I'd spent less time talking to my sister. Last week, Aunt Ella called to tell me Naomi was refusing to go to school.

"I don't know what happened," Aunt Ella said.

But when I called my sister, she wouldn't tell me either.

"Are you getting enough to eat?" My voice was controlled, but my hand clenched the phone so hard it hurt.

"Yeah."

It took another half hour to get Naomi to tell me what happened: She'd taken the bus back from school and was doing her homework when a woman had knocked on the door. Aunt Ella was still at work and had told the kids not to answer if she wasn't home. But the woman knocked harder and wouldn't go away. When Naomi answered, the woman said she was a neighbor, wanted to check in to make sure an adult was in the house. When she found out it was just Naomi and the older boys, they had gotten upset with her. Naomi was shaken by it. She didn't understand what she'd done wrong, and the woman had scared her.

"But it's okay now," Naomi said.

"Why didn't you tell Aunt Ella?"

"Bryan said not to." Bryan was the older of Ella's boys.

I took a deep breath. It was impossible to get through to her over the phone. It would be better if we were together; I could hold her hand, look her in the eye, tell her it's okay. But really, I didn't know if it was okay—if the neighbor called CPS, Naomi could end up in the system, and there was no telling what would happen to her then. I could hear her muffled crying, and it was like a knife through my chest.

With new determination, I returned to my reading. Twelve thousand dollars wasn't enough for an apartment, food, and healthcare. I needed to find a way to make more.

Several hours later, I put my head down on my arms and drifted off.

I WOKE WITH a start to a rattling sound. the window next to me was open, shutters banging in the wind. Lifting my head from my arms, I slowly blinked awake. *Where am I?* Mahogany shelves filled with books, a cavernous space. The library. Sterling Club's library. I pulled my jacket over my shoulders. *It's freezing in here.* That's when I noticed I wasn't alone.

I jolted upright. A dark figure was standing in the doorway.

"You fell asleep." I recognized Marta's voice. She stood illuminated in the doorway, next to a bucket and mop.

"Yeah, s-sorry," I stuttered. "I don't know what happened."

I scrambled to pick up my books and shoved them one by one into my book bag. Marta didn't move from where she was standing, watching me.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, swallowing the knot in my throat. I remembered how Cecily had snapped at her when we were getting ready for Winter Formal. Since then, I'd noticed other members either ignoring her or being rude, acting like she was their mother, there to pick up after them. I didn't like it, so I'd gone out of my way to be kind to her.

She blinked once and took a step forward into the library. The look on her face was usually cold and unemotional, but today there was something different about it. "Mr. DuPont is away for business...I was cleaning his office and found this." She held up a tiny gold earring. I was pretty sure it was Lila's.

"I think I know whose that is—I can give it back to her." I stood slowly and walked over to her to take the earring. I glanced at the clock. *Two-fifteen A.M.? Oh god.* "I should get going. It's late—"

"Wait." Marta looked panicked. "You're friends with this girl, yes? The girl with the red hair?"

I nodded slowly, wondering what Marta knew.

She stepped closer, lowered her voice. "I've worked here many years, many many years...and I know what goes on with him." Her eyes narrowed. "But this is the worst I've seen."

Lila must have been in some sort of trouble with Professor DuPont...“You may want to warn her to stay away,” she continued. “If it’s not already too late.”

Her words sent a shiver through me. I remembered the bruise on Lila’s temple the night I ran into her outside the library. How I’d caught them together in his office and suspected Professor DuPont and Lila were having an affair. I’d thought they were sleeping together; I didn’t think he was *hurting* her. But then again, how well did I really know this man?

And that was what Marta was implying, wasn’t it? If things weren’t going well between them, what was I supposed to do? Was it my place to bring it up?

It was the first time I realized that Professor DuPont might have been abusive. Violent. And yet, everything in me wanted to dismiss what Marta had told me as hearsay. It didn’t mesh with the image I had of Professor DuPont. She must’ve been mistaken. “I’ll talk to her,” I said.

Marta turned to leave, but when she reached the door she looked back. “In all my years working here, I have never forgotten to lock a door to an office...I would be fired if I did.” The way she said this and the way she was looking at me were weighted with meaning.

—

THE DOOR TO Professor DuPont’s office was unlocked, as Marta had implied.

As I carefully approached his desk, my heart was beating so hard, it could have broken my chest. *Did he have cameras in here?* I didn’t see any, but it always felt like he was watching.

Careful not to disturb his neat stacks of papers, I opened the top drawer and pulled out a notepad where he had scribbled a list of items:

- Dry cleaning
- Deposit checks
- Thursday 2pm Marsden

Marsden. I remembered the strange look on Lila's face during initiations when Professor DuPont had handed her the envelope with that name on it.

I tried the bottom drawer. Inside were at least a hundred file folders with familiar last names. *St. Clair, Ling, Miller, Jones*—members of Greystone.

Inside the one with my last name was a picture of me, the same one that was used for my Princeton ID, and scanning down, I saw that it had all my information, the address where I grew up, my mother's and father's years of birth...and death. And—I gasped—a photo of them. I stared at the photo—it must have been taken around the time my father died—and felt dizzy. How did Professor DuPont have this?

I opened another folder labeled *Bain*. In Alex Bain's file was a photo of him and his mother along with a note: *Senator Bain to invest 5M*.

I was sliding it back in when something else caught my eye: the edge of what looked like a photo. Tugging on it, I found it was not one photo but many. There was a picture of Daisy and me from the lingerie party, and another of Kai, Cecily, and Daisy doing lines with Alex Bain. All from Daisy's camera.

—

LATER THAT MORNING, I knocked hard on Daisy's door. When she opened it, I flew past her. "Did you know about this?"

I took out my phone and showed her the pictures. "There were files on all of us."

Daisy scrolled through my phone, her face turning paler and paler as she did. "Shit."

"Did you lose your camera?"

Daisy sighed. Shook her head.

"Then why does he have these?"

Daisy hesitated. Then she said, quietly, "We just wanted to get Alex kicked out of Sterling, and DuPont had said—pointedly—that he couldn't do that without evidence. We were just trying to take some incriminating

photos...” She shook her head. “But after you left...Alex got really messed up, and we had to take him to the hospital...” Her voice drifted off.

“Oh shit.” I stared at her. *This was bad.* “Is he okay?”

She nodded. “He’s suspended for now. But he might get expelled. Professor DuPont is on the review board.”

My legs felt numb beneath me. I sank down onto the couch. Now that she’d said it, I realized that I hadn’t seen Alex since that night in mid-December.

Daisy sat down beside me, lowering her voice. “Look, Maya. I know this is new to you, but this is how this world works...A lot of people here are extremely connected. Sons and daughters of some of the most powerful people in the world. Sometimes our alumni need things, and we find ways to help them.”

“So you knew about this?” My voice rose. I couldn’t help but be angry with her for not telling me what that party was really for. “There was something else in the file too—a note about Senator Bain investing five million dollars? Do you know what that’s about?”

Daisy sighed. “It’s a new investment fund, opened by a Greystone alum, one of Professor DuPont’s friends. Only the mega-rich are invited to join...I think there’s some kind of five-million-dollar minimum and guaranteed return of fifteen percent. I’m pretty sure both Kai’s and Cecily’s parents invest. It’s probably a bribe to get Matthew to sway the review board into letting Alex stay.”

I dropped my face into my hands. It felt like my whole world was collapsing. “Jesus Christ. This is so wrong.”

“I don’t know, lots of people open investment funds...I mean, really, how do you think the club can afford all of this? Surely you don’t think it’s all sitting in a savings account somewhere—it’s all invested.”

“So DuPont is okay with his students doing drugs to get someone expelled, helping friends pay their kid’s way into the school, backchanneling for investment funds, probably sleeping with at least one student...I mean, Daisy, you realize that these photos are essentially blackmail, right? And not just for Alex, for you and Cecily and Kai too.”

Suddenly it felt as if the whole room had turned on its side. I did wonder how we seemed to have endless resources. “There must have been a hundred files in his desk.” *And thanks to the Calum situation, I know exactly what blackmail Matthew will be saving in my file...*

Daisy shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

—

THE FOLLOWING THURSDAY, I waited outside Professor DuPont’s classroom, checking the clock on the wall every ten minutes. *Where is he?* It was almost two o’clock and if he didn’t leave now, he’d be late for his meeting with Marsden. My anxiety rose as the minute hand ticked closer to the hour.

As I was about to give up, Professor DuPont came rushing out of the classroom. He brushed right past me, almost knocking my coat from my hands, but he didn’t seem to notice.

I gathered my things and followed close behind as he cut across campus. His long legs carried him fast, and I practically had to run to keep up, until finally, he disappeared into Nassau Hall.

It took me another thirty minutes before I found a plaque on the wall that read THOMAS MARSDEN, DEAN OF ADMISSIONS.

Professor DuPont was seated with his back to me across from a large man in his fifties. The man clenched and unclenched his hands on top of the desk as he listened to what Professor DuPont was saying. I leaned closer, but I couldn’t hear a word.

“Can I help you?” A voice behind me made me flinch, and I spun around. A woman wearing a cardigan and reading glasses stood before me clutching a cup of coffee.

“Uh—yes, actually, no. I have a meeting with Mr. Marsden at three o’clock, and I was a little early.” I held my breath, praying the lie would sit well.

She glanced at her watch and frowned. “You’re *quite* early.”

“I’m always early. They say fifteen minutes early is on time.” I gave her my best smile as I cringed inside.

She sighed. “There’s a chair down the hall, if you’d like to have a seat.”

“Thank you, good idea,” I said. “I’ll go over there in a minute.”

She gave me one last side-eye and continued down the hall.

When I turned back, Professor DuPont was handing Marsden a check, they were shaking hands, and that was when I noticed the man’s finger. On it, a Greystone ring. Matthew was working directly with the dean to let anyone through that Greystone wanted. He didn’t even need me to help Calum. He must have done it just to have dirt on me, and I’d played right into his hands.

My chest burned as I ran away from the office and down the hall. I heard the door swing open. “Excuse me.” But I didn’t slow down. I sprinted down the hall toward the exit and shoved open the doors.

NAOMI

January 2023, four months before her death

IT'S THE DAY OF THE BAC show, fifteen minutes before showtime, and thirty of us are packed into the dressing room. Zee won't stop talking about the lighting and last-minute changes to the choreography, as everyone jockeys for mirror space.

"You nervous?" my friend Chichi asks as she applies a plum lipstick.

"Yeah." My nerves are firing like crazy, but it's not because of the show. We've rehearsed for months, and I could do the choreo in my sleep.

Something else is on my mind. My meeting with DuPont and his strange suggestion: *Why don't you ask your sister? After all, she was there too.*

My sister couldn't have had anything to do with Lila's death. I'll just talk to her tonight, in person, and she'll clear everything up. I couldn't call because Amy has grown convinced our emails are being watched and they've found a way to listen in on our phone calls. She says it happens to journalists all the time.

"House lights are out! Show's starting!" someone yells.

I join the prayer circle for Zee's pump-up speech.

"We have been preparing for this since September, y'all. We got this. Let's go out there and dance full out, leave it all onstage. For a lot of us, this is one of our last shows. Do you hear them?" We listen to the rumble of the audience. "We seniors might not perform again after tonight. So please,

remember your choreo, hit your marks, don't be nervous. We got this." She cups a hand to her mouth. "B-A-C, B-A-C WHAT?"

"*No one does hip-hop better than us!*" Cheers all around me. I try to smile, but my thoughts are still on my sister. *Focus, Naomi. Focus.*

I draw in a slow, steady breath and head backstage.

—

I WAIT in the wings until the lights come up and the music starts. Zee starts center stage with a quick solo. Then other dancers join her.

When it's my cue, I lift my chin and march out confidently, smiling at the audience. We have a lot of friends here tonight, and the crowd is overwhelming. I hear my name and look down, hoping to see Liam, even though I haven't spoken to him in weeks—he'd disappeared again, but he promised to be here, and so I thought it would be him.

But it's Ben, who sits next to several of his teammates in the front row, cheering for me, since I don't think he knows anyone else in the dance group. Ben, who I'd thought hated me at this point. We hadn't spoken since that day I ran into him on Nassau Street when he'd told me I was making a mistake. It's sweet to see him here.

The beat drops, and we find our places in our pyramid formation. I start in the back. We move in unison. Shoulders side to side, twisting our torsos. Winding our hips, chests thrusting up and down like they're separate from our bodies. We reach my favorite part, where we tilt our heads forward and whip our hair right, left. The lights dip to black. This is my cue to sneak forward, to the front.

Crouching low, the formation parts for me. I make my way to the front in the dark. The blood pumps through my veins. The audience waits, holding their breath. Then with a deafening boom, the stage lights come on: a spotlight right on me as I whip my head back, arching my back as I drop my knees to the floor. Everyone is watching me. I dance full out, heart thudding, pouring everything I have into the movement.

During a slower part of the choreo, I scan the theater.

There's Liam—at the front of the upper deck. I look up at him and smile. He catches my eye and smiles back. Half of me wants to be angry with him for disappearing again, but the other half is glad to see him anyway.

Margaret is sitting upright as usual, hands folded in her lap. When she sees me, she smiles and holds up a sign that reads I LOVE YOU NAOMI. I nod and hope she knows how much it means to me that she's here.

I scan the crowd again, running my eyes past every face. They're into the performance. Some are clapping, others hollering for their friends, and it feels good seeing so many different faces in the crowd.

But my heart sinks as I realize the one person missing...Maya.

—

I DANCE FOUR more pieces over the next three hours. It's the best I've ever performed.

In the dressing room, Zee comes up to me and slaps me on the back. "Hey, good work out there. You killed it."

I force myself to look at her. She's smiling big, clearly stoked with how the show went.

"Thanks. Your choreo was dope. I'm sad it's over."

"Me too." She pours some champagne into a paper cup. Hands it to me. "Hey, I might go to a Sterling alum's birthday in the city later if you want to come. It's gonna be lit. They rented out a restaurant in the Village with a massive rooftop. DJ. Open bar..."

—

AFTER ZEE LEAVES, I sit on a stool in the changing room, staring blankly at my reflection. After the show, Liam had finally texted me back: *I'm sorry, the past couple of weeks were hell. I promise I'll explain if you let me.* I'd been sitting here when I got that text, all the dancers bubbling around me about the show, gathering their things. They'd since filtered out to the after-party, leaving behind flower petals, glitter, feathers, forgotten earrings.

I blink, and my reflection blinks back. She's confident...smart...so what

is wrong with me? Why don't I feel whole?

"Naomi." Liam's voice makes me look up. He's standing in the doorway holding a bouquet of blush-colored roses, and all the anger I'd saved up for him vanishes.

I smile, playfully. "Liam Alexander the Third buys *flowers*?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't get used to it."

I stand and give him a hug. "Thanks for coming."

He hands me the flowers and studies my face, sensing my sadness. "What's wrong?"

"My sister was supposed to come, but she's not here." My sister had been more distant than Liam. Maybe she's the one I should be upset with. I set the flowers down on the table and pour myself a glass of champagne. "Want one?"

Liam shakes his head. "You hungry? Want to get dinner?"

I shrug. I don't feel like eating. "Zee said there's a birthday party for one of the Sterling alums in the city, I think I might go."

"I heard about that. But do you really want to go into the city tonight? It'll take us at least a couple hours."

I grin. "Not on a motorcycle."

—

RIDING ON THE back of Liam's motorcycle is exhilarating. My body is pressed against his, heart racing and eyes squeezed shut as we weave in and out of traffic.

"You okay back there?" Liam shouts above the wind.

"Yeah," I reply, pretending not to be as scared as I am. I'm holding on to Liam's waist, my eyes closed behind the helmet visor. I've only been on his motorcycle once—the night he'd found me at Lake Carnegie and gave me a ride back to the dorms—and we'd gone twenty miles an hour on a residential street. This...is very different.

"What?"

I open my eyes to an overwhelming blur of red and white lights streaking past, cool air and diesel exhaust in my nostrils. We're soaring, my blood pumping with adrenaline, my fingers numb from gripping onto him so tight. "I said, *yeah, I'm good!*"

He presses harder on the gas, and we zoom past a moving van and into the mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel, the one-and-a-half-mile stretch of concrete that connects New Jersey and New York City. Once we're past several cars, I stand up, holding on to his shoulders, legs trembling, the wind sending my hair flying.

"*What are you doing?*" Liam yells. "*You trying to get us killed?*"

I laugh and sit back down, leaning forward and saying into his ear, "Come on, live a little."

He shakes his head and takes off, but I can tell he's smiling.

He turns on the radio, and a familiar Cat Burns song booms from the speakers. The one playing the first time we'd kissed in Sterling Club.

"Hey, turn it up." He does, and the feeling I get is pure magic. I lift my arms into the air and let out a scream.

—

WHEN WE ARRIVE at the address Zee gave us, my heart is still hammering in my chest. I watch as Liam takes his helmet off and unzips his jacket.

"So what'd you think of the bike?"

I shrug. "Eh."

"Eh? What do you mean *eh*?"

I grin, pushing my hair out of my face, and lean in to kiss him. "I'm joking, it was awesome." He pulls me against him and kisses me back hard, sending a current of electricity rushing through me.

—

THE ROOFTOP DECK is filled with Greystone alumni, a mix of New York finance types and artists.

I scan the crowd. "Zee should be here somewhere."

We find her by the bar, taking a shot with a random guy.

“Zee!”

“You made it!” I can tell she’s already tipsy. She throws her arms around me. “This is Calum. He’s class of 2017.”

“Calum Fuller.” Wait— isn’t that the man DuPont said had a job for me? He holds out a hand. He’s got whitish hair, dark bags under his eyes, and pale, sickly skin.

I take his hand. “Naomi Mason, nice to finally meet you. Professor DuPont told me about you.”

“Naomi! A pleasure. You know, your sister tutored me when I was in high school.” He lets out a laugh, remembering. “She’s a genius. Helped me out big-time. Glad to be able to return the favor.”

What is he talking about? What favor?

“I’ll tell her hi for you. Uh, this is—”

“Liam Alexander,” Liam says, shaking the man’s hand.

“Ah...are you related to a Liam Alexander, class of ’85?” Calum asks.

“My father.” An emotion clouds Liam’s eyes. He doesn’t talk much about his father.

Calum nods. “Our fathers were roommates. Ask him about Colin Fuller. Sounds like they got in a whole lot of trouble back then. Get him to tell you how they got Bethany Park *hosed*.” *Hosed* was the term used for a student who got rejected from an eating club they’d bickered. It was a cruel form of social ostracism.

Liam grimaces.

Next to him, Zee grows impatient. She holds up a shot glass. “Are we doing this or what?”

After they take shots, I put my arm around Zee, who is draping herself over some random guy, and drag her away. “Who the hell is that and where is Trey?”

Zee leans her arm onto my shoulder, making me stumble under her weight. She’s really drunk. “We broke up after the show.”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

Zee waves a hand through the air. “He’s stupid. It’s fine. I don’t even care. But I wasn’t *flirting* with Sean. We’ve been friends since before I knew Trey. Why’s he got to be like that?”

“Just talk to him, he’ll be okay.”

“No, you know what, I’m done.” She swings around and we run into someone, their drink spilling over my shoulder.

“Okayyy. How about we get some water?”

“That’s the most borrrring idea I’ve ever hearrrrd,” she slurs.

My phone vibrates in my bag. “Fine. Hold on, just wait a minute,” I tell Zee as I retrieve it. It’s a text from Amy: *It’s happening! The police are reopening the Lila Jones case!*

Oh my god. She did it. They reopened the case. That means—maybe DuPont is a suspect. Maybe they found new evidence. I feel a ripple of excitement.

I need to tell someone about this. I try to locate Liam, but I see him on the other side of the party talking to Professor DuPont. A woman clutches DuPont’s arm possessively. She wears a cropped fur jacket and silk dress, blond hair swept into a chignon, and there’s a feline quality to her movements. She must have sensed my gaze because suddenly, she turns and looks directly at me, her eyes narrowing. I quickly look away. “Naomi!” Zee is now dancing, or trying to, her bag falling off her shoulder as she pulls me toward the DJ. “Come onnnnn. I lovvvve this song.”

Zee is now halfway to the dance floor and I have no choice but to follow.

I dance next to Zee, thoughts consumed by Amy’s message, keeping an eye on Liam over her shoulder. Zee’s arms flop overhead, her eyes closed as she sways to the music.

“Zee,” I say, and she looks at me blankly. I point her body toward DuPont. “Do you know anything about DuPont’s fiancée?”

She laughs. “Ohhh, her. Some actress, I think? She’s got to be fifteen years younger than him. I heard she dated Timothée Chalamet before he was with Kylie Jenner.”

There’s something captivating about her. I wonder how well she knows her fiancé...and what she’d do if she found out what he did.

—

WHILE ZEE IS in the bathroom, I find Liam getting another drink at the bar. “Saw you talking to DuPont. That woman is his fiancée, right? What’s she like? Zee said she was an actress?”

“Sara? Yeah...she’s pretty well-known on Broadway, I think. Won a Tony last year.” He glances in their direction. “I’ve met her a few times. She reminds me of my dad’s ex-wife. She’s...intense.” He raises an eyebrow. “I’d keep my distance if I were you.”

“Why?”

“I’ve just seen her get protective around girls like you.”

I’m about to ask him what he means by that when my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I wonder if it’s Amy with more news.

“Who’s that?”

I look up at Liam. I hide my phone instinctively and am about to play it off, but then again...he is in Greystone. His father was too. I wonder if he might know anything that would be useful.

“Hey...did you know that Greystone has ski cabins? Up in New Hampshire? Apparently we can’t use them anymore because something happened to a girl—”

With surprising force, Liam grabs my elbow and yanks me away from the crowd. “Are you insane?”

I tear my elbow out of his grasp. “*What?*”

He glances over his shoulder. “Why are you asking me about that?”

“Why not?”

He sighs. Lowers his voice. “I’m going to tell you something...but you have to promise not to mention it again, especially not around these people.”

“Fine.”

“My father told me someone’s been contacting some of his friends—other Greystone alums—asking questions about that...incident. *Please* tell me it’s not you.” He hesitates. “You of all people aren’t going to want that to come out.”

I grow nervous as Liam searches his phone. What does he mean, me of all people? How much does he know about the investigation? Does he know Amy's behind it?

Liam finds what he's looking for and turns the screen toward me.

My heart misses a beat when I see it: a picture of my sister and her friends in ski gear, arms wrapped around each other. Daisy, Cecily, Kai, Maya... and...next to my sister stands another girl, one I've only seen in the black-and-white article about her—here, she's striking with pale skin and long red hair. *Lila*. So DuPont had been telling the truth when he said Maya was there...and all of her friends too. I thought again about that whispered conversation I'd heard at Margaret's so many years ago as I study Lila's face in the picture. "It's her."

Liam nods. "This was taken that weekend. Your sister was involved."

I look at him, chest tightening. "Where did you get this?"

"It doesn't matter. Look, whatever happened, Greystone hid it for a reason. You need to stay out of it. And if you're the one asking questions—stop. You have no idea what kind of shit you're getting yourself into."

I pull back from him, frowning.

"I'm serious," he says, and in his eyes is a fear so pronounced it chills me to my core.

—

SHAKEN FROM LIAM'S warning, I walk through the party in search of a quiet corner to call Amy when my phone vibrates. Several missed calls from Zee, and a voicemail.

Naomiiiiii, where are you? Guess who texted me—just guess—Trey. Yup, he did, but I ignored him. And I found my new friend and we took shots and now I'm goooood. But I'm gonna leave okay? My feet hurt, and my phone's about to die—

Shit. I scan the crowd for Zee, but all I see are unfamiliar faces. No sign of her anywhere.

MAYA

February 2012

OVER THE PAST WEEK, SNOW had swept down over campus, covering the quad in deep blankets of white. Stepping out of my building, I ran my fingers along a wall of snow until they went numb.

DuPont had been using me. To tutor his friend's son. To cheat Calum's way in. To gain leverage over me. And he was bribing the dean of admissions to do this tens, hundreds of times. It was worse than I'd thought.

But we had to be smart about this. We couldn't just turn him and Marsden in. We would be the first to get expelled.

I was about to call Nate when my phone rang. It was Aunt Ella.

"Aunt Ella. Is everything all right?"

"Maya?" My little sister's voice on the other end of the line made my heart leap.

"Naomi? Hi! Are you okay?" I wondered if the social worker had come back.

"Yep," she said, easing my anxiety. "I was just calling to see if you're coming home soon?" Her words brought tears to my eyes.

"I want to," I said, heart breaking. "But flights are expensive right now. And I've been saving up so that you can change schools." I paused, tears pricking my eyes. "I'm going to get some money soon and everything will be better. You'll be here in no time."

“Really? I can live with you at Princeton?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. That’s not what I’d meant, but the hope in her voice meant I had to find a way to make that happen. “You’d love it here. The library has six floors and is built like a castle.”

“A castle?”

“You’ll see. Anyway, how’s school?”

“Good.”

“Are you happy? Are you feeling okay?”

When she didn’t answer, I closed my eyes, filled with guilt. She needed me and I was thousands of miles away.

“I’m okay,” she said finally. I hoped she wasn’t just saying that.

“If something happens, you can tell me. I promise I won’t be mad.”

“I know.”

“I love you, you know that, right?”

“I know.” There was a sadness in her voice.

“I’m going to figure out a way for us to be together really soon,” I said. “I promise.”

“Miss you, Maya,” Naomi said.

“I miss you too.” I kept the phone pressed against my ear until she hung up the line.

I was slowly lowering the phone from my ear when in the distance, walking quickly with her hood over her head, there she was. The person I’d been looking for: Lila.

—

I’D BEEN TRYING to find her since the conversation the girls and I had had over dinner the other night. The angry look on Cecily’s face. “I heard Lila is trying to get Greystone shut down.”

My hand had covered my mouth. *Oh my god.* Lila had warned me against joining Greystone...but I had no idea she’d take it this far.

“I don’t know what she’s thinking,” Cecily said. “But we have to do something to stop her.”

I watched as she cut into a rare piece of steak, bright red oozing onto the white plate. Greystone meant a lot to her. Not only was she president, but her family had founded the Society.

Kai looked at me. “Maya, you should talk to her, you’re closest to her.”

I nodded. “I’ll do it.”

HIDDEN UNDER THE fur hood of my jacket, I followed Lila as she cut down a cloister of Rockefeller College. If what Marta had warned me about was true, Lila might have fallen out with Professor DuPont...but still, she couldn’t really want to bring the whole club down. Did she realize how much was at stake for all of us? For me? If something happened to Greystone, that would mean the end of my lifeline to my sister. Maybe if I could explain this to her, she would understand. I watched her go into the library, and I hurried to catch her.

LILA’S THINGS WERE strewn about her usual study spot, but there was no sign of her. I was about to turn back when her laugh echoed from down the hall. Careful not to be seen, I followed the sound until I was deep within the stacks.

There it was again: her laugh, from the other side of the shelves. And another voice. She was with someone else.

“What are you going to do now?” The voice sounded familiar...where had I heard it before?

“I told Professor Williams what I knew. She said an internal investigation is under way. I have enough evidence to take to the police,” Lila said, barely above a whisper. *She was going to the police?*

I pressed my ear against the books but could only make out a few words. *Matthew DuPont* and *the Society*.

I crouched down lower, finding a natural crack between the spines where I could see the hem of her skirt and her friend’s jeans.

I craned my neck farther. Standing next to Lila was Austin, the drummer whom I had met at Terrace.

“I was able to get ahold of some of the Legacy Foundation accounting spreadsheets,” Lila said. “They’ve got millions of dollars from funds linked to Greystone, and they’re funneling them to Marsden.” *Marsden...the dean of admissions?* “It’s like corporate money laundering, but for spots at Princeton. Usually wealthy alumni just donate a building or something. But this is different. These donations are from Greystone *on behalf of their members.*” Lila’s tone gave me chills.

“This’ll be the biggest story *The Prince* has ever seen,” Austin said. *The Prince* was short for *The Daily Princetonian*, the school paper, which was known for reporting the truth, no matter what. The blood had left my face and pooled at the base of my stomach. Was Calum Fuller one of these “laundered” applicants?

“I’m certain the new investment fund Senator Bain is backing is breaking all kinds of laws too,” Lila added. “The return is way too good to be true, so I’m guessing they’re trading information, inflating prices, the whole thing.”

“Let’s focus on Marsden and the admissions piece for now. You’ve got real evidence there.”

“I can’t wait to take Matthew DuPont down,” Lila said.

“And Greystone,” Austin agreed. “I can’t wait to watch those overprivileged assholes fail for once in their lives.”

I pressed my back against the books, heart loud in my throat. What had happened to make her want to go to war against the Society like this? If Matthew’s shady business practices were exposed, everything else would start to come out too—the girls doing drugs with Alex Bain, the money I’d accepted from Mrs. Fuller. Our reputation. Our future.

Panicking, I slipped into the bathroom down the hall and hid in the first stall, quickly typing a text to Daisy: *NEED TO TALK NOW!*

Daisy responded right away: *Meet us in Cecily’s room.*

“I KNOW AUSTIN,” Kai said, after I told the girls about what I’d heard. “She’s the editor in chief of *The Prince*.”

“What does that mean for Greystone?” Daisy asked.

“It’s not good,” Kai said. “All the money we have is provided by the Legacy Foundation. The staff, the building, our member fees, loans, it’s all from that foundation. Greystone can’t exist without it.” I thought of the job offer I’d gotten from Mrs. Fuller—and the ten-thousand-dollar check I’d cashed—and felt weak.

Daisy twisted a strand of hair in her fingers, eyes darting between the girls. “What about the photos of us with Alex Bain?”

Fear and dread wound themselves in my gut. “We could all be expelled,” I said.

“Not just expelled,” Kai said. “We could end up in prison.”

“The dean of admissions was in Greystone too,” I told them. “Matthew’s been paying him to let in kids of Greystone alumni...If that gets out, it’ll be all over the news.”

Cecily suddenly stood.

I watched her grab her bag and head for the door. “Where are you going?”

She didn’t turn around. “I’ll explain later.”

NAOMI

January 2023, four months before her death

LIAM AND I FIND ZEE crumpled on the sidewalk across the street, heels splayed next to her.

“Zee!” I shout, dashing across the busy street. An angry driver swerves around me, laying on his horn. I shout and give him the finger.

Zee lifts her head—mascara is smeared down her cheeks—and tears up again. When I reach her, she’s muttering something to herself, something about *so wasted* and *not good*.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” I pull out my phone to call an Uber.

A few minutes later, Liam pulls his motorcycle over next to us.

“Is she okay?” he asks.

“Yeah. It’s been a rough night. I called an Uber.”

Ten minutes later, the car arrives. Liam hauls one of Zee’s arms, and I have the other, but she’s not making it easy.

When we’ve managed to get her seated, the driver turns around and frowns at Zee. “No.”

“What do you mean, *no*?” I demand. “She needs to get home.”

“Not in my car.” The driver turns and looks out the front window, tightening his grip on the wheel.

“Are you serious?” I say, struggling to keep my voice down. “I’m going with her.”

