

*What? You seek something? You seek to multiply yourself tenfold,
a hundredfold? You seek followers? Seek zeros!*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

*I know how influential I am over my fans and followers. I feel like
everything I do, my hair color, my makeup, I always start these
huge trends, and I don't even realize what I'm capable of.*

—Kylie Jenner

CHAPTER ONE

Orla

New York, New York
2015

Orla left for the bad salad place without her phone, so it took her a while to find out that Sage Sterling had finally died. Sage was found on a poolside chaise at the Los Angeles hotel where she had been living for a year—never mind the fact that she was so broke, she often tipped the staff not from her handbag but *with* old handbags: scuffed-up Louis Vuittons, old Balenciaga totes with half the fringe worn off. The bellhops would make a big show of thanking her, then place the purses in the lost and found.

Sage was erratic and filthy and sporadically mean, and she kept a pet ferret named Mofongo in the room with her. Yet everyone felt compelled to treat her gently, because outside the stucco walls of the hotel complex, the world was waiting, teeth bared, for her to fuck up again. So it was not strange, as the staff would tell the police later, that no one stopped Sage when she

let herself into the pool around three in the morning. And it was not strange that no one disturbed her when the sun came up and she was still there, sleeping soundly. She was, after all, known for her impenetrable naps. Paparazzi had captured Sage snoozing in roped-off sections of exclusive New York bars, on a ski lift in Gstaad (she rode it around for hours), and during the premiere of her own latest film, an expensive animated adventure based on the phone game *Candy Crush*. (Sage played a lemon drop.) Head back, Sage snored loudly through the whole terrible movie. Someone at the premiere captured her snuffling on video. It went viral instantly, via a website called Lady-ish.com. Orla was the one who put it there.

Sage had lain still at the pool until around eight in the morning, when a towel boy watched a seagull shit directly onto her stomach. Sage didn't even flinch. The towel boy—"towel maintenance associate," as he corrected the reporter—walked over, wondering what the most tasteful part of her body to jostle was. He saw that her lips were blue. Her eyes were still, but just slightly open, watery slivers cast down through brittle lashes. He touched her shoulder, the one directly in the sun. It was cold.

Orla was in the middle of ordering her salad when the news on the flat-screen over her head cut to an aerial view of the hotel. The shot circled its gray slate roof, hovering above the oblivious billboards on Sunset, and informed viewers that, somewhere down there, Sage Sterling was dead at twenty-seven.

The girl behind Orla, who wore dingy flip-flops with her skirt suit, looked up from her phone and said, sounding bored, "I literally thought she was dead already."

The stout Guatemalan man on the other side of the counter sighed as Orla gaped at the screen, ruffling brown-edged romaine with his tongs. He was waiting for her to choose another topping. Orla always spent a long time pretending to consider vegetables before saying, as if it had just occurred to her, "Actually, just double croutons, please."

The man in front of Orla was tapping out a missive on his phone in all caps: **SAGE STERLING DEAD!** Like no one would know it had happened, Orla thought, if this guy didn't tweet it.

Not that she was much different. Back at the Lady-ish offices, Orla's intern would be looking over the obit Orla had written for Sage eighteen months ago, the one she had marked with a warning: DO NOT PUBLISH UNTIL. Sage had been Orla's beat at Lady-ish for most of the time she'd worked there. Ingrid, Orla's boss, had identified Sage as a source of "bonkers" traffic early on, when a post Orla tried about her nail art drew ninety thousand views in ten minutes. From then on, every move Sage made, every boy and girl she kissed, every gown she put on was Orla's to write up. The clicks flooded in, even more so when it became apparent that Sage had a temper. Sage grabbed photographers' cameras and forced them down to the sidewalk. Sage scratched a bouncer, nearly blinding him. Sage pushed her boyfriend off his own parents' yacht. Orla received small bonuses for stories that clocked more than five million views in a day; Sage's boat rage had paid for her laptop. She tried now, very hard, not to think about what the star's death might bring, pushing away the thought of a pair of boots she had seen in a shop window recently—soft gray suede and knee-high, meant to be worn in weather that was still weeks away. Maybe months, with this heat.

Orla apologized to the Guatemalan man and left. The intern would have published Sage's obituary by now, Orla's name at the top of it. The clicks would be raging, Ingrid ecstatic. No one on the internet would care about anything else today. Orla could afford, in terms of time and money, to go to the good salad place now.

That night, Orla wrote three hundred ninety-six words of her novel while watching a dating competition show. She had been aiming for six hundred words, but the episode had been too en-

grossing. Dabbing at her nose with a tissue, a finalist had confessed that she was bipolar. The oatmeal-faced host had raised his eyebrows and said, “Wow. This is a first for us.”

Orla promised herself she would write more tomorrow. Three hundred ninety-six words, she figured, would turn easily into six hundred once she went back and filled in some of the parts about the orthodox Jews. She didn’t know any orthodox Jews. She kept meaning to Google them. But along with themes of self-discovery and female sexuality, along with tiny doodles and charts she drew herself, she felt that, to be edgy and relevant, her book needed an orthodox Jew or two. For now, she marked the passages about them with the same shorthand they used at work for “to come” where they didn’t yet know what to say in a story: “TK.” Then she went to bed and lay awake, thinking she should have done more.