“Come on, man,” Liam says, and begins trying to level with him, speaking fluent white-guy Spanish. I close my eyes, embarrassed. Judging by the man’s reaction, this was definitely the wrong move.

When it’s clear the driver won’t budge, Liam pulls out his wallet and offers the man a hundred-dollar bill.

The driver looks at the hundred, then back at us. “No.”

“I don’t want to go,” Zee says, trying to stand.

“What part of *no* do you not understand?” The driver is speaking loudly now, growing frustrated. “—muy borracha.”

Just then, I see Professor DuPont and his fiancée, Sara, leaving the front door of the building. They’re walking in our direction.

Zee lifts her head, squinting into the dark before shaking her head and mumbling something I can’t understand.

“Close the door,” the driver says, and then, when we don’t respond. “Did you hear? I said, *Close the door.*”

Zee stumbles back, pointing at DuPont and yelling, but it’s hard to understand her; it’s a jumble of slurred words.

The driver gestures wildly, yelling over Zee about drunk girls and how this is his livelihood. “You have five seconds before I drive away,” he shouts.

“Relax, man,” Liam says. “We’re going.”

“That’s it!” The driver releases his foot from the brake, and the car jerks forward. The door hits us, throwing us onto the sidewalk as he zooms away, tires screeching.

I turn to DuPont apologetically. As much as I dislike the man, I don’t want any professors seeing Zee like this. “I’m sorry, we’re trying to get her home,” I explain, but before I can stop her, Zee stumbles into them, grabbing onto Sara’s arm to steady herself. Sara lurches back, panicked, as if she were being attacked by a pit bull, trying to loosen herself from Zee’s grasp.

DuPont grabs Zee, tearing her away forcefully.

“Hey, get off her! What are you doing?” I scream, catching Zee as she stumbles back onto the sidewalk, trying to stop her from falling headfirst into the street.

A police siren sounds out of the dark. Every inch of my skin tenses as two white police officers park their car next to us and get out of the vehicle, hands on their guns. “Is there a problem here?”

“No,” I say quickly, clasping onto Zee, trying to get her to her feet. “We’re fine.”

I tug on her elbow, hard.

She looks up. “Ow.” And when she sees the police officers, her face falls.

The first officer, a stocky man with a thick neck, turns to DuPont. “Everything okay here, sir?”

DuPont brushes off his suit. “Yes, thank you. We were just leaving an event.”

The cop looks at Sara. “I want to make sure these folks aren’t bothering you.”

Sara smiles. “Thank you, Officer. We’re okay now.” She shoots us a fearful look and reaches for her fiancé’s arm. “Let’s go home.”

DuPont looks at me, then back at Liam and Zee, before walking away. As they disappear down the sidewalk, Sara looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes trailing down my dress, untrusting, suspicious. I can’t believe DuPont is just walking away from this situation like that—we’re still his students.

The bigger cop looks at his partner, and I expect them to get back in their car, but instead he turns back to Zee, who’s hunched over my arm, trying to keep herself from throwing up. He gestures to her. “Ma’am, please come here.”

My back straightens, and I tighten my grip around her protectively. If Zee pukes right now, who knows how these cops would react. “She’s fine,” I tell him.

“That wasn’t a question.”

“Just cooperate with the man,” Liam says, tightly.

I glare at Liam. What is he doing? He’s standing there, back straight, feet glued to the sidewalk, like he’s cool with these guys. Like he has no clue what’s going on right now.

Movement in my periphery draws my attention. To my right, a guy in a Red Sox hat has his phone raised, pointed at us, and I realize—to my horror

—*is that what this is?* He thinks something is going to happen here? I feel my palms go slick with sweat, perspiration accumulate under my arms. I just want to go home and sleep in my own bed.

I put one hand up and keep the other firmly around Zee. This is fine. We've done nothing wrong. There's no reason to feel scared right now. I look somewhere around the cop's chin, avoid direct eye contact, make my voice as calm and white as possible. "Sir, I'm really sorry. We are not trying to cause any trouble. We're just trying to get home." I'm proud of the control I'd had over my voice despite the adrenaline.

"And where is that?"

I try to say it casually with the same control I'd had a moment ago. "Princeton."

He stiffens. When he speaks his voice is louder this time, as if he is about to explode. "*I'm going to ask you one more time.*"

I keep my head lowered, eyes on his shoes as my heart flutters in my chest. *Please, calm down. Please, just go away.* "We're going back to Princeton. We're students—"

"*Priinnnce-ton,*" he says mockingly. The cop reels back with a sarcastic laugh before shooting a look at his partner. When he's done, he steps closer, and I go still. Sweat drips down my spine as I think of what he might do next. I imagine him shoving us against the car, forcing my hands behind my back, tightening handcuffs around my wrists—and what would he do to Zee?

My eyes drift to his gun, wondering if he might use it, and he catches me looking. His hand tightens around it. All of a sudden, static tears through the silence. His radio.

"*We've got two armed suspects on foot heading south on Lafayette at Fourth.*"

The officer responds into the radio and then looks up at me. "You're lucky I don't have time for this." He nods at Liam. "Get them out of here. I don't want to see you again."

The officer nods at his partner as his radio goes off. They run to their car and I hear the engine roar and tires screech away. I put a hand over my chest; my heart is beating fast.

Once they're gone, I turn to Zee. "You okay?"

She nods, but she's clearly shaken.

"Come on, let's get her home," Liam says.

I turn to him, furious. "You could've done something, you know."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. Not stand there like an idiot."

"You were asking for it," he says, "talking back like that. They were just doing their jobs."

Talking back? I'm so angry I can hardly see straight. I tense my jaw. "Do not speak to me right now." My hands shake as I help Zee back toward the front steps of an old church.

The messed-up thing is the officer was right, we *were* lucky. They could've beaten us, arrested us, and gotten away with it. I glare at Liam, who sits on the curb scrolling through his phone. I want to tell him these men's jobs were *created* to police us. That these patrol laws meant to keep us safe felt anything but.

—

THAT NIGHT, I'M too filled with adrenaline to sleep, and the next morning, I'm staring at the ceiling when there's a knock on the door. Outside our door, a bouquet of peonies, my favorite flower. I pick them up carefully, wondering who sent them. Liam?

After setting them on my desk in my room, I search for a note, and my fingers close around the small card buried in the cellophane: *Naomi, I'm sorry about last night. Let me make it up to you. —M.*

My hands curl into fists, crushing the edges of the card. Matthew DuPont left us there. Stranded. With cops who could have done who the hell knows what? It would have been so easy for him. All he had to do was tell them to leave us alone.

I feel the anger rise up in me, and without thinking, I grab the flowers by the neck and hurl them at the trash, just barely missing, scattering petals and leaves all over the floor.

MAYA

June 2023

ON MONDAY AFTER WORK, I'M in the kitchen reading Naomi's notebook when Nate and Dani get home. She runs up to me and gives me a hug. "Oh, hi there." She smells sweet and in her hands is a small pack of gummy bears. "What did I say about sugar before dinner?"

I shoot Nate a look, and he shrugs. "Wasn't me."

I turn to him as Dani runs off to the living room. "They're letting them eat sugar this late in the day?"

Dani is on the couch looking through Nate's iPad for a show to watch, and without looking up from the screen, she says, "The man at school said I could have them." We'd signed her up for an expensive Montessori summer school that had promised to feed them only low-sugar, healthy snacks.

My eyes meet Nate's and he shakes his head in a gesture that says *Don't blame me*.

I'm about to ask her which of the supervisors gave them to her when my phone's sharp clang on the counter makes me jump. The caller ID reads *Margaret St. Clair*.

"Maya, we need to have a chat," she says when I answer. "About the funeral..."

With a flash, I remember my horrifying breakdown and feel heat rise to my cheeks. Nate and Dani and I hadn't stuck around after the service; I

hadn't wanted to have to justify my eulogy to everyone. "Look, about what happened—I'm so sorry..."

"Absolutely not," she says, and for a moment I think she's going to scold me. But instead she lowers her voice. "You were so right, what you said up there," she says. "I've contacted the authorities. Applied a bit of pressure."

She believes me. I tighten my grip on my phone. "Can I ask...When was the last time Naomi was home? I found a notebook..." I'm not sure why I don't tell her it was hidden, but I keep that detail to myself. "I'm going to bring it to the police."

"She came home for spring break— Sorry, you found...what was it? A notebook?"

"I don't understand it yet, but it looks like she was researching something for a reporter at *The New York Times*...and—" I hesitate, unsure whether to tell her about Greystone, about Lila, but decide against it. "And it looks like she was investigating Matthew DuPont."

"Well, he's neck-deep in malpractice, so I would imagine there would be plenty to investigate. Do you think that had something to do with her death?"

"There's nothing definitive, yet...it's just— It's a gut feeling...but yes, I think he may have hurt her."

Margaret is silent, and I fear she's going to tell me I'm crazy, but when she speaks again her voice is full of hate. "We're going to find out who did this to your sister and make sure they don't get away with it."

—

LATER THAT EVENING once we've put Dani to bed, I find Nate in the living room. I'm about to mention what I discovered in Naomi's notebook when I see the look on his face.

"What is it?" I sit down next to him and follow his eyes to the TV. A news anchor and my sister's image fill the screen.

"New autopsy results led authorities to designate the case a murder investigation. The case is still developing."

Nate shakes his head, mouth open in disbelief.

My hands go numb as my sister's image is replaced by one of Margaret.
An interview.

"Please, if anyone has information. We need your help." Her eyes are filled with emotion. Not sadness, but something else. Something closer to fury.

MAYA

February 2012

IT WAS RAVE NIGHT AT Sterling Club, and everyone was there except me. I was exhausted, lying in bed with a pillow over my head, on the verge of sleep, when a door slammed, jerking me awake. I sighed and glanced at the clock—one forty-five A.M.

My phone buzzed. A text from Daisy—*Maya, get over here, quick. Something's wrong with Lila.*

—

MY LUNGS BURNED as I sprinted to the street, and when I arrived at Sterling Club, the walls were pulsing with electronic music and strobe lights. My coat was soaked from the rain as I looked for Lila. I felt it in my bones: *Something was wrong.*

The ballroom was hazy, filled with a mix of sweat and steam. A fog machine blasted the dance floor, and by the DJ booth, Cecily and Theodore Hunt were dancing. She was a wisp of silver in her bikini and tiny skirt, one arm wrapped behind his neck.

I guess she really has moved on, I thought. It made sense that she and Theo would end up together. It seemed they'd been destined from birth: same private high school, sailing trips every summer with their families. "Sailing"

to her meant on his family's yacht all over the world—he's heir to a massive oil fortune, and she'd once joked that if she married him they'd probably have to have the union reviewed by the Federal Trade Commission to make sure their marriage wouldn't be considered a monopoly.

I yelled out to her, "Cecily!" but she couldn't hear me over the music. Suddenly I was frightened of the people around me, the way the whites of their eyes and their teeth glowed in the blacklight.

Daisy ran up to me in a neon-pink rave outfit with jewels all over her face. "Have you seen Lila?"

I shook my head. "I just got here."

"Shit. Last time I saw her it seemed like she was headed to the back stairs. Come on."

Daisy grabbed my hand and we wove through the crowd toward the back stairs. Knowing the only outlet was the roof, we took them two at a time until we reached the emergency exit.

The roof was dark, nearly pitch-black, but in the far corner I could make out two shapes, swaying drunkenly.

Daisy and I hid behind a heating duct and waited. It must have been freezing out there, but I was too wired with adrenaline to notice. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness before I realized what was going on: they weren't swaying, they were arguing.

Professor DuPont had Lila's wrist in one hand and waved her phone in the air with the other. She was backed against the side of the roof, trying to get away, too close to the edge.

I had the sudden urge to rush over and yank her away from the side before she fell. But I was frozen in fear. What if DuPont saw me and panicked; what if that sent them over the edge?

My heart thudded against the inside of my ribs. I needed to do something. But what? *What?*

Suddenly Lila jerked free of his grip and ran for the door. Daisy and I scrambled behind the heating unit as he chased after her.

By the time we ran down the stairs after them, they were gone.

“I’m going to go check the officers’ rooms, you look downstairs,” Daisy said, her voice panicked.

I sprinted down to the main floor, but through the fog and bodies, it was impossible to make anyone out. Amid the writhing bodies, my eyes caught a streak of red hair. “Lila?” But the girl ran and jumped into the arms of a tall, unbuttoned guy. It wasn’t her.

Panic rose in my throat as I fought through the crowd of sweaty bodies, disoriented by the flashing lights and throbbing music, and after several more minutes, I gave up.

Making my way to the library, I scanned the faces in the dim light, but everyone was stumbling around in pairs or draped over the furniture. That was when I noticed that the edge of the Persian rug was pulled back, exposing one seam of the trapdoor. *They must be down there.*

I pried it open and descended the narrow stairwell into the dark. With a loud *bang*, the door slammed shut, and I was plunged into complete darkness. Overhead, I could hear the bass, the footsteps, but louder was my breath, the blood rushing in my ears.

Turning on the flashlight on my phone, I rushed down the stairs. I had to hurry.

When I reached the door, it was locked. “Lila?” Putting my ear to the door, I listened hard. There was the softest noise, a groan. *Lila.*

“Open the door!” I slammed my hand against it again and again, heart hammering in my chest.

Remembering the first two numbers from when Lila had unlocked it, I entered 1-5 and tried various combinations for the last two until it opened. In the center of the room, Lila lay curled on the floor, still. She was soaking wet and blood had pooled around her on the concrete.

Oh no. Was I too late?

Her head was turned into the floor, red hair wet and matted. Scared to touch her for fear of injuring her further, I crouched next to her and checked to see if she was breathing. Barely.

I touched her shoulder gently. “Lila? Can you hear me?”

No response.

She started to shiver, so I pulled a blanket from a couch and laid it over her. A deep gash split the skin on her head, and her eyes fluttered open, but they didn't focus.

"I'm calling an ambulance," I told her as I slipped my phone from my pocket.

She shook her head in a barely perceptible movement.

"Lila, you need help."

There it was again. More pronounced. She was shaking her head *no*.

No? She was scared. She wasn't thinking straight.

But as I tried to help her to her feet, she pushed me away.

"He'll be back any minute," I pleaded.

Adrenaline coursed through me as I tried to imagine the best way out of Sterling. We could go straight through the library and down the main stairwell...but that would lead through the party. We could try the back stairwell to the kitchen instead. It had a door that led out the back.

"Maya?" Cecily's face twisted in concern as she rushed in, followed by Daisy. "What the hell happened?"

"We need to call 911. She needs an ambulance," Daisy said, looking her over.

"We should drive her there ourselves. It'll be faster." Cecily touched Lila's shoulder. "Is she awake?"

Lila's head lolled to her chest as Cecily and I hoisted her up. We slung her arms around our necks and managed to bring her all the way down the back stairwell through the kitchen exit to the backyard, but as we were stumbling toward the street, a door slammed open behind us.

In the doorway stood Professor DuPont.

Cecily shoved her keys in my hand. "My car's out front." She turned back to Professor DuPont, blocking his path.

My heart thudded in my ears as Daisy and I struggled to carry Lila to safety.

Once we'd reached the front yard, I looked back to see Cecily arguing with Professor DuPont. Cecily had her hands on her hips, blocking his line of sight, but when he caught sight of us, his face filled with rage.

I pressed the key, and Cecily's car lit up. After we got Lila into the backseat, I slipped in the driver's-side door and slammed it shut, heart thrashing in my chest. *We need to go. Now!*

My hands were shaking, palms slick with sweat, and I was having trouble with the keys. *Come on. Come onnnn.*

"What are you waiting for?" Daisy shouted from the backseat.

I shoved the key into the ignition and the engine roared to life. When I looked up, Professor DuPont was standing right in front of the car. His eyes locked on mine, and for a moment I didn't know what to do.

Daisy was yelling, hitting my shoulder, and instinct kicked in.

I threw the car into reverse, knocking a bin over, before pulling off the curb. My heart was beating wildly, adrenaline making my head swim as I stepped harder on the gas. I glanced in the rearview at Lila, who was slumped over against the window. The only thing that mattered was getting to the hospital before we lost her.

NAOMI

February 2023, three months before her death

THAT SUNDAY, MAYA INVITES ME over for lunch at her apartment in Brooklyn, an apology for missing the show, and on the train ride over, I can't stop thinking about the picture Liam showed me.

—

NORMALLY I'D BE excited to visit Maya's Brooklyn apartment. I love the way she always has a pot of green tea and stacks of books and papers everywhere. It feels like home. But today, I'm more nervous than excited to see her.

"It's so good to see you." She gives me a hug at the door. Behind her, tiny footsteps patter across the hardwood. Maya yells back into the house, "Dani, guess who's here?"

"Aunt N'omi!" Dani surges up to me and wraps her little arms around my knees, toppling me over.

I laugh, bending down to hug her. "Hey, kiddo! Jeez, what do you eat and how do I get some? You've grown another two inches!"

"Next year, I'm gonna be *this* tall!" She reaches high into the air.

"You're almost as tall as me," I say, impressed. "You keep going at this rate, pretty soon you'll be a teenager." I shoot a teasing look at Maya, who rolls her eyes.

Dani looks down, chin dropping to her chest as she juts out a hip. She looks sideways at Maya, then back at me. “Mama wouldn’t let me go to your show,” she complains.

“It was too late. And not for little girls,” Maya says.

“I’m not little,” Dani says.

“Actually, she could’ve come,” I say. “We used clean versions of the tracks.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it,” Maya says. “It was impossible to find a sitter.”

I look down. “Yeah—it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“I wanted to be there, really. I promise not to miss the next one.” I bite my tongue, not reminding her that this was my senior-year show, there would be no more. “Do you want some tea?” she asks.

—

WE SIP OUR tea on the couch, listening to Dani recite one of the books she knows by heart, and I grow more anxious the later it gets. Before she starts the next one, I turn to Maya. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Maya raises her eyebrows. We don’t always get along, but we can read each other’s tones better than anyone. “Dani, honey,” she says. “Why don’t you go to your room and get your new drawing to show Aunt Naomi?”

Dani looks up and rattles off something about all the drawings she’s done and runs out of the room. Maya turns to me. “So how are things going? Are you still seeing that guy you brought for dinner?”

“Who, Liam?” I feel my face flush, remembering how badly that dinner went. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“I saw in your stories he gave you flowers?” Maya says this in a pleasant tone, but I can tell there’s more behind it. She’s itching to say what she’s said so many times before: *Why are you dating him again? He’s not good for you.*

“He brought them to the show...” *He came, unlike you,* I want to say. “But that’s not—I wanted to ask you something.” I look at her as her smile fades, and think better of it. Why do that to her, anyway? She’d never

mentioned it, not even in passing. Her friend died in a horrific way. She's tried to block it out and move on. I don't blame her.

"Aunt N'omi!" I hear Dani in the other room, and my heart squeezes.

"Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing," I sigh. "I just want you to know I'm here, if you ever need to get anything off your chest. I won't judge you. For anything." I look at her, hoping she'll get the hint, even though it's impossible for her to know what I'm hinting at.

She studies my face. I close my eyes and shake my head.

She leans down so that she's hovering over me. "If there's something going on, you can talk to me. You know that, right?"

I sigh. She's not getting it.

"I can help," she says, "if you're ever in trouble." She stands, leaving me to walk to the kitchen. She places both hands on the countertop and hangs her head as if completely drained. "If it's something else..." Her eyes slide down to my stomach.

Is she implying that I might be pregnant? "It's not about Liam." I join her at the counter. Her eyes are closed now, and she's taking deep breaths. I place one hand on her shoulder. "I'm fine."

Maya doesn't answer. I can tell she's trying to stay calm. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I know." I want to tell her I love her, but it's not something we say often. It feels so final, like we're expecting something bad to happen.

Her eyes flick to mine. "Cecily told me you turned down the job at Hunt."

"I was going to tell you."

She puts up a hand. "You don't have to explain. They're not in a good place right now." I nod. "But," she adds, "you've got to figure something out. You're graduating in three months and you don't have a plan. Everyone else I've talked to has a job already. I can ask Kai—"

"I'm figuring it out," I say, my face warming. It's embarrassing, her asking everyone we know for a job. Maybe I don't want the kind of life she wants for me. Maybe I don't need a house or a husband or a corporate job, or

all the things society tells us will make us happy, because from what I've seen, they don't. "Professor DuPont said he could connect me with someone at Omnis. Some kind of journalism program—"

"No." She says it with such force that I wince. "No," she says, more calmly. "I mean, you shouldn't settle."

The muscles in her face are tense. She looks exhausted. Maya is about to respond when Dani comes flying back into the kitchen, arms overflowing with markers and paintbrushes. "Aunt N'omi! Come to my room!"

I look at Maya, who looks away. I sigh and turn back to Dani. "Okay, Dani-girl. Show me what you got."

Hours later, I'm alone with Maya in the entryway, shrugging my coat over my shoulders, when she says, "Don't let him do any favors for you." Maya is staring at me with a look I can't read, her hand resting on the door. I've never seen my sister like this before.

"Who?"

"Matthew DuPont," she says, her voice stern. "Trust me, you don't ever want to owe that man anything."

MAYA

February 2012

IT HAD BEEN THREE WEEKS since we took Lila to the hospital. The snow finally thawed and I spent my afternoons in Chancellor Green Library, a textbook open on my lap, watching students and faculty outside the window.

But the fear did not fade. It pulsed in the back of my skull, like a tightly coiled spring. Knowing that the man who held so many of our futures in his hands had a temper like that, knowing that he knew that we'd seen him assault Lila that night...I was constantly on edge, waiting for what was inevitably coming for us.

I loved that library. It felt like a cocoon—its octagonal rotunda a giant birdcage of chestnut wood and iron railing. Bookshelves fanned out around the edges like spokes on a wheel, rays of light dancing through stained glass, washing the room in a pale golden glow.

On Tuesday after lunch, I was curled up on one side with my legs tucked under me, reading the poem “Annabel Lee,” when a familiar voice made me look up. Lila. I hadn't seen her since that night. Assumed she'd gone home to her parents' to recover.

But there she was, holding Austin's hand as they made their way to a sheltered area of the library. And—oddly—she was smiling.

It was strange to see her like this when the last time I saw her she'd looked close to death as a nurse threaded an IV into her limp arm. It was

good to see her happy.

Lila had dropped out of Greystone—we were notified via an email to the Society’s email discussion list. Everyone had known it was coming. But it was brave. No one left Greystone. *Ever*. Not without knowing they’d be blocked from getting a job at every major company in Manhattan.

Rumors flew about why she was leaving. Some said she’d gotten too high, needed to go to rehab. Others whispered about an affair with Professor DuPont. Cecily said Lila was actually suing Matthew and had to drop out to make her case stick.

—

“WE HAVE TO find a way to help her,” I told Cecily that evening as we walked to Sterling for dinner. “She doesn’t deserve any of this.”

“But how do we do that without turning all of Sterling against us too?” Cecily asked.

Most everyone had already turned against Lila. The members were shutting her out one by one, and pretty soon, Lila would be completely cut off.

—

WE JOINED DAISY and Kai at the dinner table. Daisy was aggressively shaking vinegar and salt on a salad as Kai gave her order to a waiter. Unable to eat, I sat staring at the flickering candle on the table instead.

I was disgusted. Ashamed. It felt like I was sinking into a pit of tar, feet stuck, viscous black seeping over my skin.

I jumped when Cecily’s phone buzzed on the table. Her eyes flicked down and she froze.

“What is it?” I asked.

Her eyes met mine, filled with indecision. “He’s offering Lila a settlement.” She turned the phone so we could read it.

Lila had sent her a screenshot of a text message from Professor DuPont: *Have your attorney reach out to mine. Let’s put this behind us.*

As if it were that easy for her to forget. “She’s not going to take it, though, right?” I asked, suddenly furious. DuPont was trying to quiet her with a check. No amount of money would make what he’d done to her okay, and it certainly wasn’t going to make her forget. I hoped Lila’s attorney was going to take him for all he was worth.

Cecily shook her head. “She hasn’t decided.”

“She could go to court,” I suggested. “We could be her witnesses.”

“No, we can’t,” Kai said. “Are you forgetting what Matthew has on us? One email to the dean could get us expelled.”

“Surely if a judge found Matthew in the wrong, we’d be able to convince the school he tricked us into doing those things.”

“We have to help her,” Daisy insisted. “We can’t let him get away with this.”

“Of course we do,” Kai replied, growing frustrated. “But do you really think she’d win in a legal battle? We can’t just go into this without thinking. We have to protect ourselves.”

“We have to protect *Lila*,” Daisy shot back.

I put up my hands. “Hey, stop. We’ll figure out a way, we just need time.”

Cecily, who had been quiet, looked up. “I have an idea.” Her eyes shimmered with something I thought looked oddly like excitement.

—

I WAS SURPRISED to see Lila in Cecily’s room that night, sitting on the couch next to her. The others were quiet and avoided one another’s eyes as if they’d stopped talking right when I entered.

I studied Lila. Her bruises had faded and her jaw had returned to its normal shape. She looked resolute.

“What’s going on?” I asked, unsettled, taking a seat next to Daisy.

Cecily and Kai exchanged a look. “We have a plan,” Kai said.

I glanced around the room, studying each of their faces, waiting for someone to fill me in, but no one said a word. My heart was racing.

After a long silence, Cecily finally looked at me. “Lila accepted the settlement.”

I glanced at Lila, not sure what to say. But she looked neither upset nor angry. She was sitting very still and avoiding my eyes. “Lila can speak for herself,” I said.

I wanted to plead with her. She was giving up. Letting him get away with it. I wanted to convince her there was still time to go to the police, hire a private investigator. Do *something* to get that man away from Sterling and Greystone.

“Why?” I asked her, struggling to hide my disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” Lila said. “He paid me a fortune for signing the NDA. I don’t want to get the police involved...but we came up with something better.”

Kai revealed a small silver Panasonic camera and set it on the table.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a wireless security camera, HD, good in low light, local SD card storage. My mom got it for the house,” Kai explained, her tone matter-of-fact. “Lila can’t go to the police because she’s forbidden to discuss the settlement. But with evidence, we can still get him fired. If Matthew admits to hurting her on tape, that’s something we can take to the administration.”

“*The Prince* is holding the story while the administration investigates,” Lila explained. “But without proof, I think we all know which way the school’s investigation is going to go.”

I looked from the video camera back to them. “A confession.” I laughed at the idea. “How do you plan on making him confess?”

Cecily reached into her pocket, revealing a small amber vial. Upon seeing it, my stomach twisted. I stopped laughing and felt my breathing grow shallow.

“GHB,” she said.

“Roofie him?” I asked, incredulous.

Kai typed something into her laptop and read from the screen. “One dropper full is enough to make a healthy, average-sized adult unable to function. Loss of coordination, blurred vision, low heart rate.”

“We could put a few drops of it into his drink so he loosens up, and then we get him to confess to everything,” Lila added. “The admissions scandal, the assault...”

“You’re going to drug him?” They were staring at me in such an unsettling manner, it made me lightheaded.

“We’re going to drug him,” Cecily corrected me. She was so close I could see tiny strands of silver in her blue eyes.

I took a deep breath. Cecily and Kai had been going out to Manhattan clubs since they were sixteen. But intentionally *drugging* someone—and a *professor* on top of that—was insane. Not to mention illegal.

Daisy raised her eyebrows. “So what do you think?”

They all stared at me, waiting for me to answer. The air suddenly felt very still. As my pulse raced, I remembered that I’d allowed this to happen. I’d seen Lila’s bruise and didn’t say anything. Maybe they were right. We couldn’t go to the police. But we also couldn’t do *nothing*. If we couldn’t get him arrested, this was the next-best option.

I swallowed. “So once we get the confession, we’ll take it to the administration?”

Daisy looked to Cecily, who nodded. “Of course.”

After inhaling a shaky breath, I locked eyes with her. I didn’t see another way. “Okay, I’m in.”

NAOMI

February 2023, three months before her death

THE NEXT MORNING, THE SOUND of my phone vibrating jerks me awake. It's a text from Ben: *Hey Naomi. I know you might not want to hear from me, but there's something I think I should tell you. Call me when you get this?*

I sigh. Ben had come to the BAC show and sat right in the front row with his friends. It was sweet. But it's too late for anything to happen. That ship has sailed.

"You're up," someone says, and I look up to find Zee and Amy standing in the entryway to the common area.

"I must've fallen asleep here. I was visiting my sister in the city yesterday."

"Did she say anything?" Amy asks, taking a seat in the chair across from me.

I look from her to Zee, wondering why she'd bring this up around her. "I'm not sure what you mean," I say, pointedly.

Zee and Amy exchange a glance. After a moment, Zee says, "I have a confession: Amy's laptop was open on her desk...and I looked through her email. I wanted to know what you two were being so secretive about. I want to help you guys."

I looked at Amy—having someone go through your emails was pretty violating, especially when she's been so worried about making sure no one

knows what she's working on. "I was pissed, of course, but it's been done, and she convinced me I had to show you this..."

Amy folds open her laptop. "These are the emails Professor DuPont forwarded to Theodore Hunt. I think he was trying to convince him to help in order to protect his wife, Cecily. The reporter I'm working with had asked me not to show anyone, to protect her source. But, Naomi, you cannot say *anything* about them to anyone. It could put my source in very real danger."

September 2, 2022 7:56 AM

TO: Matthew DuPont

FROM: Marta Koval

Hello, Mr. DuPont,

I received a message from a man by the name of Trevor Jones. He insists he is the brother of Miss Lila Jones. He found her cellphone in his parents' garage while going through their belongings. I've ignored his calls, but he is now asking to meet. He is being very persistent.

Regards,

Marta

September 2, 2022 8:01 AM

TO: Marta Koval

FROM: Matthew DuPont

Don't worry about him, just block his calls.

September 2, 2022 8:05 AM

TO: Matthew DuPont

FROM: Marta Koval

Mr. DuPont, this man has been calling and emailing me every day. He even reached out to my daughter on Instagram. I do not know what to do. He sent me this...

Attached to the email are two photos. The first is one of DuPont and Lila, what looks like a selfie, and when I see the second, my vision swims with a watery jolt of *déjà vu*. It's the same photo Liam showed me, the one of my sister and her friends in ski gear. This time though, in higher resolution, I notice the person taking the photo reflected in the mirror behind them—Marta.

September 2, 2022 8:06 AM

TO: Marta Koval

FROM: Matthew DuPont

Understood. I will come speak to you in person, no need to send any more emails.

“He killed her,” Zee says. “He obviously had plenty of reason to. All the documents she pulled and gave to Professor Williams? That’s enough to shut Greystone down, to shut Sterling down, and to ruin Matthew personally.”

I pull my head back from the screen. “It feels like Marta might know something...like she was there that weekend too.”

Amy nods. “I tried, but she won’t talk to me. Maybe one of you can try? And Naomi, maybe you can try again with your sister.”

I nod but, as much as I want to, I don’t tell them that if Maya *did* have something to do with it, even if it was an accident, she would try to shut this down. Getting her involved could put *her* at risk.

I’m standing, pacing the room, when I realize...I have to talk to her friends.

MAYA

June 2023

IT'S TUESDAY MORNING AND SIMMONS sits across from me at the police station, Naomi's notebook on the table between us.

"Where did you find this?" she asks.

"It was caught behind the desk in my sister's room in Greenwich. We were there for the funeral."

"And when was the funeral?"

"It was on Sunday."

"Why didn't you call us the day you found it?"

I hesitate. "I—I wanted to look through it myself. I didn't know it would have anything useful to your investigation in it until I read it."

Simmons writes this down. She takes a deep breath and folds her hands on the table before meeting my eyes.

"The final autopsy results showed evidence your sister was drugged."

I clench my jaw. That's what I'd been trying to tell them.

"What did you find?" I demand, trying to keep my voice even.

Simmons opens the folder in front of her. Inside is a photo of my sister's neck. There's a tiny red mark on the skin, a puncture wound, nearly impossible to see without the magnified image.

"We found this mark on her body," Simmons says, sliding over the photo. "We suspect someone may have injected her with the ketamine."

I look up from the photo to her, the sick feeling in my stomach rising up my throat. I swallow. “You have to look into Matthew DuPont again.”

Simmons frowns. “Why do you say that?”

My throat is so tight it’s hard to speak. I swallow. “In her notebook, you’ll see Naomi mentions a girl named Lila Jones. She was a member of Sterling Club and also in Greystone Society. She was a friend. She died on a ski trip in 2012. I think my sister was looking into her death.”

After a slow, steady breath, I tell her everything I remember about that weekend.

MAYA

February 2012, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire

I DIDN'T EXPECT WE'D BE driving through a snowstorm. My stomach turned, a combination of car sickness and unease at how far away we were from anything recognizable.

We'd left late that morning for Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, and had been in the car for over seven hours. Kai had insisted on driving and had her headphones on while Cecily flipped through a magazine in the passenger seat. The rattling of the car every time we went over potholes was unnerving. I glanced over at Daisy, who was passed out against the window, and wished I could shake the feeling of anxiety and get some rest myself.

We were heading to the annual Greystone Society ski trip, where Professor DuPont wined and dined alumni who'd given generous donations to the Legacy Foundation. Throughout the year, alumni could reserve their stay at the Society's cabins and receive VIP perks at the resort. According to Daisy, the properties were all together worth nearly a hundred million dollars.

As I peered over the edge now, my heart lurched. Below us was a valley of snow-covered pines and sweeping mountains in the distance. The car shook as our tires slipped and skidded around a tight turn in the road. Gripping the leather seat, I tried to focus on not throwing up, pushing away the darker thought—that one false move could send us over the edge.

“Can somebody look at the map?” Kai asked when we’d reached a fork in the road. The navigation on our phones stopped working hours ago, but luckily we were prepared.

I grabbed the MapQuest pages we’d printed with the highlighted route and looked up at the road sign. “I think it’s a right here.”

The road took us deeper into the wilderness, the snow piling higher outside the windows, other dwellings becoming sparse and soon disappearing altogether. Panic rose in my chest: we were so isolated up here, miles away from the safety of the city—no grocery stores, cellphone reception, or hospitals.

At the end of the road, we pulled up to a large cabin surrounded by trees on all sides.

“We’re here,” Kai said.

—

THE CABIN SMELLED of cedar wreaths and luxury candles, which were lit on every surface. Though it was the smallest of the cabins the Society owned, it was still large enough to be its own ski lodge.

I was hauling my heavy duffel bag up the front steps and past a basket of snowshoes and ski poles when something compelled me to glance up. A chandelier made of polished antlers fit for a Viking’s home swayed precariously overhead. It made me uncomfortable to stand under it. If that thing fell on someone, there was no chance they’d survive.

Moving into the living room, I stopped to marvel at the giant taxidermy moose head adorning the wall, the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a white forest, and stood there, hypnotized by the falling snow.

“Welcome, dear.” The familiar voice made me jump. I spun around to find Marta standing behind me, holding a stack of folded towels.

“Oh, Marta. Jesus, you scared me,” I said, clutching a hand to my chest. “What are you doing here?”

She was looking at me with that same cold stare. “I often work here when there are guests. Mr. DuPont likes everything to be perfect.”

The mention of his name made my heart race, the blood rush to my head. What were we doing here? Was this really a good idea?

After Marta left, I hauled my bag after Cecily and Daisy, who were down the hall.

“I have the main suite,” Kai called out. “Cecily is taking the one next to me and you and Daisy can share the third bedroom with the twin beds.”

After Daisy and I settled in, I moved to the window and pulled aside the curtains. The sky had faded to black and the forest looked ominous. As I peered into the darkness, I had the unnerving feeling of being watched. Yellow eyes blinked from behind the trees and disappeared moments later.

“Daisy,” I said quietly, “look.”

“What?” She squinted out the window.

“There’s something out there,” I said, pointing.

“It’s probably a deer.”

The blustery snow outside reminded me of how deep we were in the wilderness. A constant sheet of white. There must have been all kinds of animals out there.

Out in the living room, Kai had lit a fire in the fireplace and opened a bottle of red wine. Cecily poured us a glass.

I took a long sip, inhaling its rich, intoxicating scent. “How did you convince Professor DuPont to invite us? And Lila, for that matter?”

“It was easy,” Cecily said. “Lila agreed to the settlement and said this week would be the perfect way to put it all behind them, that she wants to rejoin the club now that she’s received restitution for what she’s been through.”

Kai pointed to a bouquet of flowers on the mantel. “Like it?”

I followed her gaze to the flowers but didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. It was an expensive-looking white, pink, and green bouquet. “It’s nice.”

With a grin, Kai stood and made her way to the flowers. She pushed them aside to reveal a small video camera she had hidden behind them.

My eyes went wide. “Wow, that’s good. You really can’t see it.”

“Isn’t it?” Daisy said, giddy with excitement.

Cecily looked at her phone. “Theodore says everyone else should be arriving tomorrow night.” She and Theodore had recently started dating. She insisted it was casual, but anyone who saw them together knew that wasn’t true.

“Hopefully the weather cooperates,” Kai said. “Lila’s coming tomorrow too. She can sleep in one of the upstairs rooms, Theodore will be in Cecily’s room, and whoever is left can have a blow-up mattress on the floor.”

“Who else did Professor DuPont invite?” I asked.

“A few Greystone alumni who are involved with the Legacy Foundation, the usual high-net-worth friends he likes to have around,” Cecily said. “But they’re all staying at the cabins on the resort side. This is the only one over here.” She turned to me. “You ready?”

I inhaled a deep breath and tried to relax. *We’re going to get him on camera. Send him to prison for good.*

NAOMI

March 2023, two months before her death

“YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, we thought we were doing the right thing.” Daisy’s voice is tense, almost pleading as she explains. She sits across from me at a restaurant in Midtown, where we’d agreed to meet. It’s not unusual for us to get lunch, but normally we’d invite Maya. This time, I told Daisy I wanted to talk to her alone.

“Oh, we were so young, you know...and we thought we were invincible.” Daisy fiddles with the edge of a cocktail napkin. I’d shown Daisy the photo we’d found of the five girls and straight-out asked her what the hell happened that weekend.

“If it was an accident, then why didn’t Maya ever talk about it?”

Daisy looks away as if she might recognize someone at the next table, then leans into her elbows. “Okay, look, he’d been seeing Lila and it had gone south for some reason. He got violent with her...It was so bad we had to take her to the emergency room. We all hated Matthew by that point, for various reasons. But we didn’t want to get the police involved, so we came up with this plan to make him confess, thought we could at least get the administration to come down on him. We figured if we could get him kicked out of Greystone, it would be close enough to ruining his life.”

I look at her. “What kind of plan?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

Daisy sighs. “Fine. But you can’t tell anyone I told you, especially not your sister.”

MAYA

February 2012, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire

I DEATH-GRIPPED THE CHAIRLIFT AS it bobbed up the mountain while Daisy sat, gazing blissfully out at the passing landscape. I hadn't been raised skiing and didn't realize how high some of the chairlifts went—and I was quickly reminded that I was deathly afraid of heights. I closed my eyes and took a steadying breath, trying to pretend we were only a few feet off the ground.

We'd woken up early that morning to take advantage of the fresh powder that had accumulated overnight, but the sky was starting to show signs of a storm. There were dark clouds hovering overhead and an icy-cold wind that made the chairlift shudder.

"You ready?" Daisy asked, when we'd gotten off the chairlift and skied to the top of the run. My chest clenched. *Um, absolutely not.* But what was I going to do, walk back down? Wind whipped my hair against my face as I forced myself to gaze down at the steep descent—a sheer icy drop. Taking a deep breath, I nudged the tips of my skis forward. *Okay, I can do this. Keep the skis straight.*

"Let's go," Daisy yelled over the wind. She pushed off, a streak of neon orange disappearing down the steep slope in a flash.

I tentatively tilted my skis forward over the edge and tried to imitate the way she'd done it. And suddenly I was falling, stomach fluttering, skidding down fast. Wind lashed past as my skis bumped over the snow. *I'm doing it!* I

was cutting back and forth through the snow like Daisy, lungs burning with crisp cold air as I bent my knees, absorbing the uneven surface. A rush of adrenaline pumped through me as I soared as fast as I'd ever gone. Pines blurred past. My jacket whistled in the wind. *This is what it feels like to fly.*

I was also fully aware that at any moment I could hit a chunk of ice and tumble forward into a tangle of skis, poles, and snow...Maybe that was part of the thrill.

"You're doing great, come on!" Daisy waved at me from where she was waiting at a fork in the run.

I followed as she disappeared down one path—a Black Diamond, the sign read. I grew increasingly uneasy as the trail narrowed, snow thickening, trees springing into our path. Somehow I'd followed Daisy off the main run.

"Where are we going?" I shouted over the wind, but she didn't turn around.

I stopped to catch my breath, throat raw from the dry cold air. Now the trees blocked the wind, and I only heard the faint creaking of their branches. I grew more anxious as the tiny dot that was Daisy's orange jacket disappeared into the distance. *Shit. Where'd she go?*

A branch broke behind me and I whipped around—nothing.

After struggling for another stretch, I stopped. I was going to seriously injure myself if I tried to keep going. My hands were numb as I fumbled with the bindings. Once I managed to get them off, I looked back the way I'd come. I was lost. My face heated with anger. *I can't believe she left me here.*

That was when movement in my periphery caught my attention.

I could feel it. Someone was watching me. Or *something*. A branch shuddered overhead, sending snow falling over me. I heard a forced exhale. *What the hell was that?*

I turned my head. Beady black eyes stared back.

Bracing to run, I squinted into the dense snowfall, heart hammering in my chest. The wind whistled through the treetops as I held my breath, until moments later, two deer emerged from the trees. The first had long antlers, sharp as blades, and steam coming from its nostrils. The animal was muscular and three times my size—only feet away. *He could kill me.*

He turned his head and we stared at each other, wondering which of us was going to react. I wanted to run, but hadn't I read somewhere you weren't supposed to run from animals? That it triggered a chase instinct? Was that for a buck or a bear? But there was also something captivating about him—being so close. Before I could move, he bowed his head and took off. The smaller one followed.

When I was pushing myself to my feet there was a huge *CRACK*—a branch had broken behind me, loud as a gunshot, and a heavy weight on my shoulders made my heart stop. I dropped down in the snow, screaming until I heard...laughter?

Daisy's, Cecily's, and Kai's voices. Cecily laughing so hard tears welled in her eyes. And Kai was keeled over, clutching her stomach. My fear was replaced by anger. *Jesus Christ.*

"You should have seen your face!" Cecily said, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Daisy stifled a laugh and looked at me, concerned. "I'm sorry, don't be mad."

"You guys are assholes," I said, sinking back into the snow as my heart slowed. "You took five years off my life."

"Sorry. But we came to let you know"—Cecily's eyes lit up as she reached into her coat, revealing the amber glass vial—"whoever is last down the mountain has to put the drugs in Matthew's drink."

I, of course, was the last down the mountain.

By the time we'd gotten settled at the cabin that afternoon, the altitude was really getting to me. I had the start of a low, throbbing headache, and my nose kept bleeding on and off.

—

THAT NIGHT, WE made margaritas and invited everyone over for a party. It was the four of us, Cecily's boyfriend Theodore, Lila, and other Greystone members and alums pouring in and out of the cabin. The altitude made one drink seem like two...two seem like four...and pretty soon I was drunk in the

hot tub between Daisy and Cecily as Afrojack's "Take Over Control" blared over the speakers.

Needing a break, I went to the room to look for something and saw movement outside the window. Professor DuPont was talking to a few alums, probably trying to get more donations out of them that he could siphon into his personal accounts.

Despite being lightheaded from the alcohol, my anxiety rose as I thought of what I had to do. He was distracted. Now would be a good time.

I filled my drink in the kitchen and returned to the back deck. As the party elevated, people turning into blurred shapes, their voices loud and echoing, I knew this was a terrible idea. Maybe I should try to get out of it. I could come up with an excuse. Say I forgot.

Just as I was thinking they'd forgotten about it, Cecily leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Let's do it now." And my pulse quickened.

I finished the rest of my drink, hoping it would calm my nerves. Cecily exited the hot tub and wrapped a towel around herself. She gave my shoulder a squeeze and hopped off to find Matthew.

Through the sliding glass door, I could see her approach Professor DuPont in the living room. "Hey, you guys want to come outside? We're going to do a toast."

Sweat beaded at my hairline as I made my way to the kitchen, where I'd hidden the vial of GHB. My head spun and I regretted drinking so much so quickly.

Okay, breathe. It's only a prank. All I have to do is slip the stuff in his drink. I glanced into the living room at the bouquet of flowers over the fireplace and could make out a sliver of the camera hidden behind the vase.

"What are you doing?" a voice startled me. It was Marta again. How the woman seemed to appear out of nowhere, I would never understand.

I closed my eyes for a moment and then gave her what I hoped was an innocent smile. "Nothing, I was looking for the shot glasses." Her eyes dropped down to the counter, where the shot glasses were lined up in a row.

My cheeks warmed, and I couldn't stop my eyes from glancing past her at the hidden camera once more. Was it fully hidden? A silver edge was

sticking out from behind the flower arrangement, and that was when I noticed something strange—the red light wasn't on. It wasn't recording.

Marta frowned and looked over her shoulder in the direction of the mantel—and the camera behind it. I held my breath and prayed she wouldn't notice.

"I have to go—they're waiting for me," I said, fumbling with a bottle of tequila. I felt the alcohol numbing my limbs, making me clumsy.

"All right, I don't think you guys are drunk enough," I heard Cecily say from outside. "How about a round of shots?" That was my cue.

Marta began cleaning up around the kitchen, clearly suspicious of me. *Please leave me alone.* "Hey, Marta? Do you know if there are any extra towels somewhere? I couldn't find any."

"I washed some this morning," she said with a nod, and took off in the direction of the laundry room. Okay. That should buy me some time.

Hands shaking, I prepared the shots. Grabbing my purse, I dug around until my fingers located the smooth amber bottle. I had no idea how much to add. *What the hell,* I thought. *He's an abusive creep, might as well hit him hard with the stuff.*

I was dispensing another eyedropper full when I heard the wood floor creak behind me. I whipped around, hiding the vial behind my back.

"Here you are, dear." Marta had returned, holding a stack of fresh towels.

"Thanks, Marta." I smiled, but she didn't move. She was still holding the stack of towels. I set the vial down behind me and quickly grabbed them from her.

"This is a bad idea," Marta said in a low voice, concern filling her eyes. At first I thought she'd somehow become aware of our plan, but she added, "She shouldn't be here." And I realized she'd been talking about Lila. I remembered how Marta had confronted me in the library, shown me what Professor DuPont had been hiding from us. The files, the photos...the start of all of this.

I nodded, keeping my back tight against the counter, unease tight in my throat. Looking her in the eye, I said, "I'll make sure nothing happens to her."

Marta gave me one last look before pressing her lips into a line and walking away, shaking her head as she disappeared behind a corner.

“Maya?” Cecily called my name from outside. But first I had to fix the camera.

Leaving the shot glasses on the counter, I moved quickly to the living room. After turning on the camera, I carefully tucked it back in place and adjusted the vase in front of it, so the red light was concealed. There.

But when I returned to the kitchen for the shot glasses a moment later, they were gone. My heart skipped. *Oh god.*

I ran outside to the back deck to find everyone with a shot glass and beer raised in the air.

“I brought them out,” one of Matthew’s friends said casually as I approached. Shit. This wasn’t good. Anyone could have the shot.

I glanced around at the party. Theodore’s arm was wrapped around Cecily, his eyes red from the chlorine; Daisy’s eyes were drooping. Professor DuPont stood near the hot tub with two of his friends, each clutching a shot glass.

Panic shot through me. What would happen if someone else got it? Would they get sick? I didn’t want some innocent person to get sick for no reason. This was a disaster.

“Come on, Maya. Get in,” Cecily shouted, waving me over.

I slipped into the hot tub next to Cecily and leaned close. “I don’t know which one it is.”

She brushed me off. “Don’t worry, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” I whispered. “I put like half the bottle in there.”

Cecily brushed me off. “Don’t worry.” My frustration only rose. *How is this at all fine?*

I sank deeper into the water as steam billowed around me, obscuring their faces. Kai handed Lila and me a shot. I carefully plucked it from her hand.

Cecily stood in the hot tub, beads of water dripping off her skin and steam rising from her shoulders. “I want to thank Professor DuPont for bringing us together.” They locked eyes and she gave him a flirty smile. “This has been quite a year, but I don’t know where I’d be without this group of people. To health, happiness, and tequila!”

Everyone cheered and raised their shots in the air. My stomach twisted.

Theodore stood and beat his fist against his chest before tilting the shot to his mouth. One by one, each person tipped their glass to their lips.

Stop! I wanted to yell, but I was frozen in shock. It all happened so fast it was over before I could react.

Afterward, I studied each person for signs of slurred speech or drooping eyelids, but each person looked as drunk as the next. Kai was laughing with Lila on one side of the hot tub; Cecily was tucked under Theodore's arm. Professor DuPont and a friend were playing ping-pong on the other side of the deck. Before I knew it Daisy was making out with the guy next to me. Kai left the hot tub and returned with another round of shots and a deck of cards.

"Kings cup. Whoever loses has to streak around the house," she said. Cecily turned up the music and slipped back into the hot tub. "All right, everyone knows the rules, right?" She flipped over the first card. "Ace!"

Everyone started pouring their beers into their mouths. Theodore splashed me and shouted, "Waterfall!" Kai handed me a beer, and I gulped it down. It shot straight to my head, blurring my thoughts. Everyone was laughing as they pulled cards. They seemed fine.

I was taking a card from the stack when I felt someone's stare on the back of my neck.

I glanced behind me. Professor DuPont sat in the far corner of the deck watching me. The darkness in his eyes pierced straight through me. *What are you thinking?* One side of his mouth curled upward, and I shuddered.

I stood and a wave of nausea washed over me. It was too hot. I'd had too much to drink, too fast. And the altitude. *Shit.* I tried to inhale fresh air but got a lungful of steam. Chlorine stung my eyes, and I could barely see. I had to get out of there.

On my way out of the hot tub, I tried to grab ahold of the side and missed. The edges of my vision blurred, but I caught myself just in time. To my relief, I felt the side of the tub, cold and hard beneath my palm.

"Hey, you okay?" Theodore asked. Panic and shame flooded my system. This was so embarrassing. *I'm going to be sick. I need to—I need to—*

"Is she okay?" Daisy repeated, her voice rising in concern.

“Fine,” I choked out before my vision went. Seconds later, I felt myself falling. A loud thud as my body hit the floor. My head collided with something sharp, and a searing pain shot through my skull. The sounds around me faded and the rest of the night was a dark void.

MAYA

February 2012, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire

WHEN I WOKE UP, I was lying in the guest room I shared with Daisy with a splitting headache. The sunlight streaming through the window told me it was at least late morning, and Daisy wasn't in her bed. Last night, a storm had rolled in, and the trees had all but disappeared under a thick blanket of snow.

I reached up to touch my head, feeling the swollen bruise from where I must have hit it when I passed out last night. *Oh my god, how many drinks had I had? Five? And the altitude...* I would have laughed, except I was afraid I might throw up. *I could really use some coffee.*

I dragged myself out of bed and ran my hand along the wall for support as I made my way out to the kitchen. But as I passed the living room, the air felt thick. I could feel the tension even before I saw them.

Cecily, Daisy, and Kai were gathered close together, whispering. When they saw me, they looked up. The expression on their faces told me something was very wrong. Anxiety tightened around my chest.

"What is it?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know the answer.

Daisy stepped forward, eyes wide with fear. "We can't find Lila." I had never seen her so pale.

Cecily looked at me. "We've looked everywhere." A bead of water dripped down her parka and onto the floor. That was when I realized they were all wearing their jackets and gloves, their faces pink with cold.

“What happened?” I asked, looking from face to face. Each looked as worried as the next, and the dread dug deeper.

“No one’s seen her since last night.” Daisy shook her head. “The back door was open this morning. And her jacket was on the floor, and her phone. We thought maybe she’d gone out for a bit, but it’s been hours.” Her voice cracked.

I stared at them, wondering why they seemed so hopeless. “Maybe she’s lost, or hurt. She couldn’t have made it far in this snow. Come on, we have to keep looking. We’re running out of time.”

—

OUTSIDE THE CABIN, everything was white and still, the ground covered in several feet of snow. An awful feeling rose in the pit of my stomach. *Would Lila really have gone out without her coat?*

We spread out in all directions from the cabin, yelling her name. My hands and feet were numb from the cold, but I was so wired with adrenaline I didn’t care. I yelled Lila’s name until my voice was hoarse.

After an hour of searching, Kai stopped suddenly. “I’m going back. Someone needs to call the police.” The rest of us kept searching, filled with a new kind of terror.

The first police car showed up a half hour later. “The K9 unit is on their way,” the officer said.

I overheard him turn and mutter something to a fellow officer. “Let’s get a search team out five miles in every direction. But we’re going to need the dogs to find a body in all this snow.”

A body. The officer’s words hung in the air. My stomach turned as I realized—he didn’t expect to find her alive.

Daisy and I pushed through the snow, sweat dripping under our jackets, exposed skin on our faces burning with cold. I scanned the ground in front of us, straining for any color among the fallen branches and pine needles, scared to miss a lock of red hair, the corner of her sweater.

As we ventured deeper into the wilderness, searching for any sign of Lila in all this snow, time seemed to stretch. The snowfall, the cracking sounds of ice, the officers' words, all floated in the distance. The snow was so thick, it seemed to have covered up any prints. Even the dogs struggled to find her scent.

It took until dusk before a member of the search and rescue team found her—five miles from the cabin, covered by snow in a ravine. By then the sun had long gone, and a cruel bitter wind circled the cabin. We waited for what seemed like an eternity...and then we saw them: a group of EMTs exiting the woods with a stretcher.

I stood very still, watching through the window as a horrible fear seized my chest and snaked down my limbs, but I couldn't look away.

Daisy was the first to run out, and I followed close behind.

What happened next had a muted, slow-motion quality, as if it were happening in a dream.

I would remember her hair first: frozen solid and dark red with blood, matted with twigs and dirt. A bloody gash split her head, and yet her expression was calm and serene...as if she were asleep, her pale skin glittering unnaturally as sunlight reflected off the tiny flakes of ice, like a shattered porcelain doll.

I stared. Captivated. Anchored to the snowy spot where I stood.

But then I blinked and the panic rushed in. She was closer now—her skin ashen, bruised, lips a jaundice yellow and purple the color of mold—and then they pulled the sheet over her.

My vision swam, and for a moment I was confused.

What were they doing? The EMTs were taking their time hauling her into the ambulance. They weren't giving her oxygen. They weren't trying to save her.

Someone grabbed my hand, and I began to hyperventilate as they shut the ambulance doors. She was gone. She was really gone.

Cold sweat coated my armpits, the back of my neck, as someone brought me inside and handed me a glass of water. I stared at it in my hand. In the living room, Daisy sank into a chair, head dropping to her hands, and sobbed.

Fear and guilt twisted my insides. *Lila was dead*. And it was my fault. My stomach lurched, and I heaved in the hallway. The glass slipped from my grasp and shattered on the floor.

—

“MAYA MASON.” THE detective’s voice cut through my skull. I looked down at where the glass I’d been holding had shattered moments ago. But it was already gone. Someone had cleaned it up.

I swallowed. “Yes?”

“I’ll need you to come with me next. We need to ask you a few questions.”

I nodded as the blood drained from my face.

Cecily, Kai, and Daisy stood behind him, cheeks flushed from the cold, jackets dripping onto the floor—like I’d found them this morning. They stared at me, each one as pale as the snow outside.

—

NO ONE SAID a word as we packed our bags the next morning.

I was still in shock, disoriented from lack of sleep and a throbbing headache. The past twenty-four hours felt like a nightmare. One from which we couldn’t wake up. We drove down the same snowy road on which we came, but this time we rode in bone-chilling silence.

It wasn’t until Daisy touched my arm that I realized I was crying. No one had said it, but I knew Lila must have gotten the shot intended for Professor DuPont. That was the only logical explanation. And that meant...it was my fault she was dead.

But something about it bothered me. *How had she made it five miles into the snow?* I’d put enough GHB in that drink to knock out a horse—how could someone as thin as Lila have made it more than a few steps with that much in her system?

I shuddered, imagining her lost in the storm, panicking as she tried to retrace her steps.

All of a sudden, my rib cage locked in on itself, my bones digging into my lungs. I couldn't breathe. Hyperventilating, I took off my seatbelt, rolled down the window.

"Woah, what are you doing?" Daisy said.

I'm going to be sick. Pushing myself up, I leaned out the window, gasping at the cold air. *This is my fault. It's my fault she's dead.* The thoughts pulsed again and again through my mind as my airway constricted. *Drugging someone is a felony. I could be charged with manslaughter, maybe even murder.*

The car was too hot. I couldn't draw in enough air.

"Sit back down, Maya," Cecily said from the front seat.

"Can someone get her back inside?" Kai yelled. The car jerked back and forth as she looked in the rearview mirror.

Her erratic driving was too much. I vomited out the window.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" Cecily turned around.

Wiping my mouth, I slouched back into the seat. Daisy handed me her bottle of water, which I gulped down eagerly. The cool liquid settled my stomach, but the bile still lingered on my tongue.

"Shit," Kai said, out of nowhere. "Did one of you pack the video camera?"

A long silence. Everyone shook their head.

Kai's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror and the fear in them sent a chill straight to my bones.

NAOMI

March 2023, two months before her death

“WE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT happened to her,” Daisy says, tears rimming her eyes.

“So let me get this straight, you guys had planned on drugging DuPont, but Lila got it instead?”

Daisy sighs. “I really don’t know why she went out alone.”

“Do you think it was less accidental than it seemed? Do you think it was DuPont?”

She shrugs. “All I know is he wanted to silence her, and this would be a way to do it.” She hesitates, looking off to the side again. “None of us saw anything solid to pin on him, though. Maya thinks it was her fault, since she’d dispensed the drugs. There was some sort of mix-up with who was supposed to serve the drinks. But...I never blamed her.”

The waiter comes to our table with the check, and Daisy stops talking abruptly.

I reach for the bill. “I’ll get it.”

But she waves me off. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

—

AFTER HAVING LUNCH with Daisy, I’m left unsettled. While she was talking, I had this incomplete feeling, like I was missing some crucial part of the story.

Daisy cares about my sister, I know she does, but I have a feeling she wasn't telling me everything. Maybe she was trying to protect me, or protect my sister.

But Kai, who could be brutally honest, would tell me the truth.

It's now late afternoon, and the sun cuts skillfully between the sleek gray lines of the city. I'm watching the front doors of the high-rise where Kai's firm is located: Stern, Cooper, & Sterling (yes, that Sterling). As the sun disappears, the temperature drops and it starts to drizzle, I wonder if Kai's firm represents the Greystone members who are under investigation. I blow on my hands and rub them together to stay warm.

I'm not sure how much longer I can take the cold. I thought about going inside and waiting in the lobby, but I don't want anyone to ask me why I'm here. I want to catch her off guard.

I wait for what feels like an hour, until finally I see her. She's on the phone, pushing open the turnstile door. I rush up to her, put on a big smile, and wave.

She sees me and frowns, confused at first, but after a moment she hangs up the call and smiles.

"What are you doing in the city?" Kai asks. "Don't you have class?"

I put my finger to my lips in a *shh* motion. "I skipped econ. Don't tell Maya."

Kai gives me a playful scolding look. "And you're asking me to support this bad behavior?" She shakes her head.

"I was nearby so I thought I'd stop by and say hi," I say cheerfully.

"Well, it's always nice to see you, love, and I wish I could take you out to dinner, but I have a meeting to get to." She looks at her watch, a small, expensive-looking piece. "I'm late. But you're welcome to walk with me."

Kai takes off at a brisk New Yorker pace uptown. As she expertly weaves in and out of slow-walking pedestrians, my heart pumps as I try to keep up. "So, tell me everything," she says. "How are classes? How are boys?"

"Good, good, can't complain," I say. "I'm dating a guy Maya doesn't like...no surprise there. But it's not serious."

"Tell me more," Kai says.

“I don’t know...he’s in Sterling, plays tennis...it’s not like we’re going to get married or anything.”

Kai gives me a look. “Of course not,” she says. “Trust me, you want to be single in your first years post-college. Your early twenties in the city are everything.” She pauses at a red light, and I’m grateful for a second to catch my breath. “You are moving to the city afterward, aren’t you?”

I tell her how I want to travel after graduation and then settle back in the city afterward. Ask her opinion on bookstore management jobs versus publishing graduate programs. She says she’ll put me in touch with a friend and offers to help me find a place.

Finally, when the sidewalk has cleared, and we’re headed up 57th Street toward the park, I manage to step in. “Did you hear about the leaked documents from Hunt Investment Group? The ones about Greystone?”

Kai looks at me. “I heard about the leaked *emails*, insider trading and fraud allegations, but nothing about Greystone directly.”

Shit. Of course she didn’t know about the documents the *Times* hadn’t reported on yet. Amy will never forgive me for letting this slip. I try to hide the flush burning my cheeks and hope she thinks it’s from the cold. “Oh, I just assumed...”

“Naomi,” Kai says, stopping to face me. “What do you know about the leak?”

I exhale, wondering how much to tell her. “There are some emails about a girl who died who was in Greystone. She was a senior in 2012...”

Kai stands back, a look of recognition on her face. She looks away and takes a deep inhale.

“I wanted to ask you about it,” I continue. “Lila’s brother emailed Marta. He wanted to know what really happened. Marta told DuPont and he shut her down. But if it was an accident, why would he be so nervous? I know about the assault, but...it feels like there is a piece I’m missing.” Kai’s face is paler than I’ve ever seen it. “Please—I can’t ask Maya—”

Kai shakes her head and gestures for me to follow her to a quieter part of the street. “Look,” she says, once we’ve settled. “It was a long time ago. We were young. And stupid. What happened to Lila was awful. But it *was* an

accident.” Kai leans in closer, her eyes intent on mine. “We were friends with her. None of us wanted her to die.”

Kai sighs. “Let me tell you something.” She hesitates, as if gathering her thoughts. “Over the years, I’ve seen my colleagues put in long hours at the firm. Bright young lawyers with Ivy League degrees, top of their class. Well, the ones who get promoted, do you know what they had in common?”

I stare at her blankly, trying to understand how this has anything to do with Lila.

“They resemble the men making the decisions. The partners.”

“White and gray,” I say.

A scornful puff of air releases from her nose. “If by *gray* you mean Greystone, then yes. I wish I could tell you success was all hard work and intellect, darling, but it’s not. At least half is luck, timing, and the right mentors.” She sighs. “So no, I didn’t say anything all those years ago. Do I wish I had? Yes. I wish more than anything I could go back. I do. But at the time, there weren’t many women of color in Big Law, not many women period, and when I was struggling to get a job, Matthew DuPont was the only one who offered to help. So I kept my mouth shut.”

I take a step back. “He physically assaulted her.” I thought I knew what kind of person Kai was. I thought I knew her. “You let it happen. All of you just let it happen.”

“We didn’t *let it happen*, we picked up the pieces after. We then tried to make Matthew suffer as much as we could, given the position we were in,” she says, speaking more quickly now. “I mean, we were twenty-one! We didn’t go about it the right way. We should have contacted the authorities, at the very least, and hired a lawyer, not tried to handle it ourselves.” She heaves a heavy sigh and places a hand on my shoulder. I can hardly stand to look at her. “This is serious. You could ruin a lot of people’s lives. Please, don’t ask anyone else about it—especially Maya. When Lila died...it tore her apart. She’s never gotten over it.”

My neck grows hot, and I jerk back from her grasp. “And if he killed her? Don’t you care that a murderer is out in the world, living his life like nothing happened?”

“It’s too late to do anything about it now,” she says, shaking her head. “I admire what you’re trying to do here, Naomi, but learn from our mistakes, and don’t try to fix things that are beyond your reach.”

I think of what Amy’s sacrificed to uncover the truth. I think of our room destroyed, the hate on our wall, and feel my whole body stiffen. “We can’t just sit here and do nothing. I’m going to the police.”

“Naomi, don’t be rash. If you do that, your sister is going to end up in prison.” Kai looks down.

I stare at her. I take a step back, slowly retreating as the desperation of the past year boils up within me. “No, she didn’t do anything on purpose...she wouldn’t...”

Kai looks behind her at a woman with a large shopping bag passing too closely, and once the woman has passed, she leans in close and lowers her voice to a blunt whisper. “Your sister *did* do something on purpose. Drugging someone without their knowledge is a *felony*. When the person dies, that’s *felony murder*, best-case scenario. It doesn’t matter if the drug was *intended* for someone else, what matters in court is what *actually* happened. Do you understand?” The intense fear in her eyes scares me, and what she says next rips the remaining breath from my lungs. “Your sister could go to prison for life.”

—

MAYA COMMITTED *FELONY murder*? the realization sends a wave of dread over me.

Once settled on the train, I call Amy. “We have to drop it.”

“What, why?” She sounds alarmed.

Because my sister could go to prison for life. I draw in a breath. “You can publish the article, but we have to keep my sister out of it.”

This quiets her. She seems to understand. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

—

IT’S HARD TO focus as I sit next to Amy in DuPont’s class the next day. I

haven't gone to his lecture in weeks. My grades are slipping, and I should drop the class, but that would require meeting with DuPont.

"It's my turn to present today," Amy whispers.

I blink at her. "What?"

"Our presentations, remember? They were assigned months ago. Yours is probably coming up." Noticing that Amy is more dressed up than usual in her black blazer and heeled oxford loafers, I try to remember signing up to present a topic to class, but I've been so distracted lately that nothing comes to mind.

"Amy Chen." DuPont motions for Amy to come to the stage.

"Wish me luck."

Amy's speech is on the rising interest rate and its effect on the housing market. Halfway through her speech, she clicks to the next slide on the projector, and her face falls. She fumbles with the remote. I've zoned out a little when I start to hear low murmurs ripple through the class, and behind me, some guys breaking out in laughter.

I turn around and glare at them. It's Pete Whitney and friends, of course. "What the hell is your problem?" I snap.

Pete's face is red from laughing. I don't understand what's happening until I hear suppressed chuckles echo throughout the entire two-level lecture hall. Pete looks past my shoulder and points to the stage.

To my horror, the screen where Amy's presentation had been is now playing a recording of Amy in her dorm room, dressed in lingerie and makeup, flirting with the camera like a cam-girl. It's impossible to hear what she's saying over the laughter of the audience, but it sounds like she's having some kind of sexy video call. A guy's voice is egging her on.

"Turn it up!" Behind me, Pete and his friends burst out in laughter again. Ignoring Pete, I rush toward the stage where Amy is desperately gathering her notes. On her way down the stairs, she stumbles and spills the papers all over the floor.

"Let me help." I bend down and start gathering papers for her. She is shaking uncontrollably as she blinks tears away.

Once we've gathered her things, I stand to find an entire classroom of people staring. A girl in front whispers loudly to her friend. Several others shamelessly raise their phones.

"It's okay," I say, moving in front of her. "Ignore them." But Amy has already seized her things and is surging down the aisle toward the exit. People are laughing, turning their phones to get the shot.

"What are you looking at?" I yell. "Put your phones away!"

Before following after her, I turn to take one last look at the projector and notice something I hadn't registered before. Text that reads: *You're in a private video call with @chinacutiexx*. It looks like YourFans, one of those subscription sites where your followers can pay for content.

My eyes slide down to DuPont, who is standing below the projector. His face is in shadow and I can't see his eyes. He could have easily stopped it. He could have shut the projector down, or clicked out of Amy's presentation. *What are you doing standing there?* I want to scream. And that's when it hits me like a blow to my center—he was letting this happen.

"Okay, everyone," DuPont says, stepping forward into the light to reveal his expression, calm and calculated. "That's enough."

MAYA

February 2012

IN THE WEEK FOLLOWING LILA'S death, the snow melted away, retreating like an ocean tide. That Wednesday morning, I'd woken up an hour before my alarm and had walked up to Small World Coffee on Nassau Street, trying to think about anything else but what had happened. Hands shaking, I unfolded the local newspaper I'd tucked under my arm. A black-and-white photo of Lila stared back.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY SENIOR DIES ON SKI TRIP

Lila Jones's body was recovered from under six feet of snow in the New Hampshire mountains on Sunday, February 26. Jones was said to have wandered away from the group with which she was staying, getting lost in the woods overnight. Her body was recovered the following day after an extensive search.

The medical examiner's office has stated that the official cause of death was hypothermia, but drugs and alcohol were believed to have been a contributing factor. A member of the crew team and writer for *The Daily Princetonian*, Jones was loved by all who knew her. She is survived by her parents and sixteen-year-old brother.

My eyes focused on the mention of Sterling Club:

Jones was a member of Sterling Club. A spokesperson for the eating club stated that the ski trip was not a club event. The university has declined to comment.

Bile rose in the back of my throat. She died of hypothermia. Drugs and alcohol might have been a factor. She froze to death. Because of *me*. Blood thudded loudly in my ears and my forehead broke into a cold sweat. I ducked my head and walked quickly back to my room.

—

THE REST OF the week, Lila's death was all I could think about. All anyone could talk about. Heads turned as I passed. It felt like they could see the shame and guilt following me as I walked through whispering halls. Everyone at Sterling knew we'd been there too. Everyone knew we'd played a part in this.

Friday afternoon, after not sleeping for two days, I broke down in the middle of an exam. My body shook uncontrollably, and tears streamed out of my eyes. Daisy walked me down to the campus clinic, where they gave me a Xanax and an ice pack.

But it didn't help. My ears were ringing as I clutched my knees to my chest and rocked back and forth. I sucked in breath after breath but couldn't pull in enough oxygen. The next thing I remember, my head hit the floor.

What happened next was a blur. I was on the floor, screaming. Then I remember the back of an ambulance. The local emergency room. A nurse injecting something into my IV. The cool sensation of it crawling up my forearm as it entered my system. A doctor told me later I'd had a dissociative hallucination, repeating over and over that I'd killed her.

—

I SAT ACROSS from a therapist in the mental health office the next morning, hands shaking as I clutched the paper cup of water, my head still numb from whatever drugs they gave me.

“Tell me how you’re feeling today,” the therapist asked in a tone meant to be soothing. Her nasally voice pierced my eardrums.

She was a plain-looking woman in her fifties with thick glasses and an upturned nose. I finished the cup of water in my hands, but my mouth was still dry and painful.

“How I’m feeling?” I repeated, flatly.

“Yes.” She sat with her arms folded in her lap, breathing steadily.

“My friend died. And it was my fault.” I felt that familiar pressure behind my eyes.

“I can’t imagine how that must feel, but it’s all so fresh. Perhaps over time some of the pain will fade. The important thing is to remember that it is not your fault.”

How would you know? I wanted to ask.

“No,” I said. “The pain isn’t going anywhere.”

She inhaled sharply and nodded. “Do you want to tell me why you feel that way?”

A memory of the cool vial of drugs in my hand. Dispensing the liquid into the shot glass. Lila’s face past the steam of the hot tub as she held the shot, laughing. Everyone laughing, the sound too loud, echoing with the howling wind. No one else could have gotten the drug but her.

The therapist stood, muttering some words meant to be helpful as I heaved again and again.

Afterward, I took small sips of the water she’d handed me as she wrote a prescription. “I’m going to prescribe you clonazepam—it’s a benzodiazepine. It should also help you sleep.”

—

AS WINTER TURNED into spring, the trees filled with leaves and animals shook their branches. With the change in season, my memory softened around the

edges.

In the weeks that followed, I floated through classes. I avoided Nate and locked myself in a Firestone study carrel as if it were a prison cell. I couldn't sleep without waking up in a cold sweat, so I avoided that too.

I no longer attended Greystone meetings. And because of the looks and questions, I avoided Sterling Club as well and ate alone in the dining hall.

The detectives were investigating, I told myself. At the very least, they would find out what Professor DuPont and Marsden had done and fire them. The evidence should be all over Lila's phone, which the police now had.

One day in April, Daisy, Kai, and I gathered around Cecily's computer. It was finally in *The Prince*:

ADMISSIONS OFFICER ACCUSED OF ACCEPTING MORE THAN \$500,000 IN BRIBES.

But weeks passed with nothing about Professor DuPont, and after Marsden was put on administrative leave, the news stories trickled away completely.

MAYA

June 2023

AFTER TELLING SIMMONS ABOUT THE ski trip, I feel lighter, like a weight I've been carrying with me has lifted. Of course, I had to leave out the part about the drugs. I didn't want to go to prison—I had my own daughter to think about. Instead, I focused on all the evidence Lila had on Matthew, the motive he'd had to get rid of her, to target Naomi if he got wind of her investigation. After running through the events of that winter, trying hard to remember it myself, I grow convinced there's something I'm missing.

My footsteps echo as I enter the cavernous McCosh Hall, pass the faculty lounge, and descend the warped stairs into the basement. Fluorescents flicker overhead in the dim hallway—a lot less glamorous down here.

When I reach the office of Naomi's thesis advisor, Fiona Williams, I pause, remembering her speech at the funeral. *Another young woman silenced in her grave.* A noise makes me jump. Movement behind the frosted glass door. Steadying myself, I give the door a light rap. The handle turns slowly, and Fiona peers out of a narrow crack, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Professor Williams. My name is Maya Banks. I saw you at the funeral... I'm Naomi Mason's sister." Recognition flashes across her face, and she hurries me inside.

“I THOUGHT YOU might have been one of those kids again,” Fiona says, setting the pepper spray back on her desk. “The ones that broke into my office.” The small room smells of cinnamon candles and wet cat. Her desk is littered with mugs of tea, and a kettle gurgles on a small side table. Bookshelves line the back wall with books of all sizes, some upright, others stacked haphazardly. She moves aside a stack of papers before gesturing for me to sit. Behind her, I notice an English literature PhD diploma. It was her, I realize—@FWPhD—who had left the Twitter comment: *When it’s one of us it’s an “accident.”*

“Tell me, Maya, why are you here?” A thick eyebrow arches above her keen eyes.

“I—I had some questions and I thought I’d stop by. I hope that’s okay.”

She studies me. The kettle whistles. Fiona stands and shuts it off.

As I look around the room, my eyes catch on a turquoise ottoman and a pair of yellow eyes peering out from underneath it.

“That’s Rochester. Don’t mind him,” she says, without turning around. The small black cat hisses before scuttling behind the furniture. Fiona raises the kettle. “Would you like some?”

“No, thank you.”

She pours her tea and sets the kettle down on her desk. “There’s something I need to show you.” Fiona turns her back to me, rummages through her office, and pulls out a phone.

On the screen is a message from Naomi: *Have to cancel our Friday meeting. I think someone is following me. Going to stay with a friend.*

Fiona pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “She was scared. I didn’t realize how bad it was...”

“Was it Matthew DuPont?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you told the police?”

“They took my statement once and haven’t called since.” She sighs. “I’m not sure how much you know, but given you just asked about Matthew, I’m guessing you’ve got the gist of things. Naomi found out about a number of crimes Matthew was involved in. And not just him, it involved others, his

friends, his new fiancée too. Naomi had a plan to make sure they couldn't continue committing them."

"A plan for what exactly?"

"Keep this between us, but your sister was helping a journalist at the *Times*. I'll see if I can find out who. They were going to expose *everyone*."

The awful feeling rises again. I swallow hard.

"This wasn't the first time a student has come to me for help," she says, sadly. "And I'm sorry to see that it's cost another young woman her life."

MAYA

May 2012

AS THE MONTHS PASSED, I became better able to tuck away our secret in a dark confine of my mind. The air warmed, the trees outside Nassau Hall filled with leaves, and classes went on as usual.

—

EVENTUALLY, I TOLD Nate about that weekend. Well, brushing around the edges of what I'd done, of course. It felt wrong, not telling him the full truth, but if I told him about the drugs and my role in what happened to Lila, what would he think of me then?

On those warm weekends in May, Nate and I escaped to New York City, wandering around the Met, talking for hours in Central Park, and walking through the city until our feet hurt. He took me to a jazz bar in Harlem, an Italian restaurant in the Bronx. We drank beer on the Lower East Side, leafed through paperbacks in the West Village, and browsed flea markets in Chelsea. I felt safe with him there.

Of course, when we came back to campus, the protective cloud would dissipate, and my memories would crowd in—the cabin, the snowstorm, the sheet pulled over Lila's body—and I'd be sick with guilt once again. What

had we done? What had *I* done? Had *I* killed her by dispensing the drugs, or was my fear, my silence, allowing a guilty man to walk free?

Over the following months I grew obsessed with Professor DuPont. Knowing everything about him. Where he was, who he was with...maybe as a way to offload some of the shame. Though he'd stepped back from his involvement with Sterling after the Marsden scandal, he was still on campus—and being anywhere near him put me on edge, now that I knew his true nature.

My memory of Lila ran through everything: dewy spring mornings as I walked to class, afternoons curled by Nate's side as he plucked out a few familiar chords on his guitar. Late at night, I'd whip around, convinced someone was standing there in the shadows. I'd see a flash of red hair disappear under an archway, hear the sound of her laugh floating through the halls, feel her watching me. For the rest of my time at Princeton and whenever I returned, she would be there. And so, too, would the guilt.

—

ONE DAY IN May, when junior year was coming to a close, I was reading on my bed when I was startled by an urgent knock on the door. Cecily sprang into my room. She had to step over boxes and open suitcases spread out over the small floor to make her way to the bed. I was still finishing packing for the summer break.

"I have a brilliant idea," she said, a grin spread over her face.

I looked up from my book. "Oh god, what is it?"

"Let's fly your sister out for the summer, instead of you going back to her. She can stay at my brother's place. I just talked to his wife, Margaret. They have more than enough rooms."

Last week, I'd told Cecily how Naomi's situation had gotten worse. The neighbor had gotten more involved. Twice, when my aunt Ella was at work late, social services had come to the house, asking questions.

I had to do something. I couldn't lose Naomi to the state. If they took her, she'd end up with a foster family with a bunch of kids she didn't know. Odds

were that she'd be bullied and neglected, and I couldn't let that happen.

I even considered turning down Fuller's internship offer at Goldman Sachs to live with Naomi in California instead, to try and get the social worker off Aunt Ella's back.

But when I told Cecily, she'd said, *But you worked so hard to get that internship. You can't turn it down.* She offered to lend me enough money to help Naomi. *It's not a big deal*, she'd insisted, but I'd been so flustered, I'd immediately said no.

"Wait," I said to her now, "you want Naomi to live at your brother's place? Just her and them? For the entire summer?" The idea was so unfathomable it hadn't crossed my mind. Greenwich also didn't seem like somewhere Naomi would feel comfortable.

"No, silly," she said, hopping onto the bed, tucking one leg under her. "You and I would go too! You wouldn't have to pay city rent while you work for Goldman, and you could be with your sister too."

"I can't—"

"I'll pay for it. Her flight, her food. All of it," she said, placing a hand on my knee. "Look, it's just for the summer. My brother and his wife host me every year. They don't have kids, and they like to have people in the house. The three of us would be a welcome addition and give them something to do other than play tennis and golf. Trust me. It's perfect."

—

I DIDN'T THINK too deeply about it. Naomi desperately needed a better situation, and this made sense. So Naomi, who was eleven at the time, flew by herself cross-country.

I was asking a flight attendant when the flight was expected to arrive when Naomi walked out with a backpack almost as big as she was. When she saw me, a huge grin spread over her face. I ran to her and threw my arms around her. "You made it!" I said, squeezing her tight, wondering how I'd left her with Aunt Ella for so long, and promising never to leave her again.

THAT SUMMER IN Greenwich was the best summer of my life. Cecily stayed there too, and Daisy and Kai visited often.

The days passed in a blur, too perfect to be real. We spent our days swimming in the saltwater pool, drinking frozen lemonade, and eating desserts, and our evenings reading by the fire or watching old movies and saying the lines out loud. *Practical Magic* was Naomi's favorite, and for several days afterward, we pretended to be the witch sisters, Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman, making margaritas and dancing around the kitchen in our pajamas.

It was a strange and magical time. It felt wrong to be happy again, after what had happened. *But*, I reminded myself, I had done what I'd set out to do. I'd built a better life for Naomi.

AS THE DAY of her return flight approached, Naomi drew inward.

"Please don't make me go back. I want to stay here with you forever," she said, softly.

Her words brought tears to my eyes. I wanted her to stay here too, at least on the East Coast...There had to be a way.

Margaret and John had already been so generous to let us stay with them all summer. Margaret had taken us on trips into the city, showing us her favorite delis, buying us front-row seats at Broadway plays. She introduced us to the talented dancer Misty Copeland backstage after American Ballet Theatre's *Firebird*, bought us clothes at vintage stores, and pointed out her favorite Vermeer painting at the Met. We'd laughed when Naomi had had her first taste of champagne at the "secret" bar, inhaled in surprise, and giggled as it came dripping out of her nose.

"Okay," I said to Naomi.

She looked up. "Okay?"

I laughed at her shocked expression and took her hand. “You want to stay; we’ll find a way to make it happen.” I didn’t have a plan yet, but I couldn’t let her go back. I knew with Margaret’s help, and Cecily’s, we would make this work.

AFTER WE DISCUSSED the options, Margaret asked if it would be okay with me if she and John were to petition the court to be Naomi’s legal guardians for the year, just until I graduated in May.

“Naomi loves it here,” I told her, after accepting her offer, and she hugged me. “Thank you.”

SENIOR YEAR CAME and went, and I visited Naomi in Greenwich often. She was happy, really happy. One Saturday in May, Margaret invited me over to the house. Naomi was in the backyard with her friends, practicing a dance they’d learned.

“We’re really looking forward to your graduation,” Margaret said. “Are you excited, love?”

“Very.” I tried to smile. I was excited, but I was also nervous. At the end of my internship last summer, Goldman Sachs had offered me a job in sales, but every day I showed up at the office, sat in my cubicle with the other interns, I felt myself slipping. They cared about investments and building their portfolio and it just wasn’t me. I felt like a fraud.

But if I quit, how would I support Naomi?

Margaret read my apprehension. “Everything all right?”

I sighed, set down my tea. “Yeah...I’m just nervous about being able to support Naomi on my own. And what if she’s not as happy with me as she is here...” My voice trailed off.

“It’s not something you have to decide right away,” Margaret said. “We love Naomi, and are happy to have her here as long as you need.”

She explained how she and John always wanted children but couldn’t

have any of their own, how in that short year, Naomi had become like a daughter to them.

ON THE DAY of my commencement, the three of them stood in the crowd with so many flowers that the people next to them had to move over to give them extra room. While Margaret and Naomi had collected the flowers from Margaret's garden, John had gone out and printed giant cutout heads of me, Cecily, Daisy, and Kai. When I received my diploma and looked out at the crowd, he and Naomi were holding them, bobbing the faces in the air as they cheered.

That night after graduation, we went back to Greenwich to celebrate.

Margaret had baked us a raspberry cake and let us eat it on paper plates while we swam in the pool.

"Push off with your legs and aim down!" Cecily said. I looked over at Naomi standing at the edge of the diving board, her arms held overhead. Our half-eaten slices of cake were scattered around the edge of the pool along with margaritas and champagne. "You ready?" Cecily shouted.

Naomi's little face was scrunched in focus. "Ready!"

Cecily counted down. "Three! Two! One—"

Naomi sprang off the diving board, belly flopped onto the water with a loud *slap*, and surfaced seconds later, gasping for air and then bursting into giggles.

The moonlight was silvery and rippling over the surface of the water, the wet skin on Naomi's cheeks sparkling with tiny droplets as she laughed, and for the first time in my life, I felt complete: I'd given Naomi the life she deserved. That was when I decided not to take over as Naomi's guardian. She was happy here. For the time being, the best I could offer her was a couch bed in a studio apartment in an overcrowded city—that was nothing compared to this. She'd been through enough, and she deserved space to run and swim in a pool and be a kid.

As I watched her, I realized I had to accept that what my friends and I had done was in the past and couldn't be changed. Trying to do anything about it now would ruin this life I'd built.

And for my sister's happiness, I could do anything. I could live with our secret. I could hold it inside forever.

NAOMI

April 2023, one month before her death

FOR SEVERAL DAYS AFTER AMY'S YourFans video was projected to the class, she refused to eat or leave her room, and every time I saw her, her eyes were swollen from crying.

"It's all over the internet," she says the following Saturday, when she finally emerges. "I'm going to lose my job offer at the *Times*."

I hand her another tissue. "Stop, don't say that." But I remember all the conversations we've had about what this job meant to her. It was the only thing keeping her here, the only thing giving her hope.

Of course, the university had been concerned when they found out about the incident, but Amy refused their offers to investigate. She was too embarrassed to worry about how it happened and just wanted to hide until it blew over.

"It's not the end of the world," I tell her. "No one knew it was a random stranger on YourFans...they probably just thought the guy was your boyfriend." But she only cries harder. "We can explain why you did it," I try. "You needed the money to pay for school. Not everyone has million-dollar trust funds lying around."

Amy shakes her head. "It's not going to matter why I did it," she says through her sobs. "It's out there. It's out there forever."

Suddenly I remember that someone had stolen her laptop a few weeks ago. She'd left it on the coffee table, she thought, but when she got back, it was gone, and there was no sign of a break-in. "Amy...do you think they found the videos on your laptop?"

She looks up. "They could have. I wasn't worried about our research—it was saved to the cloud—and I wiped it remotely the second I realized it was gone...but I guess whoever took it had already found my YourFans account." She drops her head and starts to cry again, and I know nothing I say is going to make it better.

—

AT EIGHT A.M. the next morning, I wake with a start to a loud sound. I find Amy in the common area staring at her laptop, pale and unmoving. When I ask her what's wrong, she shows me the email she received from the *Times*.

Ms. Chen,

We are grateful for your time and dedication over the past year. However, we hold our employees to a high standard of behavior in and out of the office. It has come to our attention that you have created explicit sexual content for the site YourFans, and while it is well within your rights to do so, it is not an appropriate image for our company. I hope you will understand. We wish you the very best in your future endeavors.

Best regards,
Tina Davenport
Director of Human Resources

A few minutes later, Tina from HR follows up with a kind phone call, which Amy keeps on speaker so Zee and I can hear. Tina explains that, sadly, the video was seen as pornography, and they *can't have a sex industry*

worker on staff, at least not in this political climate. She had nothing against it, herself, of course, but the men in her office were deeply offended.

“Jesus Christ, who are these ‘deeply offended’ men?” Zee says, after Amy hangs up the call. “I don’t understand why men in America are so freaked out by women’s bodies. It’s just a goddamned nipple.”

As if Amy’s firing isn’t enough of a blow, with no support from the *Times*, we’ll have to stop the investigation into DuPont as well. It feels like we’ve failed. Failed Lila, failed the *Times*, failed ourselves. As my head begins to throb, I leave Amy and Zee in the common room and retreat into my bedroom, shut the door, and sit on my bed in the dark.

—

THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND Liam is away for a tennis tournament, so it is the rare night I spend alone in my bed. I’ve gotten so used to sleeping over at his place that it feels weird to be in my own bed, mindlessly scrolling through my phone.

I set my phone down and reach over to pull the flight itinerary from my desk. Two tickets to Croatia to live on a small boat and sail the Dalmatian Islands. Leaving May 31, the day after commencement.

Last night, he’d surprised me with them.

“Hopefully our travel styles match up,” he’d said.

“You like sleeping in until four and going to Drum & Bass dance clubs all night, right?” I teased.

He laughed. “You know, with you, it doesn’t sound all that bad.” Liam looked at me. “I couldn’t stand the thought of not seeing you every day. I missed you last summer, and this time I want to get it right. I want to spend the entire summer with you.” I felt my heart expanding in my chest.

I hadn’t gone out of the country until I lived with Margaret and John. And still, travel seemed magical to me; I would always feel that seeing the world was not something to be taken for granted.

I had never been to Croatia, never lived on a boat, and I had never been on a trip with someone I liked this much.

“If you agree to one thing,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“No checked bags.”

Liam grinned. “Easy.”

He kissed me, pushing me back onto the bed. I pulled my shirt over my head and was beginning to tug on his when he took my face in his hands. “I’m falling in love with you.”

My mouth opened, but no words came out. “Wait.” I felt so many things at once, and one of those things was panic as I thought back to the last time I’d said those words. “I—” I started to say it back, but he gently brushed a curl away from my cheek.

“It’s okay.”

I smiled at him. “I...like you so much...”

He kissed me. “I know.”

—

MY PHONE VIBRATES on my desk and I glance at the screen, surprised to see a text, not from Liam, but from Ben. *I know it’s none of my business...*

I ignore it, of course. But then it vibrates again, so I sigh and look at the screen—but *I just thought this was weird*. He’s sent a picture this time, and when I see it, I go still.

There’s a picture of Liam in a cloister on campus with Professor DuPont.

I enlarge the photo to see the object passed between them. It’s a laptop. A laptop with a Totoro sticker on it. It’s Amy’s stolen laptop. The sight of it makes me go cold.

What were they doing with her laptop?

My head spins as I remember—Liam borrowed my key back in December. He could have made a copy, and, oh god. The implication of this is almost too much to bear: *Had DuPont enlisted Liam to find out how much we knew?*

MAYA

July 2023, one month later

I'M LYING IN BED NEXT to Nate, when my phone lights up on the bedside table and I roll over to look at the screen. It's a message from Daisy: *We're going to miss you this weekend. Still time to change your mind!* And with it she's sent a photo of swimsuits and other vacation items spread out on her bed.

They are going to the British Virgin Islands for Kai's bachelorette party, and I was supposed to go with them, but I had told her I couldn't go. I just don't have the strength right now.

Sighing, I scroll through my email. Messages about the gallery show. Condolences from other moms at Dani's school. And then one that catches my eye. It's from someone named Trevor Jones.

Hi Maya,

I'm sorry to reach out like this—I got your email from the alumni directory, I hope that's okay. Anyway, I heard what happened to your sister...I'm so sorry. No one can understand what you're going through, but having lost my sister, too, I can imagine some of the pain.

The next sentence makes the blood drain from my face: *My sister, Lila, was in Sterling Club with you...* Oh god, Trevor, *Trevor Jones*...Lila's brother. He must have been a teenager when she died. My heart beats faster, and a wave of dizziness makes the words swim on the screen. When my eyes focus again, I keep reading, more hurriedly now.

Anyway, I feel really weird emailing you like this, especially with everything you're going through, but...I just thought you should know, Naomi got in touch with me the week before she died. She wanted to talk about Lila...

My stomach drops. Had Naomi found out what happened to Lila? How much did she know? I'm overcome with guilt. How had she gotten tangled up in this mess? Was it the reason she died?

I hope this doesn't make things harder. But she asked me if I had ever spoken to the Sterling Club housekeeper, Marta Koval? I told her I had...and Marta didn't know anything, but Naomi seemed convinced she had some sort of evidence. Do you know anything about that?

Sorry to bother you. Again, I'm so sorry for your loss. If you ever want to talk, I'm around. You can reach me at 609-555-2639.

Kind regards,
Trevor

Do I call Detective Simmons? Marta? No. Marta has worked for Sterling Club for decades. She never came forward about anything after the ski trip either, so I'd always thought I'd misunderstood her intentions all those years ago when I thought she was trying to help Lila.

Daisy. Daisy would know what to do. And I had to see her in person.

—

“I’M SO GLAD you decided to come,” Kai says. She’s sprawled on a towel on the sundeck of the boat wearing a white bikini, her bronze skin shimmering with sunscreen.

I smile at her, trying to hide the anxiety eating away at my insides. “Me too.” Trevor’s email had shaken me to my core. I needed to find out what evidence Marta had, and if any of my friends knew about it.

“It wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

We boarded *Xanadu* this morning—Cecily and Theodore’s seventy-foot yacht that they keep docked in the British Virgin Islands. They inherited it from Theodore’s father but hardly used it. Theodore was always busy meeting with clients all over the world, and Cecily seemed to be perfectly content with the freedom to do whatever she pleased.

We’re sailing from Baughers Bay, on the south side of Tortola, to Virgin Gorda Island. I should feel relaxed, surrounded by the pristine turquoise sea, but I don’t.

With a sigh, I gaze out at the water, the sea breeze blowing my hair from my face. I wish Naomi could have seen this place. She’d have dived right off the side of the boat.

“I’m going to get some more champagne,” Kai says, and goes inside the main cabin, leaving Daisy and me alone on the deck. This is my chance.

“I want to show you something. Come here.” I pull Daisy around the corner and show her the email Trevor sent me.

Daisy frowns as she reads it, and then she looks up at me. “Naomi talked to Marta?”

“Yeah, I guess she was in contact with her, and with Trevor, right before she died. I think she was trying to investigate what happened to Lila.”

Daisy frowns. “We should talk to Marta too, then.”

I shake my head. “No way. Marta’s worked for Greystone for decades. She’d go straight to Matthew.”

I hear Kai and Cecily emerge from the cabin. They’re laughing and have turned up the music. They’re out of earshot, and the wind is loud, but they’re just around the corner from where Daisy and I are standing. Daisy lowers her

voice. “Look at what he said. Naomi was *convinced*. She must have found something. I’m going to reach out to Marta.”

Kai calls out Daisy’s name, and she turns to go back. I grab her arm. “We can’t.”

“What’s going on here?” Kai asks, appearing behind Daisy with two glasses of champagne. She eyes my phone suspiciously, and I turn off the screen.

“Nothing,” I say quickly, forcing a smile. “Just...worrying about the girls.”

Kai tilts her head to one side and studies me. “Okay...” She hands me the second glass.

But as we walk back out to the sundeck, Kai leans in and whispers to me. “I heard you mention your sister...”

I look at her. She looks worried.

“I didn’t know how to tell you, and you had enough to worry about...but it feels wrong not to say something.” She hesitates. “Your sister came to talk to me a couple of months before she died.” Kai looks to the side, then back at me. “She was asking about the ski trip.” Kai hesitates. “I thought I convinced her to drop it, but—I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t.” Her voice trails off.

Cecily appears suddenly behind Kai, holding an empty glass of champagne. “Who else is hungry?”

Feeling lightheaded, I follow Kai and sit down on a towel next to Daisy as Cecily goes back inside. I close my eyes and try to make sense of what Kai’s told me as the noise around me elevates: the dark festival music, the wind, the waves crashing against the side of the boat, the gulls shrieking overhead. Why did Naomi go to Kai? Why didn’t she come to me?

I turn to Kai. “We should tell Detective Simmons.”

Daisy lifts her head. “Tell her what?”

“Refreshments are here!” Cecily emerges from the cabin in a bikini and sarong, holding a plate of prosciutto and melon, and a bottle of champagne.

I turn to Kai, remembering where we are. “I’m sorry. We don’t have to talk about this right now. I’ll tell her when we get back.”

Kai nods. “I know you want answers. But you may not get the answer you’re looking for.”

“There he is!” Cecily says as one of the crew members emerges holding a tray of canapés. He’s attractive with deeply tanned skin and hazel eyes like Nate’s.

“Can I interest any of you in some canapés?” And he’s Australian. I glance at his name tag—*Jax*. He looks like a Jax.

I watch as Cecily flirts with him. This morning before they knew I was awake, I’d overheard Cecily telling Kai how Theo’s been away on business in London for weeks and wondered if their marriage had been suffering.

Kai stands up on the deck, holding on to the thin railing. “I know what we need.” Her face is flushed from the champagne. “Who wants to bring out the Jet Skis?”

—

THERE ARE ONLY four jet skis, and there are five of us, including Jax, whom they’ve invited, so naturally, Cecily and Jax share one.

“All right, there’s another boat out that way, so keep clear, but besides that the waves are perfect right now,” Jax says. “Brake’s on the left. But remember, it’s not a motorcycle, give it a good ten meters. And when the waves are big like this, go straight into the crest.”

Cecily rides behind him in her nearly sheer bikini, hands wrapped around his waist. A motor revs behind me and Kai howls and takes off. The others go after her. I press the lever for the gas and the Jet Ski lurches forward. My friends are tiny dots in the distance. *How did they get so far ahead?* I press down harder, watching the speed dial go from 20 mph to 25 to 30. How fast does this thing go? Knowing Theodore’s love of sports cars, it’s probably custom-designed to go faster than most. I thud over the waves, salt water spraying my face. It’s exhilarating. A rush of adrenaline every time I hit a crest that makes me forget everything else for a moment. At top speed, the bottom of the Jet Ski skids over the water, wind whipping against my bare skin. I scream and hold on tight.

Minutes later, I catch up to them. Kai and Daisy are riding the wake of a speedboat, swerving back and forth in front of me while Jax guns his Jet Ski next to the boat, racing it. He's standing as Cecily holds on tight. They must be going at least thirty-five miles per hour, drifting precariously closer to it.

I brace myself as my Jet Ski tilts sideways, dropping into the wake of the boat, and glance down at the speedometer—48...49...50, my pulse rising with it. All of a sudden, a scream rips through the air. I look up. Cecily is pointing at something up ahead. A massive black yacht had appeared out of nowhere. And it's moving fast. They're going to crash right into it.

"Watch out!" I scream.

The speedboat up ahead must have let off the gas to avoid the yacht because the stern is growing larger. Its massive engine and propellers coming at me. Fast.

Panic rips through me as I yank the handlebars hard and lean into the turn. But I take it too hard. The wake slams up against the bottom of the Jet Ski, throwing me off the saddle. Everything happens fast: the Jet Ski jerks sideways, slipping from under me. I fly into the air, suspended, weightless.

And suddenly I'm plunged into the sea. A low-key roar. Water burns my nose, fills my throat, my ears, tiny bubbles everywhere. I'm disoriented by the water rushing in every direction, but I force my eyes open and find a ray of light flickering overhead. With a surge of adrenaline, I crawl toward it until my head breaches the surface. I gasp.

Everything is quiet for a moment and I hear the deep thud of my heart. But then a loud ringing. Louder and louder.

Disoriented, I look around for Cecily. The yacht is speeding over the spot where she'd been. *Oh god.* I twist my body around and spot their Jet Ski on its side, being tossed around by the waves like a broken toy boat.

—

MY HEART is racing as I climb back onto my jet ski and surge in their direction. The first thing I see is a woman crying hysterically on the boat that hit them. Her hand is over her mouth and she's pointing a shaky finger at her

husband, yelling at him in French. “Mon dieu! Regardes ce qui s’est passé. You shouldn’t have been drinking!”

There’s no sign of Daisy, Cecily, or Kai.

I cut the engine, sick with adrenaline. “Where are they? Where are my friends?”

But the couple isn’t listening to me. Instead, the man stares at the damage with a look of horror, running his hands through his hair. “Putain. C’est ta faute.” *This is your fault.*

I take in the damaged Jet Ski and dread sweeps over me.

The couple stops arguing. They look at me. “Your friends,” the woman says in English, out of breath. “There.” She points to the back of the boat.

Daisy emerges from behind them. “Maya. Everyone’s okay.” The tension flushes from my body. Thank god.

When I see Cecily seated in the cockpit, shivering as Daisy cleans a bloody cut above Jax’s eye, I can’t help but wonder if this really was an accident. There seem to be too many of those these days.

—

THAT EVENING, EVERYONE is too shaken up to eat. we’re huddled at the table as the dying sun casts a golden glow through the cabin. Cecily stares blankly at the horizon as Daisy texts her husband and daughter.

“He said something was wrong with it,” Kai says when she returns from talking to Jax. He’d offered to take a look at the broken Jet Ski. “The throttle was stuck.” She takes a seat next to Cecily.

“Do you think someone wanted that to happen?” I ask.

Daisy and I exchange a nervous glance. I know Theodore and Matthew did business together. He’d likely hosted him on this boat earlier this summer, like he did every year. Could Matthew have gotten access to the Jet Skis?

Or am I being paranoid?

Everyone falls silent, and suddenly the air feels tense, the movement of the boat nauseating.

“What makes you say that?” Daisy asks, looking at me.

I shake my head. “I’m overthinking it.”

Kai lifts her head. “You think it was tampered with?”

“It’s weird,” I say, after a moment. “I can’t help but think someone meant for that to happen.”

They go still. For a moment, no one says a word. Then Daisy speaks. “But...they would have tampered with all of them, not just the one, right?” she says. “It would have been impossible to know which of us would get it.”

I look at her. “Right.” But as I see Jax in the distance, obviously listening in, I can’t rid myself of the feeling.

—

THAT NIGHT WHEN I’m getting ready for bed, there’s a knock at the door. The space is small, low ceilings and half-sized doors, so I have to close the bathroom door in order to open the one that leads to the main cabin.

I find Cecily on the other side. She looks pale. “Can I talk to you?”

I nod and step back to let her in. “Of course.”

The cabin is so small that I have to sit on the edge of the bed. I’d planned on reading, so the only light in the room is the one directed at the pillow.

“I don’t think you were being paranoid.” Cecily hesitates, bites her lip. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened to your sister, and there’s something that happened the week before she died that you should probably know about.”

“The week before...wasn’t that the Legacy Foundation event?” I’d missed that event because Dani was sick. I remember Cecily, Kai, and Daisy had gotten a table together.

Cecily nods. “You remember Sara, Matthew’s fiancée? She was there... and she was drinking more than usual. I mean, we all were, but she was noticeably tipsy...and not in a good way.”

I picture Matthew’s fiancée tipping back glass after glass at the party. Those events tended to go all night and have an open bar...the looser the guests, the more generous they’re willing to be with their donations.

“Well, sometime after dinner, I went out to the balcony to get some air and I saw them in the corner, arguing. I wanted to listen, so I got closer, and it sounded like Sara was saying something about an affair with a student. How he’d lost his temper and done something awful. And you know those kinds of rumors have followed Matthew around even back when we were at school. And you said yourself Naomi was acting strangely those last few months...”

She goes quiet, and her words hang in the air between us. I can feel my heart thudding behind my ribs. The only window is no bigger than the size of my palm, and I’m suddenly aware of the lack of oxygen.

The way Cecily is looking at me, I can tell we’re thinking the same thing: Could it have been Naomi?

NAOMI

May 2023, one week before her death

LEARNING LIAM WAS WORKING WITH DuPont feels like a blow to the center of my chest. I can hardly sleep more than a few hours at a time. Nothing feels real. And *why*—why didn't I see it? His father had been in Greystone, his mother a major donor to the Legacy Foundation. Why did I think Liam would be different?

I lie in bed with this churning, bitter feeling inside me until with a burst of anger, I send Liam the photo, and a few seconds later, my phone vibrates. I won't answer. I can't.

Seizing the phone and silencing it, I hurl it across the room.

—

ZEE CONVINCES ME to get dinner with her, and when we return later that evening, I'm surprised to find Liam sitting in the hall. When I call out his name, he doesn't turn to look at me. His body is in shadow and I can't see his eyes, but I can tell he looks disheveled in his wrinkled shirt and slacks, head tipped back against the wall, empty bottle next to him as if he'd passed out and spent the night there.

"Liam?" I say again. Zee and I exchange a look. Something's not right. The air is too still. As we approach, the stench of alcohol reaches my nostrils.

My heart beats faster. He's wasted.

"What are you doing here?" I say, louder, holding my ground.

He lifts his head and grins. His eyes are bloodshot. "Naomi."

Zee raises her eyebrows, likely sensing the tension between us. "I'll let you two do whatever this is." She motions between us. "I'm here if you need me."

As she retreats into our suite, she throws a look of concern over her shoulder. *I'm not going anywhere*, it says. *I'll be right inside*.

"It's fine," I tell her. But is it? Is it fine? When he's betrayed me like this? And surely, *surely* he will try to come up with an excuse to make me doubt myself like he always does. I remember the nights spent in his bed, the deep conversations, tearing open my soul—*lies*, all of it.

I reach out and steady myself against the wall, take a deep breath. Once Zee's footsteps fade into our room, I turn to face Liam, every hair on the back of my neck rising. "What do you want?"

I wait for him to respond, but as I take him in, I feel sorry for him. He looks awful. His hair is greasy. His head hung, posture deflated. It's like someone has used him as a punching bag and dumped him here. I feel a rush of irrational hope. Maybe there's a rational explanation.

"I miss you," Liam slurs. *I miss you*. His words cut straight into my heart. I feel a pull before I stop myself. *No*.

Liam stands and shoves his hands into his pockets, looking at me like he'd expected this confession to fix everything. His jaw is working. He's walking drunkenly, wavering toward me. Instinctively, I take a step back.

"Naomi," he says, reaching for me, and unable to stand it, I put up a hand.

"I can't do this right now."

The picture said enough—he'd handed DuPont Amy's laptop—he'd betrayed me. There's nothing else to it.

But this is the first time I've seen him since, and a part of me thinks, *He wouldn't do that to me*. A part of me is desperate for it to have been some kind of mistake. Because despite everything, I still care about him.

"It wasn't what it looked like," Liam says, louder, desperate. His eyes flash with an emotion: Regret?

“So what was it?”

Liam shakes his head, a lock of hair falling over his eyes. “You don’t understand. My tennis. Matthew is the reason I’m here—”

I stare at him, confused. “You’re here because you trained with the best coaches in the country and because you’re a fourth-generation legacy, Liam.” We’d had many conversations about this. These elite coaches had gone to *him*, not the other way around. He’d said it was the only thing that made his father proud.

He pushes a hand through his hair. “Those coaches only taught me because of DuPont. My father knew him through Greystone and now serves on the board of his company. DuPont got into some trouble years ago when he bet on a risky medtech company. When the truth broke that they were lying to investors, my father helped him inflate the stock enough for DuPont to get out. To return the favor, DuPont pulled strings to convince my coach to train me. Why else would that caliber coach train a wimpy kid from Rye? And without tennis, I *wouldn’t* have gotten in here. Not even as a legacy.” He lets out a sad laugh.

It feels like I’ve been struck. I stand there, stunned, for several seconds as I waver for a moment between feeling sorry for Liam and confused, before anger floods my system. He was that close to DuPont? Since he was a kid? A *wimpy kid from Rye*. More like a trust-fund nepo kid. His whole life was orchestrated by a monster. Two, if you consider his dad. I can hardly breathe. It feels like I’m drowning.

Liam moves closer, and I stiffen. “So you did this for DuPont because he got you into this school, he helped you save face with your dad growing up?” My vision blurs as tears sting my eyes, and I fight to hold it together. I think again of Amy’s laptop. What I thought was us getting back together was bullshit. Liam’s only interest in me was my connection to Amy and her investigation. He’d lied to me. He’d *used* me. Each realization is like a needle digging into my heart.

“Look, just let it go, okay? We’re leaving all this anyway.”

I remember the tickets to Croatia sitting on my desk. The words he’d finally said, the ones I’d been waiting years to hear: *I’m falling in love with*

you.

But...

How *could* he? How *dare* he say that to me? And to think how badly I'd wanted to say it back. Knowing what I do now, I'm sure as hell glad I didn't.

"You." I glare at Liam, hoping to convey all the rage and hurt spiraling through me. "Are a *liar*. A selfish piece of shit."

Liam takes a step forward, face twisting. He's breathing hard, a vein pulsing at his temple. "Listen." He grabs my arm, hard, and I fight him. But he's stronger than me. "I didn't mean to get involved. I didn't want to." He pauses. "But that day we met at the Sterling library...when I told you about the investigation, it was already too late. DuPont knew your roommate was working with someone at the *Times*. He asked me to talk to you."

"Asked you?" I yank my arm free, but Liam jerks me back.

"Yeah."

I shove him, and Liam forces me back, harder than expected, and my head slams into the wall. Pain radiates from the back of my neck to the crown of my head, and I nearly cry out.

"I trusted you." I can barely say it, and before I know what's happening, tears are streaming down my cheeks.

Liam takes a step back. I'm so angry I can't look at him. My hands are shaking, head throbbing as I try to unlock the door, fumbling with my keys.

"Naomi, wait," he says, trying to stop me. "I'm sorry—"

I throw my arms up and shrink away from him. "No. You can fuck off. Get out!"

Undoing the lock, I yank open the door and burst in, relieved when it slams shut behind me. My heart is pounding fast. My head filled with a searing pain. If Matthew did all this to prevent the story from coming out, was he the one who'd hurt Lila? Or had it been my sister?

In my bedroom, I collapse onto the bed, eyes stinging with tears, and reach into my purse for my medication—I won't be able to sleep without it—but it's not there. Furious, I slam the purse down and yell out in pain.

MAYA

July 2023

ON TUESDAY, WHEN I GET back from Kai's bachelorette, I reach out to Margaret for Sara's number—they know each other from Legacy Foundation events—and she puts me in touch with Sara's assistant, who tells me she has a meeting in the city this morning. When I press her, she accidentally lets slip that it's with the producer behind her latest show.

I look up his company and go to the address near Union Square. As I wait outside, pretending to sip my coffee, my mind spins from what Cecily told me: Sara was acting strange the *weekend* before my sister died. She'd accused Matthew of having an affair with one of his students, said he'd lost his temper...What if he did the same thing to Naomi that he'd done to Lila?

By nine-thirty, my coffee is cold, and I'm about to leave for work when I see Sara walk out the revolving door talking to a man in a suit and take off up Park Avenue. I follow them, staying a good fifty feet behind, until she breaks off from the man and walks to the nearest subway station on 28th Street. Heart racing, I hurry down the stairs after her. When I'm close enough for her to hear, I call out her name, but she doesn't turn around, and she disappears around a corner a few seconds later.

I make it to the platform as the train is about to leave. Morning commuters jockey for space as I shove my way past, trying to get to her, but the flow of people is going in the opposite direction. I panic as I lose sight of

her again, but then I see a flash of blond hair as she slips into the last car. Running for her car, I arrive as the train is about to leave, reach from the platform into the subway car and grab her sleeve. “Sara!”

She looks at me like I’m human-sized vermin and yanks her sleeve out of my grasp as the doors slam shut. Her eyes lock on mine as the train pulls away, and I watch it grow smaller and smaller as it slips from the station, taking Sara with it.

—

BY NOON, I’VE had two large coffees to make up for the lack of sleep and am so jittery I don’t think I’ll make it through the day. When I get a free moment, I step outside the gallery and dial Sara’s direct number, which Margaret found for me later. It rings and goes to voicemail, so I text her instead: *Hi Sara, this is Maya Banks. Please give me a call—it’s important.*

I sigh and lean my head against the wall. I’m exhausted, and the longer this search for answers goes on, the more I think I might lose it completely.

A moment later, my phone rings. I pick it up right away. “Sara?” I cringe at my desperation.

I can hear someone on the other end of the line. Then Sara’s voice—impatient. “Yes...”

“Hi—it’s Maya Banks. I have to ask you something—did my sister and Matthew have a falling-out that you know of?”

A pause. “No, why?” I can sense the tension in her voice.

“Did she ever try to get in touch with you?” I inhale, wait.

She doesn’t respond. Her breathing is slow and steady, the awkwardness of the conversation seeping through the phone.

I wonder how she’d respond if I’d come right out and asked: *Did you think she and your fiancé were having an affair?* Maybe she does, and that’s why she’s being so cold. Or maybe that’s just how she is.

When she speaks again, her tone is derisive. “We’re private people, Maya, and in the past month, the police have come by our house multiple times, thanks to you.” She pauses, and I’m too shocked to reply. “You and your

sister have caused us enough problems. I'm sorry for your loss, but please, leave us alone." And she hangs up the line.

WHEN I GET home from work that evening, I expect Dani to run up and hug my waist like she usually does, but instead she is standing at the window holding her stuffed rabbit and staring down at the road as if in a trance. "Dani?" My first thought is that she's sick again—something's going around her summer school.

I set my purse down and clear a few stray toys off the ground before making my way to the kitchen and opening the refrigerator. "What do you want for dinner tonight?" All we have is frozen peas and chicken nuggets and I'm reminded of how I'm failing as a mother.

"I'm not that hungry, I had candy after school."

I look up. She's still at the window, staring down at the street with a blank expression. Dani is at that age where she can't stop asking questions. *Why don't dogs have families?* and *How come we can't have pancakes for dinner?* She hasn't been this quiet in months and the sight is a bit unnerving. "Dani? Where did you get—"

"Mama," she interrupts. "Why is that man waiting outside?"

A bolt of fear cuts straight to my heart.

"What man?" I make my way to her side, and that's when I see what she's staring at: on the street, directly outside our building, is a black SUV. From this distance, and the way the sun is reflecting off the glass, it's impossible to make out the driver's face—panic twists my insides, and my legs feel weak. "Dani, honey..." My jaw is tight as I force my voice to remain calm. "Get away from the window."

But instead of backing away, my daughter raises a hand to the glass and smiles.

I watch in horror for a moment before instinct takes hold and I sweep her into my arms and away from the window. "You listen to me when I tell you to do something."

Dani squirms in my arms. “Stop it—what are you doing? It’s the gummy bear man!”

I freeze. Set her down, as slowly, the realization hits me. *I had candy after school.* “Dani...who is that man?”

“He said he’s your friend. He said you’d be mad if we didn’t give you some too.” From her pocket she reveals another small pack of gummy bears with a folded piece of paper taped to the side. My hands shake as I unfold it to reveal a typed note: *Stay away from my family and I will stay away from yours.*

My stomach plummets. I grab my phone to dial the police, but by the time I return to the window to write down the license plate, the car is gone.

—

I HARDLY SLEEP that night and can barely function the next morning. At work, all I can think about is the man outside our window: I didn’t get a good look at him, but it had to have been Matthew...or someone he sent to intimidate us.

Last night, when I called the station, the detective took my statement over the phone and had me file a report. I was so panicked it was hard to remember what he looked like, and all Dani could recall was that he was “tall” and had “whitish skin.” I have an appointment to speak with them in person tomorrow.

After supervising the construction on a new section of the gallery, I don’t leave work until after dark, and on the train home, I can barely keep my eyes open. I’m conjuring up the image of the man outside our window, trying to picture his face, when the rattling of the seat makes me jerk upright. There’s no one else in the car. Outside, I read the sign for Broadway Junction—*shoot*, I must have fallen asleep and missed my stop.

As I exit the train, I remember the article I’d read about this station being one to avoid at night, and the unfamiliar surroundings make me nervous. I’m crossing over to the opposite platform, which is dark and empty, to wait for

the next train when I hear someone behind me, but when I glance over my shoulder, no one is there.

I pull my keys from my purse to hold between my knuckles as I walk quickly to the other platform. I've only seen one other person out here, and he didn't look like someone I wanted to talk to.

As I'm trying to calculate the amount of time it'll take to get home, movement in my periphery draws my attention. I turn, but the platform is empty, an abandoned newspaper floating by—maybe that's all it was.

But then, a noise: footsteps, approaching fast. And what happens next happens too fast for me to react: a heavy weight hits my shoulders, a body tight against mine, arms straitjacketing me, squeezing the air from my lungs. Matthew.

My blood spikes with adrenaline as I fight him, twisting around, but he's too strong.

Matthew curses under his breath and grabs both of my shoulders. "*What is wrong with you?*"

I firm my jaw. Look him in the eye. "I'm going to tell them." His fingers dig into my skin. I can't move. "I'm going to tell them what you did." I inhale sharply. "I already told Sara, the other day, when I saw her on my way to work." It's a lie, but by the way his expression falters, it looks like it had the desired effect.

His voice lowers. "Stay the hell away from her."

He points at my face and instinctively I reach up and shove his hand away.

He lunges forward in response, and I shrink back. He's forcing me toward the edge of the platform. Panic floods my system. "What are you—"

Two lights in the distance. The platform shakes with an incoming train. It feels like the whole world is rattling. My body. The inside of my skull.

"*Stop!*" I yell, struggling to tear away, but he doesn't let go. "*Help!*" But I don't have enough air in my lungs to shout.

"*Shut up,*" he commands. But I fight harder, shoving him with all my strength.

I slip from his grasp and stumble back, look down as my foot slips off the edge of the platform.

“This is your fault,” he hisses, and before I know what is happening, he grabs me. His hands wrap around me, fingers digging into my throat and, suddenly, I can’t. Breathe.

Falling forward, I tear at his hands, and as I resist, my vision swims, but there, in my hand, are my keys. The lights of the train grow brighter, brighter. The brakes are shrieking, wind tunneling around me, when with the last of my strength, I stab the key into his thigh and run for the exit as the screech of the train muffles his scream.

—

SOMEHOW I’VE LOST my phone in the struggle, so once I get to the police station, a couple of blocks away, I call Nate to let him know I’m okay. After assuring him I’ll be home as soon as I give a statement, I get called into a back room to meet with the detective.

“I’m Detective Gary.” Detective Gary sits across from me, a tall white man in his fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and tired eyes with gray, sagging skin beneath them, the gruff, macho kind of guy. “I’ve spoken to Detective Simmons about your case.”

I manage a nod. My heart is thudding fast, a giant moth trapped behind my rib cage.

“I’ll be recording this conversation.” Gary takes out a notepad and flips to a clean page. “Can you tell me what happened tonight?”

I force myself to meet the detective’s eyes. They’re not exactly kind. “A man named Matthew DuPont followed me in the train station and tried to push me onto the tracks.” It’s hard to keep my voice even.

Gary writes this down. “And, according to our records, this was the same person you reported yesterday?”

I nod. “Yes. That was around seven P.M. last night. I’d just gotten home from work, and there was a black SUV waiting outside our building. I’m pretty sure it was him.”

“Pretty sure...Did you get a good look at him?”

“No—but my daughter did—*my five-year-old girl*—and she said he gave her candy at school.” I hand him the note Dani gave me. “Matthew was threatening my daughter, and now he’s tried to kill me.”

Gary studies the note, then passes it to another officer who is standing by the door. “How do you know it was him outside your house?”

“After what happened tonight, who else would it have been? I want to press charges.”

“I understand.” Gary runs a hand over his chin. “We’re reviewing the CCTV footage.”

“Then you’ll see what I’m talking about.”

“Tell me, Ms. Banks.” Gary flips the page on his notebook. “What is the nature of your relationship with Mr. DuPont?”

I look at him strangely. What is he getting at? “He was my economics professor...My sister had a class with him too, and I think he found out that she was looking into a crime he was involved with.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I gave Detective Simmons her notebook, she had written about him.” Heat rushes to my face. Hadn’t she told him about it? “Naomi was working with a reporter at the *Times*. They were writing an article about him, trying to expose him, and he must have found out. He’s threatening us because I know it was him. He killed my sister.” I’m breathing hard as Gary writes this down. *He attacked me. I have evidence. We’ve got him.*

Gary exchanges a glance with the officer, then turns his attention back to me. “Ms. Banks...Ms. Vail and Mr. DuPont came into the station this morning. Ms. Vail claimed you were acting erratically, harassed her over the phone, followed her Tuesday morning and assaulted her in the 28th Street station. Does she have any basis for thinking this?”

My mouth feels dry. I swallow. Shake my head.

Gary sighs. “We’ll give you a call once we’ve reviewed the CCTV footage, but Ms. Banks, in the meantime, it is in your best interest to stay away from them. For your own sake.”

NAOMI

Tuesday, May 23, 2023, three days before her death

I ASKED BEN TO MEET me for breakfast at Sterling Club. I want to tell him that I tried to get in touch with DuPont's fiancée, maybe not to warn her exactly, but to see what she knows.

When I see Ben, he gives me a hug, but it's quick and casual, the kind of hug you'd give a friend. He knows I'm still hurting after finding out the truth about Liam, and I'm glad he's giving me space. I'm also glad he's not making me feel bad about this outcome...even though he'd predicted it.

"I've gotta show you this—you're not going to believe it," Ben says, after I sit down next to him. I wrap my hands around my coffee and look at his laptop, where a spreadsheet fills the screen. "After all the shit *someone* gave me for being treasurer of Sterling..." he teases. "I think I might have just found what you need."

I give him a look. "What is this?"

"The Sterling Club books. These are last year's Q3 numbers."

"Oh, wow."

"Perks of the job." Ben shrugs. "It's not really my job to keep track of payroll, but I have access to everything the accountants have. When you told me what you and Amy discovered, I decided to *follow the money*, as they say. So check this out..." He points to a line labeled *Marta Koval—Housekeeper*.

“Damn.” I blink hard and look at the number again. “She really makes that much?”

“Yeah.” Ben flips the laptop back to face him. “I know she’s worked for the club for a long time, but what housekeeper do you know that makes a six-figure salary? With bonuses?”

I shake my head in disbelief and look at Ben. “Okay, so what are you thinking...”

“Marta was the one who panicked when Lila’s brother reached out to her, right?” Ben asks excitedly, like he’s about to win a bet.

I nod.

“Well, look at this particular bonus. It’s around the same time the emails leaked. My guess is DuPont paid her to keep quiet. I bet she’s got something on him, more than just her word.” He grins.

I stare at him, slowly understanding, then slap the table as I stand. “You, Benjamin Wong, are a goddamn genius.”

—

I FIND MARTA in the upstairs hall, dusting the curtains.

The floorboard creaks, and she looks in my direction. “Marta, can I ask you something?”

“Yes...” She frowns at me.

“What do you know about what happened to Lila Jones?”

Marta goes still. Emotion flashes across her face before she turns back to the window, dusting faster now.

I move closer, watching her closely. “You were there that weekend, weren’t you?”

Marta shakes her head. She gathers the cord of the vacuum cleaner next to her and walks away from me down the hall. I follow after her.

“I know about Lila’s brother. And the emails,” I say to her back, not bothering to keep my voice down. “I talked to him. He seems to believe strongly that you have some kind of evidence.” It’s not the entire truth, but I

know Marta is hiding something. I can feel it. “Do you know why he would think that?”

Marta stops at the end of the hall, turns and glares at me. “I cannot talk to you. Please leave me alone.”

Clearly agitated, she turns on the vacuum and pushes it over the carpet. A group of guys walk past, and I see her eyes dart up to them, then back down to the floor. I stand with my hands on my hips, waiting for her to finish.

When Marta sees I’m not going to leave, she turns off the vacuum cleaner and sighs. She drags the vacuum behind her to the broom closet. It’s a large, dusty space, lit by a single flickering bulb. After putting away the vacuum, she turns to me, pointing a shaking finger at my chest. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay out of this.”

“Did Matthew do it?”

Her eyes dart to mine, filled with warning. “Stay away,” she repeats.

“You were there that weekend. You were in the background of Lila’s photo. What do you have that’s got him so scared? Why did he pay you to keep quiet?”

“Shh.” She looks fearfully around before grabbing my wrist. “Someone will hear you.”

“Marta. We can go to the police. I’ll help you.” Marta is breathing hard. She closes her eyes for a moment as if hit by the force of the memory. When she looks at me, she looks exhausted.

“You must leave. Now.”

Part Four

Here we are taught by men and gothic towers
democracy and faith and righteousness and love of
unseen things that do not die.

—H. E. Mierow Carved in stone outside McCosh 50,
Princeton University

MAYA

August 2023

IT'S THE DAY OF KAI'S wedding, and Nate and I have set off for the St. Clair estate, where Margaret is hosting the event. The couple and their close friends will all be staying the night, so we've packed an overnight bag and plan to leave Dani with Daisy's au pair.

Dani is humming quietly in the back as she listens to music in her big over-ear headphones. Nate is driving, his Ford SUV more comfortable than my sedan. The yellow lines of the road tick by, illuminated by the headlights as the car cuts through the morning mist. When I told Nate about Matthew threatening our daughter, a side of him I rarely saw showed itself. "If he gets anywhere near her again, I'll kill him," he'd said.

Now Nate turns off the highway, past a sign that reads WELCOME TO CONNECTICUT. I roll down the window, letting the cool morning air rush in.

"You doing okay?" Nate asks.

Before I answer, my new phone rings in the center console. The ring is unfamiliar, the default iPhone setting, and I'm still getting used to the fact that I'd had to replace the one I'd lost when Matthew attacked me. I look at the caller ID and see it's Detective Gary.

"Detective?"

"Ms. Banks. We have some news. We reviewed the CCTV footage at Broadway Junction and can confirm that a man attacked you. Unfortunately,

his face was hidden from view.” My heart sinks. “But...we found Sara Vail’s car at a gas station on I-95, five miles outside Princeton, during the time she said she was with him—she wasn’t actually home. Seeing as Mr. DuPont no longer has an alibi for your sister’s time of death, he is now a person of interest.”

THE BACK LAWN is already teeming with hundreds of guests, stifling hot. I shiver despite the heat, despite the sweat dripping down the small of my back. One foot, then the other. *The detectives are on it. Matthew is going to prison.* I focus on that thought as my feet tread over the fresh-cut grass, willing it into existence as I follow Nate into the ceremony.

A pergola arches over the space, bursting with roses and purple wisteria. Waiters bustle about with silver trays and hors d’oeuvres. We’re taking our seats when Daisy rushes over. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“What’s wrong? Are the girls okay?” I ask, worried about Dani. She’d thrown a fit when we’d left her with Daisy’s au pair.

“They’re fine,” Daisy says. “But—look, I got in touch with Marta. I know you told me not to but I had to try. You were right. Naomi *was* asking her about Lila. Marta didn’t want to talk to me at first, but eventually she admitted that Naomi had asked for her help. I reminded her that Naomi’s death is now being investigated as a potential murder, and that something she knows could help put away her killer. That’s when Marta told me that she has *the security camera footage.*”

I stare at her. “What security camera footage?”

“The video. From the ski trip.”

I stare at Daisy, and before I can process the information, her husband, Scott, appears next to her and a rustling of movement sweeps through the crowd as guests stand around us. My chest feels tight as I stand with them and turn to watch Kai make her way down the back steps. It spreads down my torso into my ribs as Daisy’s words sink in: *The video. The camera we’d*

left at the cabin. It might have evidence of what happened the night Lila died...

I can feel my heartbeat in my throat. *The video.* I can't believe Marta had it this whole time. I clutch the side of my seat, trying to keep it together. We have to get her to send us that video.

Kai appears in a white silk gown at the end of the aisle. The groom, Marcus, looks calm, present as the quartet plays a bridal march and Kai makes her way toward him. During the rest of the ceremony, I find it hard to focus, and afterward, escape to the house to get away from the crowd.

I'm catching my breath in the living room when I hear two people arguing upstairs. I follow the sound of their voices until, from the second-floor landing, I make out a bright line of light seeping from beneath the door at the end of the hall.

Peering into the crack in the door, I gasp at the sight.

It's Matthew.

His face is red, and his hands are folded in front of him, his eyes on the ground as his fiancée, Sara, talks animatedly, her back to me, clearly upset. She stops abruptly, her hand gripping the red leather chair as if for support. Matthew doesn't move. From here I can see the tension between them, the stiffness of his stance, the way he's flexing his jaw.

She must know that he's a suspect in my sister's case. That he attacked me the other night. She has plenty to be upset about.

She says something I can't make out and reaches for him violently, as if to strike him. But just as her hand nears his face, he seizes it.

"Not now," he replies, tightly. "We'll talk later."

I'm taking another step closer, straining to hear, when the floor creaks.

Matthew looks directly at me and my heart lurches. *No no no.* I take a step away, and another, before I turn and run.

—

MY HEART RACES as I rush through the party looking for Daisy.

"Matthew's here," I tell her, out of breath, when I find her near the bar.

“What, why?” She looks over her shoulder. “Where is he?”

I point to the house. “Upstairs. He and Sara were arguing.” My hands are shaking. People waiting in line are looking at us.

“Marcus probably invited him. They do business together,” Daisy says, pulling me away from them, but she looks concerned. “I’m here. Nate’s here. There’s hundreds of other people here. He can’t hurt you. If he tries, we’ll call the police.”

—

AN HOUR LATER, we’re at the reception. the sun has gone down and the wind has picked up, rattling the trees, making the candle flames dance. Kai comes out in a traditional red silk gown, a cheongsam, and the guests erupt in cheers, clinking glasses, screams.

I can’t get comfortable, I keep expecting Matthew to be inches from me every time I turn around. I send a text to Margaret. *Matthew’s here.*

She responds after a few minutes: *That bastard, he should have known better than to come here. I’m sorry—I’ll send him away.*

I watch Matthew out of the corner of my eye. *Does he know Daisy spoke to Marta? Did he come to try to stop us?*

I touch my throat, remembering the feel of his hands on my neck, the sound of the oncoming train. I picture him waiting outside our apartment in the black SUV, talking to Dani after school. Sweat beads on my forehead, and I force a breath, dig my nails into my palms, as the sound of the train grows louder. *Make it stop.*

The microphone screeches, and I flinch. “Thank you all for coming,” Marcus says. I force myself to look away from Matthew. “We cannot express the joy and gratitude we feel to be able to celebrate this special day with you.” He holds his glass up and hands the microphone to Kai. “With all the awful things going on in the world, we feel so blessed to be able to celebrate our love with all of you. Thank you to Margaret and John for hosting.” Kai gestures to Margaret’s table, but her chair is empty next to John. I glance around and see Margaret marching toward Matthew’s table. Oh no. “And to

our family and friends who have traveled halfway around the world to be here,” she says. “And...we have a surprise for you this evening. My talented friend, Brigitte Senyuva, has choreographed this original piece for us.”

The DJ starts the music and dancers in flowing fabric take the stage. One of the girls, with her curly Afro and focused expression, reminds me of Naomi. Beyond them, on the opposite side of the dance floor, seeing Margaret approach, Matthew stands up from his table.

I lean over and whisper to Nate, looking in their direction. “Matthew’s here.”

—

WHATEVER MARGARET SAID to Matthew must not have worked, because she’s back at her table, and he’s at his. After dinner, Nate gets up to get another drink from the bar. Kai and Marcus are beginning their first dance when Daisy lets out a little yelp, pointing across the reception. “Oh no. Maya, look!”

Across the reception, Nate is in Matthew’s face, shaking his hands in the air. Matthew shoves him.

Guests turn to stare, but Kai and Marcus are lost in their first dance, unaware of the commotion.

“What are you doing?” I whisper-yell when I’m close enough for them to hear me, trying not to call any more attention to the situation than there already is. A small crowd of men has gathered around them. Nate has Matthew pinned, one fist raised overhead. I pull Nate’s arm. “Stop it, stop!”

Matthew staggers to his feet. He brings his hand from his lip, which is split, bleeding down his chin. “You’re lucky I don’t press charges,” Matthew spits.

Nate stares at him, hunched over like a boxer, with a wild, soulless look in his eyes I’ve never seen before. He looks like he’s about to lunge at Matthew again, but I grab his arm. “Don’t. It’s not worth it.”

—

IN THE POOL house, where we're staying, Nate holds an ice pack to his cheek. The life has come back to his eyes but now he looks spent.

"I don't know what you were thinking," I say, trying to keep the judgment out of my voice, because the truth is, if I'd had the chance to punch Matthew in the face, I'd have done it too.

"He should stay away from my family," Nate says through clenched teeth. He smells like alcohol.

"How much did you have to drink?"

He ignores me.

"What happened? Did he say something to you?"

Nate closes his eyes, shakes his head.

"What did he say?"

Nate's jaw clenches. His eyes flash with hatred. "He tried to hurt you. He tried to hurt *Dani*."

—

I WANT TO tell Nate that Marta has the video, but I don't know how he'd react. Now isn't the right time.

Instead, I put my head on his chest and thread my arms around his torso. "Remember what the detective said—his alibi fell through," I remind him. "This is almost over."

MAYA

August 2023

I'M IN A DEEP SLEEP when a loud sound rips through the silence. A guttural scream.

I jerk awake. *What the hell was that?* I sit up, filled with adrenaline, heart kicking against my rib cage. Holding my breath, I sit perfectly still, waiting for it to happen again.

The silence stretches. Nothing but wind. Crickets. I instinctively reach for Nate next to me, but instead I just feel the sheets, cool beneath my fingers.

There must be a rational explanation for why he's not here: He couldn't sleep. He needed something from the house.

As I stand, I'm suddenly dizzy, my head throbbing with a splitting headache. *How many drinks had I had last night? Three? Four?* I grasp onto the side table for support. After steadying myself, I make my way to the door and peer into the night. The wind rattles the shutters.

The pool glows under a full moon, and beyond it the lawn is dark. No sign of Nate. The windows on the main house are black save for one rectangle of light emanating from an upstairs bedroom.

On the counter, the new phone I bought, still without a case, lights up and vibrates. It vibrates again. I pick up the phone—four o'clock—and open the message.

It's from Kai. *Are you awake?*

I text her back: *Did you hear that noise?*

Kai: *Come over to the main house. I'm in the kitchen.*

Tossing a loose sweater over my shoulders, I shove the phone into my pocket and rush out the door.

The air outside is chilly. The lawn wet beneath my shoes as they sink into the grass. As I cross the lawn, anxiety grips my chest. I'm halfway to the house when a bright light slices across my vision, startling me.

"Maya?" Kai grips a flashlight. She rushes over, barefoot, clutching her robe. Her eyes are wide with panic as she catches her breath.

"What's going on? Have you seen Nate?"

Kai frowns. "No, why? I heard a scream, and when I looked outside, there were headlights on the road right outside the gate. That's when I texted you—I texted everyone—we should check the cameras."

But without Margaret, who isn't answering, we don't have access to the cameras. I follow her up the back stairs and we cross through the kitchen. We reach the front of the house and step out to the front yard, which is empty besides a few of the staff's parked cars. Without the wind, the shriek of crickets feels threatening.

"What about Margaret? Should we wake her up?"

"I don't want to bother her." She shakes her head. "It could've been a neighbor's car. And an animal or something earlier."

Kai and I go back inside and do a full scan of the house, checking windows and rooms for signs of a break-in. Nothing.

Back in the kitchen, Kai removes a bottle of pills from the cabinet. "We're flying to Milan today and then it's a long car ride to Como. I need sleep." She unscrews the cap and shakes two into her hand. "Here." She hands me one. "Ambien. It'll help you get back to sleep. No offense, but you look like you need it." She gives me a flashlight to get back to the pool house.

AFTER KAI LEAVES, I run a glass under the faucet and place the pill on my tongue and take a long sip of the cool water. *Maybe it was nothing.*

I'm about to turn back for the pool house when something catches my eye: a sliver of light runs jagged across the room, illuminating the knife block. And...one of them is missing.

I LEAVE THE main house to head back and am staring out at the pine forest at the edge of the property when a light flickers.

I hold my breath. Did that just happen?

Cautiously, I cross the wet grass and make my way to the edge of the woods, entering the thicket of pines.

“Nate?” A rustling of branches. I cut the beam of light toward the sound and see a fox dive into the bushes. A nervous laugh escapes my chest, but as I am about to turn back, I see something strange in the dirt: a muddy footprint. A man's footprint.

Walking faster, I call out for my husband, but my voice falls off.

Movement in the distance. I hunch down, chest tight as I approach. Nate? Or some kind of intruder? A branch breaks behind me and I whirl around, cutting the light toward it. Nothing.

The deeper I go, the more the trees begin to look alike. The flashlight flickers, battery dying. I hit the bottom and the light comes back on. I hurry forward, lungs burning as the darkness shifts around me. It's only when I reach a fallen tree, covered in moss and rot, that I stop. Nate isn't out here. He's probably waiting for me back in bed. He probably just went to the bathroom or needed to grab something from the car. I'm about to turn back when I hear a noise: the sound of a man in pain.

New fear flares across my chest. “Nate?” I run toward the sound, branches scraping my arms.

Somewhere up ahead, another flash of movement.

Heart racing, I turn around to run back the way I came when dizziness overtakes me. What is wrong with me?

The flashlight slips to the ground, flickers and dies, and when I look up, I see her: a young woman, no older than twenty-two, standing in the moonlight. I strain my eyes in the dark, my blood turning cold.

Her skin is pale, her red hair darkened from rain and spooling around her neck. *It can't be...No...That's not possible.* It's Lila.

I take a shaky step back, drop to my knees. *I have to get out of here.* The exhaustion and anxiety and fear have me seeing things again. The ground sways beneath me as I frantically search the dirt for the flashlight.

Filled with panic, I try to find my way back out of the woods. When I finally reach the fallen tree, I break into a run. But the strangest thing happens: Rain falls from the sky...and then it turns to snow. I blink hard, catching my breath. It's August. Snow doesn't make any sense. *What is happening?*

Up ahead, something or someone is dragging Lila's body behind it. It's hard to see through all the snow, but when I focus harder it becomes clear—*Matthew is dragging her body through the snow.*

Heart pounding wildly, I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. *Stop hurting her! Let her go!*

I yell until I catch up to him, but he doesn't turn to me. His focus is on Lila.

Get off her! I grab at his arms and finally he turns to me. He looks awful, the whites of his eyes black, irises disappearing into nothing.

I freeze, too shocked to move, and before I know what's happening, someone shoves me out of the way and lunges at him. He stumbles back, clutching his chest. A thud, a body falling onto the damp ground. And now there's blood. So much blood.

—

I JERK AWAKE with a gasp, heart racing, fingers tearing at the sheets of the bed. In my panic, it takes a moment to realize the scream I hear is my own. But soon, another voice joins it, soothing, familiar.

"It's okay, it's okay, you're safe. Everything's fine." It's Margaret.

Slowly, the fear fades. I'm safe. Back in the pool house. Disoriented, I sit up and try to place the furniture in the room. The wicker chair in the corner, where I threw my gown from last night. The wooden blades of the fan overhead. My head is throbbing with a massive headache as I squint at Margaret until her face comes into focus. "What happened?"

She pats the bed and stands. "You had a nightmare, that's all. Come on, love, let's get you cleaned up." She reaches out a hand and helps me out of bed.

I'm drenched in sweat, the sheets are soaked under me. Had I really dreamed all of that? Reaching up to touch my hair, I find it matted with twigs and leaves. My hands are covered in dirt. Nails caked in dried blood. *What happened last night?* I'm glad Margaret is the one with me. She's never been one to pry.

"Come here," Margaret says, as she turns on the hot water in the shower and steps out of the bathroom to give me some privacy.

As I'm peeling off my clothes, I remember—the scream. Nate missing from bed—and I go cold. "Where is Nate?" I ask her, shakily, from the other side of the door.

"He's off for a run. He said he texted you." A pause. "Well, if you're feeling better, I may go back to the house and whip up some coffee and crepes for everyone to help with the hangovers. You're welcome to join."

I shake my head. He's on a run. Everything's fine. Get a grip. "Yeah, okay. Thank you." But something doesn't feel right. Nate was drunk last night. When was the last time he woke up from a night like that and went on a run? He hasn't been up that early since he was training for the Boston Marathon, and that was before Dani was born.

I step under the hot water and close my eyes, suddenly exhausted like I hadn't slept at all. Leaning against the tile, I will the throbbing in my skull to ease.

By the time I emerge from the shower, the darkness has sifted away, replaced by a soft lemony light. The air outside is still cool and crisp, but I can sense the imposing clouds overhead. I step out onto the patio in my robe, and as I'm having coffee on the chaise longue, I see Nate approaching in the

distance. I scan his body for any signs of distress, but he looks fine. Perfectly fine, in running clothes and a gray sweatshirt. I exhale.

“You’re up,” he says.

I nod, not sure how to react. Is this all in my head? Am I so paranoid about Matthew that I’m seriously losing it?

He gives me a peck on the cheek and looks me over with a puzzled expression. His eyes stop. “What happened to your neck?”

Reaching up, I wince at the frayed skin where I must have scratched myself. I pull my hand back, blood on my fingertips, and cringe. “I had a nightmare again. I woke up in the middle of the night, you weren’t in bed.” I pause, studying him. “Where were you?”

He frowns, shakes his head. “I woke up early. Went for a run. I must have been getting ready when you woke up the first time.” His face is blank.

I swallow the knot that’s formed in my throat. Nate’s expression sends a chill through me...because I’ve been with my husband for over ten years. I know when he’s lying.

MAYA

August 2023

AN HOUR LATER, I'M SITTING on the edge of the bed, trying to piece together what exactly happened last night.

A noise makes me startle, and when I look up, Nate is standing at the door, holding a paper bag and coffee. My arms prickle at his sudden appearance. Why hadn't I heard him open the door?

"Nate," I inhale. "We need to talk."

"Huh?" Nate's voice is loud, distracted. He taps his phone, silencing the music. Removes an earbud.

"Last night...I thought it might have been a nightmare, but I definitely heard someone scream. Kai heard it too."

"What happened?" Nate is putting his headphones away into the case and fiddling with his phone. My jaw clenches in frustration.

"Nate." I grab his arm. "I think someone could've been hurt."

He takes a seat on the bed next to me and softens his tone. "What do you want me to do? Call the police?"

"Where were you last night?" I ask, unable to keep the suspicion out of my voice. The next words rattle out of me before I can stop them. "Nate, you were gone and—the scream. It sounded bad, like someone was hurt. And I was scared it could've been you. I went to look for you in the woods. But you

weren't there. And I thought I saw someone...Matthew...Lila." My lungs hurt, and my head is throbbing with a massive headache.

"Woah, slow down. What do you mean, you saw Lila?" Nate studies my face. *He's taking me seriously now*, I think for a brief moment, before I realize that it's not concern for what I saw, but rather, for my sanity.

I blink back at him. Before I'd said it, it seemed to make sense in my head, but now I realize how impossible it sounds. "I don't know, I just...last night is such a strange blur, it's like I can't grab hold of it."

"Did you take anything?" he asks.

Oh—the pill Kai gave me, *to help you get back to sleep*, the Ambien, of course. And mixed with all of the alcohol I'd had at the reception, no wonder it had made me hallucinate. Shame floods my cheeks.

"I'm not making it up," I say softly. Am I losing it? Am I actually losing my mind?

A loud banging on the door startles me.

—

DAISY BURSTS INTO the room muttering something about *Matthew* and *last night*, but she's talking so fast and so frantically she doesn't make any sense.

"What happened? Are you okay? Are the girls okay?" I say, my chest tightening.

Daisy turns to me with the look of someone who has seen something horrible. She's breathing hard. "It's Matthew," she says, between heaving breaths. "He's dead."

It takes me a moment to make sense of her words. *Matthew is dead?* I glance at Nate, who shakes his head and looks away. I can't comprehend it. Is this a good thing? Just yesterday, I'd wanted this so badly, in fact, imagined myself doing it. So I should feel happy, or at least relieved...this should mean it's all over now.

And yet.

"Did the police—did something happen?"

Daisy shakes her head. “He was still here when I left to check on the girls.” Her voice cracks. “They found his body this morning—he was stabbed.”

—

EVERYTHING AFTER THAT is a blur. My head feels full, a noise buzzing like static, as questions spiral. Who killed Matthew? And why now? Why right before the police would have arrested him? Just a little bit longer, and he wouldn’t have been a problem anymore.

I couldn’t eat after Daisy told us what had happened, but it’s now past noon and I’m starving, so I make my way to the main house in search of food. With all the commotion, we decided that it would be better to keep Dani away with the au pair a while longer. I don’t want her overhearing any of this.

My hand is shaking so badly I can hardly pour myself a glass of water in the kitchen. I tip the cold water to my lips, gulping it down. The touch of a hand on my shoulder makes me jump, and the glass slips from my hand and lands with a crash on the floor. I bend to pick up the pieces. “Oh god, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry.” Margaret helps me, a strange expression on her face. “I take it you heard about Matthew?”

I nod.

“Well,” she says, “I can’t say I’m sorry about it. He deserved it.” She moves over to the sink and begins washing the dishes. She dries a plate and puts it back in the cupboard.

My throat is suddenly dry, so I pour myself another glass of water, while Margaret flits around the kitchen. She wipes down the counter with a rag and tidies a stack of *Architectural Digest* next to a vase of hydrangeas.

“The detectives will be here soon,” Margaret says. “You all right?” She dries off a knife and sets it back in the knife block.

All the knives are there.

I blink hard. “I’m not sure what they expect to get from us,” she continues, fixing her gaze on me. Her sharp green eyes are intense against her pale skin. “After all, we don’t know anything, do we?”

—

WHEN I RETURN to the pool house, I find Nate gone, a note in his handwriting on the nightstand: *Went to pick up Dani*. Why would he want to bring our daughter here, where a man’s been murdered?

Uncomfortable in the silence, I turn on the TV to find an anchor reporting the local news. “A forty-five-year-old man’s body has been found in Greenwich, Connecticut, at the edge of Bedford Road on Monday by a local resident.” The hairs on the back of my neck rise. “The office of the chief medical examiner has stated that the cause of death was multiple stab wounds. The case remains under investigation.”

Multiple stab wounds? The edge of Bedford Road—that’s just around the corner from the St. Clairs’. A metallic taste fills my mouth, and I’m suddenly so dizzy I have to grab the dresser to steady myself.

I shut it back off. Sink onto the bed.

What had happened last night? Where was Nate when I woke up? My husband may be reactive, but he would never *kill* someone. *If he gets anywhere near her again, I’ll kill him*. No. He didn’t mean it. People say things they don’t mean all the time when they’re angry. *They also do things they don’t mean to do...*

I inhale sharply and start packing up our clothes. I’m folding Nate’s sweater when I stop cold. Nate’s reaction when Daisy told us Matthew had been killed—it wasn’t the look of someone hearing the news for the first time. It was the look of someone who already knew.

Outside the window, coming from the main house, two figures are approaching, headed my way—Detective Gary and Detective Simmons.

NAOMI

Wednesday, May 24, 2023, two days before her death

IT'S POURING RAIN AS I run across campus. Marta has something. The leaked emails, DuPont's strange reaction, the payments to her afterward...It's all connected. And everyone involved could go to prison.

At the same time, I have so many questions. What, exactly, does she have? And if DuPont knew it existed, he would have made her destroy it, right? If she's loyal to him, why has she kept it for all these years?

Marta had always worked quietly in the corners of Sterling, frowning as she swept and dusted. It was impossible to tell whose side she was on.

—

I STEP OUT of the rain and into McCosh Hall, where Professor Williams's office is located.

I knock on her door, and a few seconds later, she opens it a crack, peering out at me from the dimly lit space. "Naomi...I wasn't expecting you."

"I have a favor to ask," I tell her. "Do you have a minute?"

I take a seat in the chair across from her desk. "It's about someone named Lila Jones." Amy had told me months ago that Professor Williams knew Lila, but I'd been too distracted by everything else to go to her. Now I need help, and she's one person I know I can trust.

I watch as her face falls into a look of concern. “Be careful who you ask about that.”

“We can’t let this go on. If we don’t do something now, it’ll never end. It could happen again.”

I tell her about our plan to talk to Marta, and though I can tell she’s scared, she’s willing to help us.

On my way out, she stops me. Her hand grips my elbow tightly. “Naomi. Please be careful.”

—

IT’S RAINING HARDER by the time I step out of McCosh Hall. I open my umbrella and step onto the slick sidewalk. I’m halfway to my dorm when I see movement out of the corner of my eye. Someone in a dark coat slips behind the side of a building, out of sight.

Unnerved, I walk faster.

I’m crossing the wet grass when I hear footsteps behind me, hard soles, barely perceptible over the rain. Panic floods my system.

I walk faster. The footsteps get louder, closer, until they’re right behind me.

I spin around, ready to react. But there’s no one there.

MAYA

August 2023

“MS. BANKS, MAY WE COME in?” Gary says, from outside the door.

“Of course.” I open the door. “I’m sorry for the mess—I was packing.” My palms are slick with sweat.

Simmons looks at the chair next to me, which is covered in my dress and Nate’s suit.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions,” Gary says.

Simmons paces around the room, eyes crawling over our clothes, old coffee cups, luggage before stopping in front of me. My body goes rigid. “Ms. Banks,” she says, “can you walk us through what you did yesterday?”

I take a step away from her. “I was here—for Kai’s wedding. Margaret St. Clair invited a few close friends to stay on the property.” I pause as she writes this down. “My husband, Nate, and I came back to the room around ten.”

“We heard there was an altercation.”

“Nate didn’t start it.”

“Right.” She shoots a glance at Gary, who stands near the doorway with his arms folded. “What happened after that?” she asks.

Well, I think, I was asleep. And then I wasn’t.

“We went to bed, and”—I swallow—“my friend Daisy came by the next morning and told us he’d been—” I can’t bring myself to say he’d been

murdered. “That was the first time I’d heard what happened.”

“What hours were you asleep?”

A bead of sweat drips down my spine. How do I mention the scream but avoid the fact that Nate was missing?

“Ms. Banks?”

“Sorry, um.” My mouth goes dry. “I think, uh, around one to seven A.M.... something like that. A noise woke me up at some point. But I fell back to sleep.”

“What kind of noise?”

I look down. “I don’t know...”

Detective Gary narrows his eyes. “Was your husband with you?”

I freeze. Where was Nate?

Looking for Matthew, a voice answers.

No. Nate wouldn’t do that. I should cover for him. He would do the same for me.

“Yes,” I answer, meeting Gary’s eyes.

Gary doesn’t look away. “Mr. DuPont’s body was found near the edge of the St. Clairs’ property. We think whoever attacked him was staying here last night.”

My eyes fall on my shoes, caked in mud, by the door. Something happened in those woods. Detective Gary’s eyes follow, and I look away, but not soon enough.

The room is suddenly too hot. “Mind if I open the door?”

He nods, and I open the door, letting in some air. I hover there, trying to block the shoes with my body.

“If you remember anything else,” Gary says with one last glance around the room, “don’t hesitate to call.”

Simmons follows him out the door, and I think it’s over, until she stops and looks down at my shoes. “Mind if we take these?”

I'M LEFT STANDING there in the doorway, dread pooling in the pit of my stomach, as Detective Simmons and Detective Gary cross the lawn for the main house. They reach the back stairs at the same time that Nate and Dani emerge.

Nate sets Dani down and is saying something to the detectives, gesturing toward the pool house.

Wait! I want to run over there and tell him to corroborate my story, but it's too late.

—

WHILE THE DETECTIVES are talking to Nate in the main house, Daisy arrives at the pool house with the girls.

The moment I see her, I wrap Dani into my arms. Thankfully she seems fine. "Are you okay?"

She nods, squirming in my tight grasp. "Are *you* okay, Mama?"

"Of course." I force myself to smile as convincingly as possible.

As I help Dani change into a clean shirt, I ask Daisy about her meeting with the detectives. "Did they ask where Scott was?"

"No...why?" Daisy frowns, confused.

Dani runs off into the corner toward our luggage.

"Do you think whoever did it was on the property?"

"The detective seemed to imply that."

"That's awful." Daisy checks her phone. "Marta's not picking up," she says. "I'm going to go over to her house."

My chest tightens in warning. "Are you sure?" In the corner of the room, Dani is fiddling with the lock on Nate's suitcase. "Dani, honey, leave that alone."

"I want to watch something." She yanks at the front pocket zipper, where she knows Nate's iPad is.

"Can you please give us a minute?"

"No."

Sighing, I go over to Nate's suitcase. Put in the passcode, 0925, our wedding anniversary. It doesn't open.

"That's weird." I try again, jiggling the lock. It's stuck. He's changed the passcode.

"What?" Daisy asks.

"Nothing," I respond, staring at it in confusion. Why would he change the passcode?

That's when I notice something caught in the main zipper of his suitcase: Nate's running shirt. The thin dry-wick fabric is still damp with sweat. I'm working it free when I notice a dark rusty-brown stain on the sleeve, the color of dried blood.

My hand covers my mouth.

No longer distracted by her phone, Daisy looks up. "What's that?"

I drop the fabric back into the suitcase. "Nate's dirty running shirt. It's nothing."

I startle as my phone trills through the silence. It's someone calling from the main house.

My hands are shaking so badly, I can barely hold on to the phone. "Hello?"

"Maya, it's Margaret. The detectives want to speak with you again." She lowers her voice. "And I think you should have a lawyer with you this time."

NAOMI

Thursday, May 25, 2023, one day before her death

How HAS THIS GONE SO wrong? My bout of paranoia on the lawn has me freaked out—the stress is really getting to me. My heart is pounding as I pack a suitcase in my room, throwing in only what I need. Ben’s offered to let me stay at his uncle’s place in the city.

I was so sure Marta would come through...but in the end, she must have gotten scared.

After zipping my suitcase, I press my palms to my eyes. I can do this. All I have to do is get on that train.

I’m about to leave when the sound of my phone makes me nearly jump out of my skin. I glance down—it’s Liam. We haven’t spoken since he showed up drunk at my door last week. I should ignore it...I should—

My thumb taps the screen. I feel sick, every cell in my body tense with anger.

“Naomi?” His voice is strange. “Where are you?”

I grit my teeth. “Why? Does Matthew want to know?”

Liam doesn’t reply. I imagine his jaw working as he paces in his room. “Listen to me. I need you to—”

“Don’t do this.”

“Where are you? Are you home?”

“I’m leaving. Goodbye, Liam.”

“Wait.” His voice is urgent. I hear him opening a door. Running down the stairs. “Listen to me—you have to be careful. They know everything. They’re coming for you.” He’s breathing hard. Running. “Stay where you are. I’ll be there in a minute.”

The fear in his voice makes my heart race. Then the panic gives way to anger. “Don’t come near me.”

“Naomi—”

“I’m done!” I hang up. Close my eyes as they prick with tears. I’d trusted him with everything, and he’d lied to me. The hurt rushes up inside again, stinging my heart, spreading outward across my shoulders. He said he *loved* me. And that, too, was a lie.

They’re coming for you.

I’m not safe here. I need to leave. Now.

I’m rushing toward the front door when a voice makes me jump.

“You okay?” Zee stands in the hallway in a sleep shirt, her hair wrapped for bed. “That sounded rough.”

I shake my head, fighting tears. “I’m fine. I’m staying a couple nights in the city. You could come with me.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Trey’s coming over.”

“Okay. Good.” I nod. “I’ll be back Saturday. Where’s Amy?”

“She’s with friends,” Zee says. “I’ll keep trying Marta.”

I’m halfway out the door when she stops me. “And, hey—” she says. I turn and meet her worried gaze. “Be careful, okay?”

—

THE TRAIN SHRIEKS out of the station. I stare blankly at the passing factories and old buildings as it surges toward the city. It’s the first time I’m alone with my thoughts, and they buzz loudly through my skull. Why am I running? So I don’t have to face the truth?

Matthew and his friends were lying, stealing, cheating, and he’d do anything to make sure it doesn’t come out. That much is clear.

I CLOSE MY eyes and pin my head to the back of the seat, concentrate on the movement of the train, my chest so tight I feel like I might pass out. *Focus. Think of the options.*

We could go to the *Times*, force them to take us seriously. At least have them expose Greystone, even if we couldn't yet prove the murder. That could buy us more time to convince Marta to help us. I could go to Maya, make her tell me the truth...but not after what Kai told me. Not after knowing that it could land her in prison.

A few moments later, I get the disquieting feeling that someone is staring at the back of my neck, and my eyes bolt open.

Reflected in the glass, there he is, standing right behind me.

I whip around, ready to fight for my life. But the man in the aisle is not Matthew DuPont. The man looks at me like I'm crazy and continues down the aisle, glancing back over his shoulder like I might follow him, steal his wallet. Ha. I look down the aisle, scanning the downturned faces for DuPont, but he's not there.

MAYA

August 2023

I LEAVE DANI WITH DAISY’S au pair, who takes the girls out of the house, and when I enter the kitchen, Margaret rushes over and grabs my hands. Margaret’s usual sleek black bob is unkempt, on her face a look of barely contained panic.

“I’m going to call my lawyer. Remember, you don’t have to say anything.” A cold sweat breaks out over my brow.

Detective Gary strides into the room. He smiles. “Hello again, Ms. Banks. May I have a word?”

—

HARSH LIGHT FILTERS in past the shutters in the upstairs study. Seeing the red leather chair, I suddenly remember how Sara Vail’s hand had gripped it when I saw her and Matthew arguing. Detective Gary takes a seat in one of the chairs and gestures for me to sit across from him.

“Ms. Banks, I want to give you a chance to tell us what really happened last night.”

“What do you mean?” My hands twist in my lap. When I look up, Gary is watching me with interest.

Simmons enters carrying a plastic bag, which she hands to Gary.

Gary turns back to me. “You accused Matthew DuPont of killing your sister,” he says, keeping the bag out of my line of sight. “Correct me if I’m wrong...but it seems you had every motive to want him gone.”

I try to swallow the knot that’s lodged in my throat. *It’s true.*

Gary holds up the evidence bag so I can see it: my old phone. “We found your cellphone at his house and your footprints at the scene of the crime.”

At the scene of the crime? My heart stops, then flutters rapidly. *But how—*

“Ms. Banks, were you involved in the murder of Matthew DuPont?”

My heart is beating so hard I can feel it in my temples. “No!” I insist. “I lost my phone the night he attacked me. I thought I’d dropped it on the tracks, but maybe he took it off me instead. But—” I force myself to take a breath. “Okay, yes, I was at the edge of the property last night...After the noise woke me up, I went and looked around.”

“You looked around?” Gary repeats, writing this down.

“And I didn’t see anything.” *Except Lila Jones’s ghost.* I silence the thought. *Focus.* “So I went back to bed.” I nod, hard, trying to convince myself as much as him. But it’s impossible to push away the memories as they flood in: running past branches, Lila, the blood, so much blood. I clasp my hands tightly in my lap.

“Let me get this straight.” Gary leans forward. “You were in the woods around the time Matthew DuPont was murdered, in the *exact location* where we found the body...and you didn’t see anything?”

“Right.” I swallow. “It was dark. And I’d taken a sleeping pill and had been drinking, so I was pretty out of it.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret it.

“I see.” Gary looks at Simmons, then back at me. “Ms. Banks, let me lay some things out for you. For months, you’ve been trying to get the police to look into Matthew DuPont regarding your sister’s death, to the point where he felt compelled to lodge complaints. And there’s CCTV footage of you following Sara Vail from Union Square up Park Avenue. Chasing her into the 28th Street station, trying to grab her and stop her from getting on a train. All after calling her repeatedly, and getting her location out of her assistant. Your husband then got into an altercation with Mr. DuPont last night, in full view

of scores of witnesses. And now we've discovered that you've been lying to us about your whereabouts last night. You must see how this looks." *Shit shit shit.*

"No." I shake my head, slowly. "That makes it sound worse than it was."

"And," Gary says, a strange expression guarding his face, "your husband was recorded leaving the property last night. Does he drive a blue Ford Explorer?"

My stomach drops. Gary goes on. "A neighbor saw a suspicious-looking man in a hoodie parked on Bedford Road near the location where Mr. DuPont's body was found. They called the police." *So my husband, simply because he's a Black man in a hoodie sitting in his car, warranted a call to the police?*

"You have to admit, Ms. Banks, this doesn't look good for either of you."

Despite feeling like I might pass out, I manage one last sentence: "I want to speak to a lawyer."

Detective Gary snaps his notepad closed. "Be my guest."

—

I CALL DAISY from the pool house. it rings and rings. I know she's gone to find Marta, but I hoped I'd catch her in time.

Please, Daisy...please pick up... I need to talk to someone about Nate. If he killed Matthew...I don't know what I'll do.

Daisy finally answers. "Maya? What's wrong? Sorry, I was driving. I just got to Marta's."

A wave of relief at the sound of her voice. "About last night..."

A long pause. "What about it?"

I take a shaky breath, trying to stay calm. Remind myself: I don't know if he did it. I don't know anything. I lower my voice. "I woke up around five A.M. and Nate wasn't there."

"What do you mean, *wasn't there?*"

"He wasn't in bed."

“Then where was he?” she asks, and when I don’t answer, her tone slows as she understands. “What...Maya, what do you think he was doing?” Her voice is shaking.

I swallow the knot in my throat as images flash: Nate with a knife, Matthew covered in blood. I knew it wasn’t a dream.

But why was Matthew still here? “I don’t know. But the two of them got into that argument at the wedding. I’d never seen Nate like that. Do you think he—” I can’t bring myself to say it. “Do you think he could have...?”

“No, Maya, Nate would never—”

“I saw someone out there. I thought it was just the Ambien making me see things, but what if it wasn’t? Oh god, what if Nate did it...what if—” But I stop when I hear someone enter the room behind me. The click of the door closing.

Daisy is still talking as I slowly turn, and standing there, ten feet away, is Nate.

—

I SLOWLY HANG up the call and watch Nate approach. My heart thuds a slow, abnormal rhythm. I can’t read the expression on his face.

I gesture to the phone. “It was Daisy—” I don’t know why I’m telling him this, but it’s the first thing that comes to mind. At least, if he knew it was her, someone we could trust, he wouldn’t be upset.

“What did you tell the police?” Nate stares in my direction, but not into my eyes.

Dread twists in the pit of my stomach. Why is he asking me this? What does it matter what I told the detectives? I remember my conversation with Detective Gary, how I’d *lied* for Nate. How I’d said he was with me when he wasn’t.

“Nate.” My voice shakes, but I force myself to be strong. “Where were you, really?”

I think of our first anniversary after our wedding, the promise we made at a wine bar in Harlem: *I’ll never lie to you*, Nate had said, as he took my

hands in his. We promised we'd get through anything; no matter what, we'd work it out.

And now I want to believe Nate, of course I do, but how can I?

"Where do you think I was?" Nate asks, his voice strangely calm as he approaches, slowly.

In the woods near Bedford Road.

I take a step back until I'm flat against the wall, heart racing, blood whooshing in my ears. "I—I don't know."

"I told you. I went for a run." Now that he's closer, I notice the bruise under his eye turning purplish black, and what looks like a fresh scrape on his cheek.

"Why aren't you telling me the truth?" I whisper. I don't move. My hands stick to my sides. "You—you lied to me, Nate. You said you went on a run. But that's not true, is it? The police have security footage of your car leaving the property." *Tell me I'm wrong.*

The muscles of his jaw work. "Okay," he says slowly, his face changing, caught in a lie. "I went for a drive."

"You were drinking." Nate looks away. His hands are in fists at his sides. "Why didn't you tell me when I asked you this morning?"

He doesn't respond.

Heat rises up my neck, burns my cheeks. Now it's my turn to be furious. "I had to cover for you, you know that? I told the detectives you were with me, but they saw you leaving the house in a hoodie and now they think one of us killed Matthew because they caught me lying!"

Nate stares at me. "You didn't have to lie."

"Yes I did, Nate. You're my husband. We're in this together." He folds his arms over his chest. He's shutting down.

"Where did you go?"

Nate turns away, refusing to answer.

"Nate, look at me." I'm pleading now, but I don't care. I need some kind of explanation. Anything.

But...I can sense there's something he's not telling me. "Why did you change the lock on your suitcase?"

“Lost the old one.”

“And the blood on your shirt?”

“The blood?” Nate lets out a strained laugh, but his features harden. “Maya, if you’re so goddamned sure I did it, what are you doing asking me? Go call up your friend, the detective.” I flinch at his words.

“Nate—”

“Go ahead,” he says, throwing the door open so it slams against the wall. I jump. “Go ahead. You want to leave? Leave.”

The room tilts. I place a hand on the wall to steady myself as I draw in a tight breath, the noise in my head growing louder.

Nate swears under his breath and grabs his suitcase.

“Wait—”

He doesn’t turn around. “I need to think.” He stops outside the door, turns around, but doesn’t meet my eyes. “I’m going to call AJ to pick me up. I’ll take Dani with me.” He throws the keys onto the bed. “Take the car home.”

—

I STAND FROZEN in place after Nate leaves for what feels like an hour. We haven’t fought like that ever.

Fighting tears, I sink onto the bed and drop my face into my hands, completely and utterly exhausted. It’s as if I’ve been treading water in a rip current, barely able to stay afloat. A loud static fills my head, a knot in my throat that won’t go away. *Had* Nate killed Matthew? And if he had...*then* what? What was I supposed to do? As much as I want to know the truth... what good would that do? Because if the truth is that my husband murdered a man, even if that man killed my sister, then my whole world will fall apart.

It’s too hot. I can’t breathe. *I need to get out of here.*

NAOMI

Thursday, May 25, 2023, one night before her death

THE RAIN HAS STOPPED BY the time I get to the city. Ben meets me at the station and walks me to his uncle's place, a modern loft in the West Village. It's concrete and glass, stark and empty, with a Rothko painting on one wall and a security camera in the entryway. Far from the plant- and music-filled haven of Ben's dorm room.

He notices me shivering and frowns. "Are you cold? I can turn up the heat."

"I'm okay." I wrap my arms around myself and try to stop shivering. Ben disappears into his uncle's room and returns with a sweatshirt as I'm struggling with my suitcase.

"Let me get that." He hands me the sweatshirt and takes my suitcase. "You can sleep here." He nods at the guest room. "I'll stay in my uncle's room."

In the kitchen, Ben fills a glass with water for me. When he opens the fridge, I notice it's empty besides a jar of kimchee, condiments, and several bottles of Sapporo.

"Thanks," I say, accepting the glass. "For this." I gesture around. "It means a lot that you'd let me stay here." Ben's turned up the heat and it's warmer now. He seems so comfortable in this space. I still can't quite merge

the image I have of Ben with the Ben that spent his high school years living in this cold house.

“Stay as long as you’d like...I’d stay with you if I didn’t have to go back to Singapore.” His face falls. He hesitates. “My dad had another stroke and it’s too much for my mom to deal with alone. I’m not even staying for graduation.”

I look up at him. “I’m so sorry.”

We fall silent, looking away, waiting for the other person to say something. Being here alone with Ben, I feel a tremor of what we had before...that thrill when I’d first started falling for him back in October. I don’t know what we’re doing, whether he can forgive me, but I catch myself wondering...

“Mind if I sit down?” I ask, moving toward the couch.

“Oh, yeah, go for it. I know it’s not exactly cozy, but make yourself at home.”

I take a seat on the couch and pull out my phone to see if Marta’s answered. She hasn’t. I sit back on the couch and sigh.

Ben slides into the chair across from me. “No luck?”

I shake my head. “I don’t get it. She seemed like she was going to help. And then...nothing.”

He touches my arm. “It’s going to be okay. You’ll figure it out.”

—

THAT NIGHT, BEN and I try to talk about anything but the investigation. We put James Blake on his uncle’s record player and look through some 35mm stills Ben took of people around the city, trying to select the best ones. Ben explains that the girl who’d shown up to his game was a family friend whom his mother wanted him to marry, that they’d been off and on for over a year, and he’d tried to end things long before the soccer game. It makes me think of Liam and me...how the ends of relationships are often messier than we want them to be...messier than people pretend they are.

As he talks, my mind wanders. Ben makes me feel calm and safe and beautiful. *This is the type of guy I want to be with.* I find myself picturing a life with him: indie warehouse concerts, photography exhibits, conversations about space and time and the meaning of life. I wonder if someday he'd invite me to Singapore to meet his family. I hope his dad's okay.

—

I WAKE UP in the middle of the night, my heart thundering in my chest, and for a moment, I forget where I am. As my eyes adjust, I take in the large windows, the painting on the wall, two muted blocks of color. I must have fallen asleep on the couch while Ben was talking, because he's draped a blanket over me.

Suddenly, everything rushes back—the investigation, Marta. Unable to fall back asleep, I rise from the couch and tiptoe upstairs to his bedroom. “Ben?” I whisper into the dark loft.

He stirs. Lifts his head. “Hey. Come here.” He lifts the covers for me.

I slip under the covers and hesitate for a moment, not sure if this is too much. It's been a long time since we slept in the same bed, and even then, I'd never quite gotten used to it. But he reaches for me, and I fit myself against his warm body. He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight, and I fall asleep to the steady beat of his heart.

The next morning, Ben kisses me on the cheek before he leaves for the airport. “If you need anything, just text. I'm here. I'll keep my phone on the whole flight so you can reach me if anything happens.”

I look at him, wishing he could stay. “I'll be fine.”

“Take care of yourself.” He gives my arm one last squeeze before walking out the door.

MAYA

August 2023

THE DARK ROAD SWEEPS BY. passing headlights. and my foot presses harder on the pedal. I'm driving at breakneck speed across the countryside, all four windows rolled down and the radio blasting.

I was finally ready to tell Nate everything, but he wasn't picking up. He texted me that AJ had picked them up and they were going to stay over at his place for the night. I didn't want to go home without him and Dani there, so not knowing what else to do, I took Nate's car, and I drove. And drove and drove.

My mind has been spinning with horrible thoughts. That Nate, my own husband, the person who has been by my side for the last ten years, with whom I share a last name, a home, and a *child*, may have killed Matthew. Yes, I wanted the man dead, but not by my husband's hand.

This nightmare has spiraled out of control, and it's all because of me, because I couldn't be honest with the people closest to me.

A horn honks, and I swerve back into my lane. *Shit*. It's dark, almost midnight, and I have no idea where I am. My eyelids are heavy, and I should pull over.

My phone rings with another call from Detective Gary—but I grab the phone and silence it. Throw it into the backseat. I need a break. Some time to think. All the thoughts buzzing around my skull are driving me insane. I wish

I could hit pause on the world for a moment and take a long, much-needed rest. Nate and Dani are gone, and I'm a suspect in a murder investigation. I'd laugh at the absurdity of it all if it weren't so horribly real.

—

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, a neon sign floats past that reads *Surly Goat Tavern*. That'll have to do.

I pull into the gravel parking lot and take in the ramshackle building with a tired American flag next to the door, the pickup truck with the dent in the bumper and a sticker with a gun on it. This is normally not the kind of place I'd go anywhere near, but I need something, anything, to distract me from my current situation.

Heads turn when I enter, but I'm too tired to care. The bar smells of sour beer and mildew, of sweat and cigarette smoke. A jukebox plays a sad rock ballad, and a man with a long gray beard and leather jacket with an American flag on the back sits at the bar drinking a glass of dark liquor.

The bartender, a curvy woman in her thirties wearing hoop earrings, her greasy blond hair with dark roots, gives me a once-over.

When I sit down at the bar, she looks up. "Oh, honey, you look like you could use a drink."

I sigh, barely able to lift my head, and try my best to meet her eyes without bursting into tears. "Thank you."

"What do you drink?" she asks, filling up a beer.

I shrug, the decision too difficult right now. "Honestly, anything."

She fills a shot glass with whiskey and sets it in front of me. I reach for it. The whiskey burns my throat. Without waiting for a response, she fills it up again.

I stare at the glass—I probably shouldn't—but feeling reckless, I pick up the glass and gulp it down.

The bartender leans on her elbows. "I'm Missi—with an *i*, not a *y*—like *Mississippi*."

“Maya,” I say, smiling weakly. I’m suddenly not only exhausted but unbelievably thirsty. “Could I have some water, please?” I ask, and she fills me a glass. After taking a few desperate gulps, I wipe my mouth with the back of my sleeve and set my head on my arms. I’m finally ready to admit to everything. To everyone. Tell them that it was me. I was the one that killed Lila. A wave of exhaustion hits me.

“What are you in for?” she asks, an odd expression.

I shake my head, looking up at her. It hurts too much to think about. Her brown eyes lined in sparkly blue liner remind me of Naomi—she had one just like it. “My husband and I got in a fight. He left and took my daughter with him.” My shoulders slump. I haven’t slept in days. I need to sleep.

She clucks her tongue and shakes her head as she moves to clean up a dirty glass and pick up some singles left at the bar. “Sorry, hon, I have a two-year-old, and if her daddy ever tried to take her from me—oh boy, I’d be after him like a bat outta hell.”

She refills my glass, and I thank her. “And trying to protect me, he did something terrible, and now he’s going to end up in prison,” I tell her, the thought terrifying. “It’s all my fault. I should’ve told him the truth. I should’ve told everybody the truth.”

“Nothin’ you can do about it now.” She watches me with a gentle expression, one hand on her cross necklace.

I smile, grateful for her company. Somehow, explaining the situation to a total stranger makes it feel less heavy. She pours us both a beer, and then another, and at some point, I’m loosened up by the alcohol, and the past couple of months come pouring out of me.

“...And the whole time, I knew it was him, had to have been him...” I’m slurring, and I know it, but I had to get it out. I had to tell someone.

Missi’s shaking her head, brows furrowed in sympathy. “Let me see him. You got a photo?”

When I pull out my phone and show her a picture of Matthew and Sara, Missi’s face hardens. “I know her—she’s that actress.”

I stop.

Sara. My stomach drops as I suddenly remember what Cecily told me on the boat: Sara had accused Matthew of cheating on her. She knew he was sleeping with someone. She implied they could have been talking about Naomi.

I remember how Fiona Williams told me Sara had been involved in Matthew's crimes. How Gary had tried to warn me—*Sara's* car was seen five miles outside Princeton, and that's why Matthew's alibi fell through—but I'd been so focused on Matthew, I had barely listened.

I think back to Naomi's funeral. How Sara had come after me when I'd run off. She was trying to stop me from looking into Matthew. Protecting him, I'd thought.

But she hadn't been protecting *him*, had she? She'd been protecting *herself*.

The haze that's been clouding my thoughts finally parts, and it's like I've opened my eyes for the first time. The last piece I'd been missing was right in front of me: Sara wasn't home with Matthew the night my sister died because *she'd* been with Naomi.

"Sorry, one second," I say to Missi while I pull out my phone. I have to tell Daisy.

I dial Daisy, but the call goes to voicemail, so I hang up and text her instead: *Urgent. Please call.* I dial her again. *Daisy, please pick up.* But the call goes to voicemail yet again.

When I call Nate, he doesn't pick up either.

I try calling Cecily. *Please. Please.*

She answers on the second ring. "Maya? Is everything okay?" And relief floods my system.

"Cecily." I try to concentrate, to make sure I'm not slurring, but the shock of this realization has temporarily sobered me, and I'm shaking instead. "I—I think I know who killed Naomi."

"Who?" she asks, sounding as alarmed as I feel.

"Sara. Matthew's fiancée." I'm breathing fast as I wait for her to respond.

"How do you know?"

“You said it yourself, she thought Naomi was sleeping with him. I know it sounds crazy...”

“Hold on. I can’t—you’re breaking up.”

“Cecily, listen.” So much adrenaline is pumping through my system, I can hardly think straight. “We have to go to the police. Now.”

“It’s after midnight, but okay. I’ll go with you. Which station should I meet you at?”

The thought of Cecily helping immediately calms me, but then the reality of my situation sinks in. “I—I can’t drive,” I admit. “I had a few drinks.”

“I’ll come pick you up. Where are you?”

“Thank you.” Relief rushes through me. The detectives will take Cecily seriously. “I’m at the Surly Goat Tavern. I’ll send you my location.”

—

“DO YOU REALLY think it’s too late to call Detective Simmons? Go to the station?” I ask Cecily once we’re on the road. It must be almost one A.M. now, but I have to tell them about Sara. I’m still stunned by this new revelation and my head feels like it’s filled with a hundred tiny bees crawling around in cotton.

“Yes,” she says, then looks at me and frowns. “We’ll tell them, but not with you like this. You’ve obviously been drinking, and leaving after the detectives said to stay put didn’t look good. I think we need to get you showered and a good night’s sleep. We’ll call your lawyer first thing tomorrow morning. We want you to look as credible as possible so they stop focusing on you.”

She’s right. I can’t go in like this. They’re probably home for the night. And it’s true I’d been ignoring Detective Gary’s calls. If I came in, who knows how they’d respond.

I sink back in the seat. “You’re right.”

Closing my eyes, I take a long, deep breath, suddenly exhausted. The vibration of the road calms my nerves, and I’m reminded of the way Dani always falls asleep on long road trips. So tomorrow. Tomorrow we’ll deal

with it. Tonight, I can rest. All I want is to see Dani, kiss her good night, and fall asleep in my own bed...though I know that's impossible right now.

I think of Nate, how angry he'd been with me. The fight we'd had. The bar. The whiskey. I look at my reflection in the mirror, wipe at the smeared mascara under my eye. "Oh god."

She looks over at me, concerned. "What is it?"

"Nate and Dani are staying at his friend's place. They'll be back tomorrow morning. But I can't let him see me like this. I need to go back and get his car."

"You can stay in my guest room. Theo's still in London. I'll tell Nate you needed some space. I'll drive you to pick up your car tomorrow."

I think of Cecily's condo on the Upper East Side: the guest bedroom with the down bedding like a luxury hotel, the smell of her expensive detergent, and the pillows, *so many pillows!* And imagine my head sinking into them as if they were clouds.

Cecily is still talking, and her voice, her rational thinking, eases my nerves. She always gets what she wants. Everything is going to be fine.

It all makes sense now: Sara thought Naomi was sleeping with Matthew. She'd hurt my sister, and after the wedding, she'd gone after Matthew too. Maybe she'd simply snapped, gotten tired of his lies.

I feel my neck flush with shame. "I can't believe I didn't see it..."

I remember running after Sara into the subway. Thinking she'd help. How she'd ignored me. Accused *me* of assault. What was I thinking? Was I really that *stupid*? Sara Vail is an actress. It's literally her job to lie.

"I knew there was something off about her," Cecily says. "Water?" She hands me a Perrier, which I eagerly accept.

The lemon-flavored sparkling water is cool on my tongue, sliding down my throat, and I drink it down in long gulps. But it's not enough to get rid of the bitter alcohol taste in my mouth. I take another sip to try to chase it away, but it's still there, along with the pounding headache. This is why I don't drink whiskey.

"I feel like an idiot," I say, reaching up to massage my temples.

“Don’t say that.” Cecily places a reassuring hand over mine. “There was no way you could have known.”

Outside, it’s started to rain. My eyes drift to the road, glassy wet pavement winding like a black river. Soon the drizzling rain and the rhythm of the yellow lines lulls me into a trance.

Tick tick tick.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I wake up, I don’t recognize where we are. All around us is gray nothingness, fog swallowing the car, the faint outline of evergreen trees. And it’s quiet, so we can’t be in the city. What time is it?

I squint at the clock. It’s out of focus, the numbers sliding and breaking. I must be exhausted. Or more drunk than I thought. When I pull my phone from my pocket, the numbers are clearer: 1:26 A.M.

A message from Daisy lights the screen, and when I open it, I stop.

Stay away from Cecily.

My heart falters. I text her back: ?

Daisy responds right away: *Cecily and Matthew. It all makes sense now. It was her!*

Time seems to slow as all the blood leaves my face and slides down into my stomach. My hands grow cold, sweaty. I glance over at Cecily, but her eyes are focused on the road.

Careful not to react, I respond to Daisy: *What was her???*

Before I fell asleep, I’d grown used to the passing New Jersey factories and gas stations, but now, there are tall evergreen trees on either side, the road winding, twisting up, up. My eardrums pop. *Where are we going?*

My eyes slide over to Cecily, dread sitting in my stomach. Her eyes are focused on the road, and she’s driving fast. Too fast.

Daisy is typing...and typing...and my chest is growing tighter with every passing second. It can’t be...not Cecily...

Daisy: *Naomi got the video. Cecily helped Matthew silence Lila. Cecily and Matthew were together then...And I think this entire time!*

“Who is it?” Cecily asks, glancing over at me. Her voice is casual, but I sense a note of tension underneath. The top half of her face is in shadow, and

her eyes, which were once blue, are now a steel gray.

I swallow, quickly tucking my phone by my side. I have to pretend everything's fine. I can't let her know what I'm thinking. Or what Daisy's told me. A metallic taste fills the back of my throat. Bitter and sharp like blood. I swallow, hard. "Just Nate."

"Nate?" Cecily repeats. "I knew he wouldn't stay upset forever." But she's looking at me with an unreadable expression.

My pulse quickens and I try to calm myself, force myself to smile. Maybe if I tell her Nate knows I'm with her, she'll take me home. She'll have to.

"Yeah," I lie. "He was..." But there's something wrong with my throat. And my head is fuzzy and slow. It's like searching for the words at the bottom of a murky lake, each slipping from my hands like fish. I swallow and try again. "He was...worried. I told...I told him...I was...you...with you." I try to smile, but find it exceedingly difficult. I feel sick.

Cecily turns her attention back to the road and I exhale the breath I'd been holding. She believed me...for now.

But I need to know what Daisy found.

Suddenly, in a burst of clarity, I remember what Detective Simmons told me one of the first times we met: *Your sister's phone pinged a tower in Manhattan.* A tower in Manhattan—Cecily lives in Manhattan. They'd learned Naomi was sleeping at her friend's place downtown, but the tower had been uptown. Where Cecily lives.

I respond to Daisy's text: *HELP. I'm with her.*

What I really want to know is: *How? Why?*

But I don't have time. I need to get out of here.

If only I could call the police. Leave the phone on while I signal for help— isn't that something people do? Pulling my phone up to my face, I concentrate hard on the screen until it becomes clear—one bar of service. *Shit.* The last message hasn't sent, and my phone is almost dead. A horrible sinking: we're in the middle of nowhere. She's taking me somewhere remote—I shudder.

Cecily looks over again, and I try to smile, but it feels like I'm drifting, strong anesthesia haze pulling me under, the sides of my mouth stretched by

an invisible string. It reminds me of a time when a nurse dispensed a strong sedative into my IV. Something is wrong. Something is very—

Stop. Think. There has to be another way. I concentrate on the road in front of me, trying not to lose myself in the winding pavement, the falling rain. Dizzy, I reach for the water, finishing the rest in a few gulps.

“More?” Cecily asks, offering me another bottle. I grab it from her and unscrew the cap, but the cap doesn’t click.

It’s already been opened.

I freeze, and my heart goes crazy. *No, oh no, oh god.*

“You okay?” Cecily asks, eyeing me. My neck is too hot. Sweat beads my forehead, the back of my neck. The glass bottle feels heavy, like a five-pound weight, in my hand.

I try to respond, to assure her nothing’s wrong, but my tongue is awkward and thick.

“I’m fine,” I try to say, but it comes out mumbled—something’s seriously wrong. *She’s drugged me.*

Cecily reaches over to grab the bottle as it slips from my grasp and spills onto my lap. “Oh no. Poor thing. Looks like someone drank a little too much tonight. You were always a bit of a lightweight.”

I lean toward the window, and my body crumples into it, head lolling to my chest. My breath grows shallow, fogging the window. Everything is wrong.

What the hell did she do to me?

I’m exhausted, my head heavy, so heavy, my eyelids tipping shut, and just before I feel it all slip away, one final thought lingers at the edge of my consciousness—*How am I going to get out of this?*

NAOMI

Friday, May 26, 2023, night of her death

BEN CALLS ME FROM THE gate when he gets to the airport, and the sound of his voice sends a current of longing through my center. How is it possible I miss him already?

I stay in the apartment all day, but needing some air, I leave and head uptown. As the sun sinks toward the horizon, I feel more and more exposed. Every few seconds, I check over my shoulder to make sure no one is following me. I try to focus on the other people, the bodegas and cafés. I imagine moving to the city with Ben after graduation, taking walks like this together. A young interracial couple smiles at me, and I think of Ben's photography.

I text Ben: *Can you teach me how to use your camera?*

He replies a second later: *Anytime.*

I find myself at my favorite little deli uptown, buy a lox bagel and matzo ball soup, and am checking out when I hear the bell jingle with the door and a familiar voice behind me.

"Naomi, is that you?"

I turn to find Cecily standing in line behind me. "Aunt Cecily." I throw my arms around her, and before I know it, my eyes are pricking with tears.

"Oh, don't cry, you're graduating! You should be excited! What's the matter?"

“It’s not—I can’t—” All my fear and anger in the past weeks fills my throat, and I can’t get out the words.

“Come over, tell me all about it. I made some of that bread you like. And I have that good French butter and Margaret’s raspberry fig jam.”

I look at her. I’ve been feeling so lost. So scared. I could really use her help. I nod.

“Good,” Cecily says, handing the attendant her credit card. After we pay, she puts an arm around me. “Now, come. Tell me everything.”

—

WE’RE EATING IN Cecily’s Upper East Side home when my phone buzzes. It’s an email from Marta. I stand and move to the other side of the room as I read: *Watch the end first, around four hours in. Then take it to the police.*

I quickly download the video to my phone and delete the email to protect Marta. I don’t want anyone, not even the police, to know it came from her.

Cecily watches me from across the room. “What is it? Everything all right? It’s not about graduation, is it? I’m going to miss Reunions tomorrow, but I’ll be there Sunday.”

I take a second to catch my breath. I have to look at the video. “No...it’s about that girl who died...the one who was in Greystone...”

Cecily nods. She’s staring at me now. Standing a few feet away. “What about her?”

But I’m too distracted to answer. I need to watch it now. “I’ve been looking into it—we found some things that make it seem like it wasn’t an accident, and I think we may have just found what we need.”

“You’ve been looking into it?” Cecily stops short. “Show me.” She moves closer.

I scan to the place in the video Marta referenced. It’s the cabin, the same one that was in the background of the photo of my sister and her friends. It’s hard to tell what’s going on—the footage is grainy and dark—but then I see it: the dark outline of a body.

“That’s her,” I say.

The video plays on: the dark cabin. Lila on the floor, a strip of light flickering over her. Is she still alive? I can't tell.

"Well done, getting this," Cecily says, and I exhale the breath I'd been holding. "Get some rest. We can—"

"Wait, we need to see what happens." In the video, a man appears out of the darkness. He's wearing a ski jacket and holding a shovel. He sets the shovel down and tries to lift Lila off the floor.

My heart races. It's him. I knew it was him. DuPont struggles with her body, and after a minute, he stops, turning over his shoulder. His mouth is moving, like he's talking to someone off screen.

"We'll go to the police first thing tomorrow morning," Cecily says. "Watch the video with them and my lawyer." She reaches over and pauses the video. I look up at her, surprised. "Have you told your sister about this?"

"No—no, not yet. I didn't want to get her involved."

"Well, you did the right thing. We'll make sure nothing happens. You're safe now."

My heart is fluttering and my hands feel clammy. I think I need to sit down.

"You don't look good. Let me get you some water." Cecily disappears into the kitchen and returns with a glass of water, which I gulp down.

Sinking into the couch, I feel a wave of relief, and at the same time a sharp pain in the center of my forehead. "Can I use your bathroom? I think I'm getting a migraine."

"Of course—you know where it is."

I go to the bathroom in the hall, but then remember she keeps the Advil in the upstairs bathroom. I yell out from the hall, "I'm going to grab some Advil."

I don't hear her respond, but I've been here enough times to know where she keeps it. My head is throbbing now, so badly that it makes my vision blur around the edges. I have to grip the railing hard as I make my way upstairs.

When I reach the sink, I splash my face with cold water and lean over the counter, dizzy. My breath sounds animal, ragged and shallow. Maybe I ate something weird. Or maybe it's a reaction to seeing the video. Seeing Lila

murdered. I shudder. I just want to watch the rest and get it over with. God, I hope Maya is innocent in all of this.

After steadying myself, I open Cecily's medicine cabinet to look for Advil and am riffling through one of the drawers when I happen to glance at the name on one of the prescription pill bottles.

NAOMI MASON—TEMAZEPAM

I frown. What the hell are my sleeping pills doing in Cecily's bathroom?

"Naomi?" I hear Cecily call my name from the hall. Her footsteps thudding up the stairs. "Where did you go?"

"Up here." My mouth is dry.

My neck suddenly feels too hot, and sweat breaks out over my forehead. I turn on the sink and bend my mouth to it, drinking from the tap. I must have stood up too quickly, because the room spins, and I have to grip the edge of the sink so that I don't fall.

I hear the door open. Her footsteps outside.

I want to run, but there's nowhere to go. Cecily opens the door. She stares at me, a dark shape, backlit by the light in the hall.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes slip down to the bottle of pills in my hand and her face darkens. She holds out a hand. "Give that to me."

No no no. This isn't happening. Not Cecily... My heart is pounding now, but my legs feel like lead. My vision swims, my legs collapsing beneath me. The pills slip from my fingers, clattering to the floor, and the last thing I see before everything goes dark is her long fingers wrapped around a syringe.

MAYA

August 2023

AN HOUR LATER, MAYBE MORE, I wake to the sound of rain and blink my eyes open. It's impossible to tell the time of day because outside is gray and bleak, rain streaking the glass. Everything is out of focus, a jackhammer pummeling the inside of my skull. Slowly, I remember the car ride, the bitter taste of the water. Then the room around me comes into view: wood beams on a high ceiling, massive fireplace, floor-to-ceiling windows. *Where am I?*

I try to push myself up, but I can't move my arms. Adrenaline surges through me, every nerve in my body firing. *What's wrong with my arms?* Beneath me, I feel something cold and smooth. I'm on the floor, a hardwood floor. And...something isn't right. My mouth hurts and I can't breathe because there's something keeping it shut. Twisting my hands, I realize they're tied in my lap with rope.

What the hell?

My heart is racing as I try to free myself from the restraints, but there's something wrong with my head. I try to scream, to cry out for help, but no one's there.

Oh god.

I look up. The familiar moose head stares down at me from the wall, its beady eyes watching me. The large chandelier made of antlers over the foyer. It's the Greystone cabin. I squeeze my eyes shut. *This isn't happening.*

My stomach clenches and I heave, but nothing comes out.

“Oh, you’re up,” Cecily says, walking into the room with a cup of coffee like nothing’s wrong. “I made some coffee, do you want some? It might help with the hangover.”

Anger shoots through me. *What’s wrong with you?* I want to scream, but I can’t. The tape is cutting into the sides of my mouth. Instead, I slam my foot against the coffee table, nostrils flaring as I struggle to free my hands from the rope.

“Stop. You’re going to hurt yourself.” Cecily calmly leans over and rips the tape off my mouth. It comes off with an unexpected sharp sting of pain. “What was that you were saying?”

“Cecily...” I say through my teeth, voice shaking with anger. Adrenaline surges through me. “*How could you?*” From the ground, I try to reach for her, but she takes a step back, and I collapse onto the floor.

“Oh...no. Don’t do that.” She turns and paces to the window. Holds her cup of coffee to her lips. “I loved Naomi, you know that. Don’t you remember how much I did for her. For you?”

“I don’t understand.” My head is still spinning from the drugs. “Why would you help Matthew?”

Cecily’s eyes flick to mine, and for a brief second she looks like herself again—the twenty-one-year-old Cecily, the one who was confident and full of life and always knew what to do. The Cecily I considered family for the past ten years. “Why did you do it?” I ask, desperate for an explanation.

She looks down at the cup of coffee, picks at a tiny chip in the mug with her nail.

And that’s when it dawns on me: the second part of Daisy’s message. Had Cecily really been with Matthew since college? I think back to how long ago that was, how young we were then. That would mean they started dating when he was nearly twice her age, when she was still practically a child. I feel fury churning within me. He’d groomed her. He’d done this. I start to shake. “Naomi found evidence about that night, you know, about Lila. He would have gone to prison. She was trying to put away a *murderer*.” My voice sounds strange, choked, like it belongs to someone else.

“That’s exactly the problem,” Cecily says abruptly. She’s standing very straight, very still. “I wanted to get her to stop. The article. The investigation. Could you imagine what that would’ve done? Not only would it have sent Matthew to prison, but it would have collapsed Theo’s investment fund, bankrupted Sterling and Greystone, and destroyed the very foundation we’ve *all* built our lives on, yourself included. So when she came to me, I had to stop her. I had no other choice.”

“So you drugged her with *ketamine*? A girl you’ve treated like a sister for the past ten years? *You dumped her body in the lake?*” I feel like I’m choking on the words.

“Well, she wasn’t supposed to *die*! I meant to just buy us some time to figure out what to do, but then...”

It feels like the wind has been knocked from my lungs. My vision starts to go.

Cecily sets down the cup, shakes her head; she can’t look me in the eye. “I didn’t know what else to do. And when she stopped breathing and wouldn’t wake up, I called Matthew.” She’s crying now, talking quickly. “It was his idea to bring her to the lake, make it look like an accident.” Her voice falters, and when she closes her eyes, a tear escapes and meanders down the side of her face.

Rage swells within me, hot as a burning flame, expanding in my chest, snaking up my throat. “How *could* you? Naomi loved you.” This woman is not the Cecily I know. The smart, fun young woman I met in college, the friend who’s been by my side for all these years.

“Matthew has meant everything to me for the past ten years,” she says quietly. She rubs a hand over her forehead. “I was trying to protect him. To protect all of us. I didn’t have another option.”

“You had a choice.”

“No. I didn’t.” She turns to me, eyes flashing, and I stop. “I married Theodore because my mother wanted me to, despite the fact that he was awful to me. He wasn’t faithful, not ever. Not for a day. He was horrible to me, and he controlled the majority of our finances.” She pauses. “But it was okay, because I had someone else. Someone better. Our love was the only

thing keeping me sane. I had this whole plan to leave him. To file for divorce. But then—” Cecily blinks fast, turning away again, as if trying to hide her tears. “You lost someone you loved...but so did I.”

I look around the room. *Come on. Think.* All I can do to buy myself more time is to keep her talking. That’s when I see it: by the fireplace are a set of tools, a heavy iron poker.

With all my strength, I slide toward the fireplace. I’m so dizzy, it’s hard to move. If only I could reach them with my foot and knock them over. I concentrate on the iron rod. All it would take is one hard kick.

“I’m sorry it happened the way it did.” She begins to turn. “I didn’t—” Cecily stops when she sees me.

I squeeze my eyes shut and kick the stand. The tools clatter to the floor with a loud metallic crash. Cecily rushes over, but as she is reaching for the poker, I bring my foot into her knee with all my strength.

She yells out in pain.

It’s enough of a distraction for me to grab the iron rod. I hold it in front of me, my hands bound, as she grips her knee on the floor. I’m unsteady on my feet, but I finally have a chance.

“You’re going to let me go,” I say, speaking slowly, willing my voice to be strong. “I won’t turn you in. I just want to go home.”

There’s got to be some ounce of her left in there. Some part of her that regrets what she’s done. That understands that Matthew was a monster, that he manipulated her just like he manipulated every single student that passed through Greystone. He never cared about any of us, only what we could do for him. The edge of her mouth quivers, and for a brief moment, I wonder if I’ve gotten through to her.

But instead, she laughs, a cruel sound that echoes through the cabin. “With the amount of drugs in your system, I’d be surprised if you could raise that over your head, much less hurt me with it.”

She’s right, I realize. It feels as if the floor is shifting under me. I can’t see straight, and despite the adrenaline, the iron rod feels heavy in my hand. “And...can you smell that?” She sniffs the air. “Is there something on the stove?”

And that's when I smell it. Gasoline, sharp and acrid, and burning rubber. *Oh god. What has she done?*

Cecily shrugs. "It makes sense you'd come back here to hide from the police...to destroy everything associated with Greystone." And now I see it. *I'm* the one the police are after, not her. *I'm* the one accused of killing Matthew. I hadn't slept well since my sister died. This is *exactly* the type of thing a woman in my position might do.

She's going to make it look like I'd completely lost it, burned down the Greystone cabins in a fit of rage, with myself inside, thinking that I was about to be caught and tried for murder. The fire would ensure there was no evidence, no thread to follow.

A trail of smoke drifts into the room, winding its way across the wall like something alive. The sound of crackling flames. My stomach sinks as I lose hope. I want to run after her, but it's too late. The front door slams, and I realize Cecily is gone.

—

THE CABIN is filling with smoke, and it's getting harder to breathe. I start coughing and can't stop. I'm choking on the fumes, particles of smoke lodging in my throat. Using the fireplace tools, I manage to loosen the rope enough to free my hands. Dropping down to all fours, I crawl for the front door.

My eyes sting, tearing up so much I can't see. How could I have been so naïve? How could I not see what was in front of me for ten years?

I think of Naomi and rage shudders through me. I won't let it end this way. I won't let Cecily get away with this.

When I try the front door, it's locked. Behind me the smoke is piling higher on the ceiling, a gray mass of ash and soot. An angry gust of heat rushes my face, searing my skin. A loud *bang* comes from somewhere in the house and the sound of glass shattering. My heart races as I look for another exit.

Pulling my shirt over my mouth, I crawl toward the bedrooms. Maybe I can escape out a window. The heat burns my back, sweat trickling down every inch of my face, my neck.

But when I reach the bedroom, the window is stuck. Bolted down. And as much as I struggle to yank it open, it won't budge.

Coughing, eyes stinging, I run back into the living room and try not to inhale as I seize the iron poker and rush back to the bedroom.

With all my strength I hurl it again and again at the glass until it breaks. Once I've cleared out the broken glass, I squeeze my body through the opening, cringing as the jagged glass cuts into my sides, before falling into the bushes below.

—

IT TAKES A moment to clear my lungs and catch my breath, and when I look down, my stomach is bleeding, badly, pain radiating up my sides and down my legs. Blood rushes down my waist where the glass has cut into my skin.

And yet I am relieved to be out here, alive, sucking in lungfuls of clean air, rather than inside that burning cabin.

The roof has caught fire and plumes of black smoke fill the air.

Out here, though, it's freezing. The rain is coming down harder now, and I don't see any sign of Cecily.

When I start walking, my ankle gives way and I cry out in pain. I must have sprained it when I jumped from the window. My choices don't look great: the road, winding and narrow, or the forest itself, dark and ominous. The closest cabin is on the other side of the mountain, but it's the best chance I have at getting help. I'm running out of time.

On the off chance someone might be driving this way—I choose the road.

—

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I'm limping down the center of the empty road through the pouring rain. I'm colder than I've ever been, like the cold has penetrated my bones, but grateful to be surrounded by darkness. Safe. Hidden. From her.

I'm shivering violently when a light flashes in the distance, and hope rises in my chest. Headlights! A car bending around the curve. Could someone have seen the smoke? Called for help?

It's hard to see in all this rain. But I make out the shape of someone behind the wheel.

I wave my hands overhead and yell out. But instead of pulling up next to me, the car crawls slowly forward before stopping in front of me. I take a step back. It's an old gray van. The kind electricians or plumbers drive. Or... people with worse intentions. Suddenly, my hope vanishes, replaced by panic.

Behind me, a door slams shut. Quick footsteps. I turn, bracing myself, but I can't see a thing. I'm blinded by a second pair of bright headlights, cutting directly into my eyes. But through the painful glare, I can make out someone approaching, a dark shape. Heart beating faster, I raise my arm to shield my eyes.

It's too late.

A loud thud, followed by a sharp pain on the side of my temple. And everything retreats into darkness.

—

I WAKE TO a strange scraping sound—a pain on the back of my skull—and it takes a moment to realize I'm moving, sliding, someone dragging me by my legs, small rocks in the dirt scraping the back of my head and neck. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, and I look up at the pine trees overhead, shivering in the wind. *Run*. My brain is saying *run*. But my muscles refuse to cooperate. With a rush of movement, I'm sliding down, down some muddy embankment, mind going in and out of consciousness.

She's not going to stop until she kills me. It's a sobering thought and sends a chill right through me. *This is where Lila died. This is where they buried her.* I wonder if this was the last thing my sister saw before she died too, a blur of feathery pines rushing past overhead, the rain needling her eyes.

Cecily pauses and looks down at me, and I squeeze my eyes shut once again, pretend I'm still passed out. She's breathing hard, probably from dragging me all this way.

"How's it going?" Cecily asks. "Is it ready?" *Who is she talking to?*

A familiar voice answers. "Good, almost done." It's Marta. *Marta*. And I hear sounds of metal on dirt, digging. And a harrowing realization: she's digging my grave.

I feel the betrayal like a bitterness on my tongue, a knife in my side. How could she do this? Hadn't Marta been the one to give the video to Naomi? Wasn't she trying to help? I knew Marta had worked for the St. Clairs when Cecily was a kid. Her family had gotten Marta the job at Sterling Club. Was she sponsored by the St. Clairs, employed by the St. Clairs, loyal until the very end?

I want to push myself to my feet and run. Get as far away from Cecily as possible. But with all of the drugs in my system, I know I won't make it far. And who knows what weapon she might have with her. She wouldn't let me get away.

The scrape of the shovel on the dirt is a grating rhythm. *Crfft shhh crfft shhh crfft*. And my heart is beating so hard I might pass out.

No, hold on. Stay with it. I have to escape. I will not die here.

"Okay, that's enough," Cecily says in a commanding tone. "Enough," she says louder, when Marta doesn't stop.

I open my eyes a sliver, and through my eyelashes I can see Marta with the shovel. She wipes her eyes with her sleeve, smearing tears and dirt on her cheeks. Cecily snatches the shovel from her, and as Marta turns away, our eyes meet for a split second. I squeeze my eyes shut again and hold my breath, praying she won't tell Cecily.

I'm about to open my eyes again when I feel cold metal against my neck. My heart flutters rapidly.

"Get up," Cecily says. "I know you're awake."

I struggle to my feet, careful not to lean into the blade of the knife. I glance over at Marta, but she looks away, arms folded over her chest.

“Get in. Let’s go,” Cecily says, but I know there’s no way I’ll get out of there alive. I freeze, feet planted to the ground. “Move!” Cecily shouts, forcing the knife into my back until it nearly breaks the skin.

I take one step toward the ditch, and another, breathing hard, heart thrashing in my ears. The rain is coming down harder now, beating on the ground. And I’m freezing, my clothes soaked through and dripping, every muscle sore and shivering. When we reach the grave, someone shoves me hard, and I fall forward. My head collides with the side of the ditch, pain shooting through my skull.

“Marta! Help. You have to help me!” I scream, struggling to turn around. Above me, Cecily stands with an awful smirk. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a gun. *No!*

I claw at the walls of the grave, panic shooting through me as my hands slip in the mud, nails scratching at dirt, bending painfully. But there’s nowhere to go and it’s too steep to climb out. The gun is pointed right at my chest.

“I’m so sorry, Maya. I really am.” Her hands are shaking as her finger closes slowly on the trigger, and in the final seconds, I squeeze my eyes shut. An image of Dani appears behind my eyelids: she’s running toward me, laughing, arms spread wide. All I want is to hold her one more time. To have one more hour with her.

There’s a loud metallic *bang*. I try to hold on to that image of Dani, but it’s fading. Everything is fading, slipping away like melting snow.

I hold my breath, wait for the pain to sting my chest, the blood to fill my lungs. I wait, and wait, but nothing happens.

I inhale. The air entering my lungs is cold. I feel no pain. Maybe this is what it feels like to be shot. Painless, numb, time stretching in those last moments before death.

When I finally open my eyes, I see Marta standing overhead holding the shovel. Cecily is crumpled in a heap at her feet, blood dripping from her head, her torso hanging over the edge of the grave. The bang hadn’t been a gunshot; it had been Marta’s shovel colliding with Cecily’s skull.

MAYA

August 2023

THE SOUND OF CARTOONS FROM my childhood on the television. *The Jetsons*. A familiar laugh. Dani.

I slowly blink my eyes open. I'm back in Brooklyn, lying in bed with an ice pack on my forehead. It's dark, save for the flicker of the television, a strip of light creeping through the crack in the curtains.

Sensing I'm awake, Nate sits on the mattress next to me and smooths my hair. "How ya doing, Bruiser?"

A laugh escapes me, sending a sharp pain up the base of my neck. "Oh god." Bringing my hand to my head, I wince. There's a lump where I must have hit my head on the side of the ditch. My ankle throbs with a sharp pain, and when I try to move my foot, I realize it's in a cast.

Nate laughs and kisses me gently on the cheek. I vaguely remember being driven to the hospital, the hazy sequence of events that led me here. God, it feels good to be home.

Seeing us together, Dani stands up from the armchair and crawls into bed on the other side of me. She kisses my arm before looking at me with a worried expression.

After we sit like this for a minute, Nate sits up. "Big news."

"What happened?" I ask.

Nate grabs the remote and switches the TV from cartoons to a news channel. I prop myself up onto my elbow for a better view.

It's footage of Cecily from around town, nights out at galas and functions.

A news anchor says, "*Cecily St. Clair's body was found in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, on her family's property. The property was consumed by fire, her body found with severe third-degree burns. A longtime employee of the family witnessed the fire and gave a statement.*"

I stare at the screen. Marta...

"The Manhattan gallerist had been wanted for questioning over the murder of former Princeton professor Matthew DuPont, after her DNA was found at the scene of the crime."

"Cecily killed Matthew..." Nate shakes his head in disbelief. "I didn't think she had it in her."

I swallow, unable to drag my gaze away from the screen. *They're wrong.* But I don't tell Nate what I know: Cecily would never have hurt Matthew. She loved him too much. *Cecily and Matthew were together then...And I think this entire time!* It made sense that her DNA would be on his body. Maybe he'd been on his way back from visiting her.

The news segment cuts away from the anchor to a photograph of Cecily and Matthew and begins to explain how they had been having an affair since she was in college. *Affair* isn't really the word I'd use to describe his manipulation of a student, though.

Seeing her face sends a mix of emotions twisting inside me. That sharp feeling of betrayal stabs deeper into my side. How could she do something so awful? After all these years? Someone who I thought was a friend, with whom I'd spent every Thanksgiving, shared so many memories, was being groomed by Matthew the whole time? I hated her for it, but I also felt like I'd failed my friend by never noticing she was in a toxic relationship with one man who was unfaithful and another who manipulated her. Two horrible men who controlled her.

"You burned the place to the ground," Nate says, and I shake my head. It still doesn't feel real. "I'm glad you're home." Nate smiles and gently wraps

his arms around me. I don't realize I'm crying until my cheeks are wet with tears.

Dani looks at us, concerned. "What's wrong, Mama?" she asks.

I smile, holding my arms out for her. "Nothing, Dani, I'm just glad I'm home."

She turns to me and I pull her in, breathing in her sweet smell and holding her tight against my chest, remembering how I'd imagined this moment seconds before I thought I would die.

—

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm lying on the couch in the living room, lost in thought, when the doorbell rings. Nate answers it, and moments later, a hand touches my shoulder.

"Hey, Maya." Daisy moves to the other side of the couch so I can see her. She's holding a bag from my favorite deli, one where we've gone many times before. "I brought your favorite." She smiles and carefully sits down next to me, places a hand on my knee. "How are you feeling?"

"I've been better." I reach up to feel my head and wince. "I can't believe I didn't see it."

Daisy smiles. "It's not your fault, none of us saw it either."

I close my eyes and let a warm tear fall down my cheek.

"After what Marta told me, I went to the police," Daisy explains. "I told them about the video and everything I knew about Cecily and Matthew. They already had an APB out looking for her by the time she abducted you." I try to breathe, but my ribs are bruised and painful. "Also, I brought along someone who wants to see you."

She gestures to someone behind me. Marta steps into the living room, stands awkwardly before me. "Hello, dear."

My eyes tear at the sight of her. "Marta." I hold out my arms for an embrace. "Thank you so much for saving my life."

She leans down and gives me a careful hug. "I wish I had done something sooner. Maybe I could have saved your sister too." Her expression breaks and

she looks like she might cry.

A sudden memory, just before I'd passed out: Marta standing with the shovel over Cecily.

She explains how she'd been too scared to help Naomi—how Matthew had threatened to have her family deported, how he'd collected information about her loved ones. "He was with Cecily for a long, long time, many years he was with her. When she was a student, he was. Oh, I wish I had stopped him."

"It's not your fault," I tell her. "I know you tried." I hold her closer and don't let go.

—

AFTERWARD, I TURN to Nate. "Could you take Dani out for a minute?" He nods and takes Dani out so that we can talk.

Once they're gone, I turn to Daisy. "Can I see it?"

Daisy hesitates, then hands me her phone. I stare at the video, a stone in the pit of my stomach, and force myself to breathe.

The low-res video shows us passing the living room, beers in hand, the back patio, all of us in the hot tub. Memories of the night come flooding back. The taste of tequila. The smell of the fireplace, the pulsing music, the shouts and raised voices. To think that Cecily had been with Matthew at the time, or shortly thereafter, that she'd likely been jealous of his relationship with Lila.

I scan forward. Several hours later, the camera moves. Marta's face appears on the screen, like she's holding the camera. She frowns into the lens and sets the camera in a new spot, facing the back door.

"I think this is it," Daisy says now, pointing at her screen. My chest fills with a familiar panic. All the blood has left my face and pools in my stomach.

Now two people are, oh god, they're dragging Lila's body across the floor. One is definitely Matthew, and the other is smaller, wearing a ski jacket with a hood. It's hard to make out her face in the dark, but I know, when she turns to the side...it's Cecily.

MAYA

September 2023, three weeks later

A RADIANT BLUE SEA STRETCHES to the horizon under a cloudless sky. Gentle waves lap at the shoreline as a seagull circles overhead.

Dani screams and runs out to sea, her polka-dot swimsuit a bright splash of pink against the water, little feet pattering across the sand. Susie runs in after her, laughing with delight.

It's been three weeks since Cecily died, and so much has happened. But on this Sunday, we've escaped to the Hamptons with Daisy's family for the weekend. Next to me, I have a small urn with Naomi's ashes, to scatter over the ocean like she'd wanted. *I don't want to be trapped in a box like Mom. I want someone to scatter my ashes over the ocean, so I can be free.*

"How are you feeling about everything?" Daisy asks. She's drinking a glass of Chardonnay next to me as we sit with our toes in the warm sand, watching the setting sun as it dips toward the horizon over endless rolling waves. Nate, and Daisy's husband, Scott, are throwing the Frisbee nearby, beers in hand.

"Oh, you know..." I look at Daisy, who smiles.

"I know."

I take a long sip of my wine, thinking about the past few weeks. We haven't talked much about Cecily. Her death is still too fresh.

Daisy leaked the video of Cecily and Matthew moving Lila's body to Austin Levy at the *Times*—Austin had briefly dated Lila at Princeton, and she had been the reporter Amy was working for, the one who told her to chase the Lila Jones story, whom she referred to as *AL* in her notebook.

The video went viral, appearing on all the major media outlets, and the gallery's clients—many of whom were members of Greystone—started dropping just as quickly. When questioned, the drug dealer, Kevin Francis, came clean to the police, filling in the gaps about what happened to Naomi. He'd sold Matthew the ketamine that was found in her system, who must have given it to Cecily.

Amy's article ran in the *Times*. And apparently, Matthew's crimes ran much deeper than I could have imagined: he was in deep with Cecily's husband Theodore, who was arrested on charges of fraud and embezzlement at Hunt Investment Group, the ill-gotten gains of which Cecily had been helping him launder through her gallery for the past decade. It was all linked—Hunt Investment Group, the Hunt Gallery, the Legacy Foundation—with Matthew DuPont at the core, orchestrating the scheme like a puppeteer. Such a well-oiled machine that it kept running even after his death.

I often think about how he manipulated Cecily: he was an adult; she was barely nineteen when they met. We all admired him back then, before we knew what kind of person he was. And yet, for so many years, he was able to get away with his crimes by using the people around him. Dangling promises of financial security and career success and friendship in front of them, pushing them to find out what price they'd sell their values for. My price—a better life for my sister.

But ten years later, Cecily was old enough to make her own choices, wasn't she? Sure, Matthew *bought* the ketamine, but Cecily was the one to use it. At what point were the decisions his, and at what point were they hers?

"They look so perfect, don't they?" Daisy says, her words cutting through my thoughts. She's watching our girls as they swim in the ocean. Dani taught herself how to duck under small waves and pop up on the other side, and Susie is trying to copy her. The sound of my daughter's laughter brings me

back to myself. To think I almost lost her, left her without a mother. I would never have heard that sound again.

“They do.” Watching them, I remember teaching Naomi the same thing.

“I’m thinking of homeschooling Susie for the rest of her life. For some reason, I’m just not feeling very trusting of teachers these days.” Daisy lets out a laugh and looks at me guiltily. “Too soon?”

A few seconds later, I look over at her. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Daisy takes my hand. “You don’t have to worry about that. I’m not going anywhere.” She smiles. “You’re stuck with me for life.”

We sit with our feet buried in the sand, watching the girls, until they run back and collapse into the sand nearby where they’ve built sandcastles with their fathers.

I think of the ski trip. Of Lila. It was Matthew who’d killed her, and Cecily who’d helped him cover it up, but we’d let him get away with it. Now I understand that it wasn’t the drugs that I’d dispensed, but *my silence* that had killed her. My *silence* the ripple that set off the series of events that eventually killed my sister. How often, in the world, is *silence* what allows horrible people to get away with their crimes?

I wish we could go back to that day—the day we found Lila’s body—and tell the police the truth about everything. Maybe if we had, he would have been in prison long ago, and Naomi would be here with me.

The guilt twists in my stomach. It’s something I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life. From my bag, I retrieve Naomi’s urn.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Daisy.

The urn is heavy in my arms as I make my way into the ocean. The cool water grazes my ankles as I walk deeper, lifting the skirt of my dress as the cold wraps around my calves, my thighs.

After taking a deep breath, I remove the top of the urn and slowly scatter her ashes into the ocean. *Now you can drift wherever you want to go.*

As if in answer, a warm breeze rolls off the sea and brushes hair from my face, and I swear, for a moment I can feel Naomi’s presence, hear her voice echoing around me. I picture her floating there like she did the day she first

swam in Margaret's pool, untamed curls floating around her as she stared up at the evening sky.

I feel the warmth of another body next to me, and when I open my eyes, Nate is at my side. When he wraps his arms around me, every muscle in my body relaxes. I breathe in, inhaling his familiar scent and the briny salt air, as overhead, the sky is fading.

"Naomi was trying to do the right thing," I say.

He pulls me closer to his chest, and the regrets quiet to a whisper as I think of my sister, how she'll be an absence in my life forever, a wound that will never fully heal. Today, though, I'm a little closer to the person I was before. Today I'm surrounded by people who need me—Nate, Dani, Daisy—and I want to show up for them fully. Nate and I stand together in silence, gazing out at the sea, until the last orange glow melts into the horizon.

—

AFTER THE SUN has set, I make my way back to the towels, and as I'm gathering our picnic basket to leave, my phone vibrates with a text. It's a message from Margaret St. Clair. A photo of her in an apron, slicing vegetables with a sharp knife.

We did it. ;)

I squint at the screen in the dark. It takes me a second to make sense of the words. Frowning, I read it again, and that's when I remember: the look in Margaret's eyes after Matthew's body had been found. The unmistakable look of satisfaction. Or was it pride? And...the missing knife...the one she'd cleaned and slid back into the knife block right in front of me.

My heart skips as I finally understand: *Margaret killed Matthew*. I knew it wasn't Cecily, it couldn't have been. And it definitely wasn't Nate.

Unnerved, I type: *But how did you*—and then I delete the sentence and instead type: *Thank you*.

After pressing send, I wonder for a moment what it says about me, that I'm thanking her for taking a person's life, even if it was Matthew's. Were we contributing to this endless violence that he'd started?

“Everything okay?” Daisy asks, looking over with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

“Yes.” Shutting off the screen, I tuck my phone into the pocket of my bag and smile at her, tucking away my questions with it. “Let’s go home.”

Dani comes over and grabs my hand as we make our way back to the car, and it reminds me of when Naomi was little, how much I wanted to protect her. Now as the grief and shame fade away, I’m filled with a sense of purpose. As I inhale deeply, my chest feels strange, and it takes a moment to realize that this space, this lightness within me, means now I can finally breathe.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading *Society of Lies*. It is to my great relief to say: Greystone Society and Sterling Club do not exist at Princeton. (Could you imagine?)

Though the Gothic campus in the book was inspired by a real place, the sisters, Maya and Naomi, were influenced more by my experience growing up multiracial—part Black and part Asian—never feeling like I fit in anywhere, not in my mostly white high school in Atherton, California, and, though it was more diverse in many ways, not in many spaces at Princeton.

Whether or not this was in part because I was a shy and awkward teenager and later, college student, I'll never know, but I do remember how it felt. I remember how it felt to be teased for my hair, my eyes, the way I spoke, and how I never felt I could fully embrace my identity until I found BAC, a dance group at Princeton, and the friends who made me feel welcome.

And, though every multiracial person's experience is unique, I wanted to center a story on two women who struggled with their place in the world and explore that feeling of being an outsider.

In writing *Society of Lies*, I considered the way a small, corrupt organization could contaminate an otherwise well-intentioned one.

I want to make sure the reader knows that the characters in this book are not representative of the majority of the bright, kind, hardworking students and professors I met at Princeton, many of whom I now consider my closest friends and chosen family.

In recent years, the student body has grown more diverse, more socially and politically active, the financial aid program more robust. Recent

graduates are fighting for environmental policy change, fair housing, and social justice. They are saving lives and giving back to their communities.

But just as the student body is a slice of America, an eating club is a slice of America's elite, and the qualities that make these spaces beautiful—the joining of ideas, cultures, and beliefs—also make them unique places to explore the conflict that exists in every community in America.

My goal was to write an entertaining story that also encourages conversation around friendship, sisterhood, privilege, and multiracial identity. To these complicated, often uncomfortable questions, I don't have the answer, but I believe in the need to discuss and explore them further.

Thank you for taking the time to read.

—Lauren

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About the Author

Lauren Ling Brown graduated from Princeton University and USC School of Cinematic Arts with a BA in English literature and an MFA in film production with a focus on screenwriting. She currently resides in Los Angeles, California, where she works as a film editor. *Society of Lies* is her first novel.

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