The frustrating part of it, writing a book she wasn’t really writing, was that she had been good at this once, when she was young. Orla would spend her afternoons curled over the electric typewriter that sat on her bedroom carpet, her shins beneath her and still encased in the blue knee socks she wore to school. She didn’t have time to change; she was filled with urgent, grotesque tragedies, like the one about the murderous lunch lady who ground her child victims into the taco meat, or the one about the baseball player killed by a wild pitch, a fastball that orphaned his nine frilly-named daughters. She was prolific.

There was one main difference between writing now and writing when she was in second grade: Back then, she didn’t own screens. Now, whenever a sentence of hers unfurled into something awkward or just never began at all, she gave up. She let her eyes jump from her drab Word document to the brighter planes of her phone and TV. Suddenly it would be 1:00 a.m., and she would be tapping out half-dream run-ons—into her manuscript if she was lucky, Facebook if she wasn’t.

All of the scrolling and staring was delaying her grand life

plan, the one she had always had. Orla had never not known she would move to New York. That was where authors grew, and she would be an author. She thought, when she walked into a bookstore as a kid, that the novels on the shelves had been emitted, nearly automatically, by the grown-up iterations of each American high school's best writer. In her high school, that was her. She was always winning prizes for her persuasive essays, written on things that didn't matter anymore. She had a ribbon from the governor for her paper on Napster, and she imagined, serenely, when she was young, that New York was holding her place. Then she got to New York and found out that it wasn't. No one cared about her ribbon. She learned what former teen composition all-stars actually did when they got to the city. They blogged.

She had been blogging at Lady-ish now for six years, and trying to do something bigger—write a book—for just as long. She tried to ignore the old teachers who found her on Facebook, who remarked, between *Farmville* moves, that they couldn't wait to see what she did next.

Not that it was their prophecies that haunted her. No: it was Danny's. That was all part of the pressure, too—a part that grew, strangely, as the years since she had last seen him counted up. Orla thought that perhaps she was striking a bargain with herself: if the whole world wasn't meant to believe she was special, then maybe just him thinking it would be enough.

And now, at twenty-eight, with her brain wrung of thousands of Lady-ish posts and her body sick of being pounded by New York, she was—though she couldn't admit it directly, not even to herself—in search of a shortcut. A way to be someone who had done something without having to actually do it.

A former Lady-ish colleague of hers—she was one of the older women, thirty-three, maybe—had quit the site after selling a compilation of her dating app exchanges to a large publisher. “Now I just have to actually write the damn thing,” Orla had

overheard the woman say in the ladies' room, the day before she left Lady-ish for good. Her agent, she added, had sold the unwritten book on a single chapter. Orla's ears had perked at that: she had a chapter and then some. Now she just needed an agent. But she had no idea how to get one.

And then, one morning, an agent turned up on the floor outside her apartment.

Orla wouldn't say that she had stolen the business card, really. For one thing, what was a business card these days but a collection of information anyone could find online? For another, Florence was never going to remember dropping the card. She was so drunk when she came home the night before, she could hardly remember which apartment was theirs. Orla had awoken to the sound of her stumbling down the hall, ramming her key into different locks, before finally their door swung open and Florence bellowed from the doorway, "Six! Motherfucking! D! I live in 6D!" A raft of smells—rum, shawarma, Florence's thick cotton-candy perfume—pushed under the fake door in Orla's fake wall, the dinky partition that cut the living room in half, making the one-bedroom two.

It had been three weeks since Florence moved in, and she had never come home before last call. Orla had barely caught a glimpse of her new Craigslist roommate since the day she arrived, braless in a tight white tank top, her long, dark hair straying into her armpits. Florence slept all day and woke at dusk to start primping, the odor of her burning hair mixing with the fumes from Orla's microwave dinner. She left each night just after Orla went to bed, returned around dawn, and settled in to sleep just as Orla left for work, picking her way through the living room aftermath of Florence's night out: shoes shipwrecked in the entryway, clutch forsaken on the kitchen linoleum, credit cards half under the oven, keys still swinging from the door.

But on that morning, there was something else: at least a dozen business cards, strewn across the living room's linted rug.

Orla gathered them up and read them all. Modeling scouts, TV producers, beauty company underlings, and one man calling himself a “personal brand cultivator and 360-degree image guru.” Orla shuffled the cards together, placed them on the counter and walked out the door.

On the matted, jade-colored carpet near the elevator, faceup, there was one more card. Orla could read it without picking it up: Marie Jacinto, literary agent. The card was not impressive. The name of the firm it advertised had the ring of something small, and its stock was so flimsy that it shuddered slightly when the elevator came and split open.

Orla stepped into the elevator, then put her hand against the door and got back out. *Couldn't hurt*, was the phrase skipping around in her mind. She had no reason then not to believe it. She was already composing the email she would send Marie Jacinto as she scraped the card off the carpet and slid it into the gut of her purse.

The apartment was dense with new silence in the mornings, at least between the banshee wails of the fire trucks racing up Eighth. Though she was the one who had lived there for years, Orla found herself trying not to wake Florence up. She watched the morning news on mute, let her hair air-dry, and started picking up coffee after she left instead of grinding beans in the kitchen. Orla told herself that it was better for her brain to have quiet, that her damp waves helped keep her cool in the underground heat of the August subways, that holding a paper coffee cup as she marched into her day was the New York thing to do, anyway. But this was just what she did, and she knew it. Orla had always been the sort of person who let brazen classmates borrow her clothes, the sort of person who said “sorry, sorry” when someone ran into her on the street. The sort of person who could not speak up at Lady-ish team-building tapas, who

let her colleagues order awful things, octopus and duck, then failed to secure any carbs for herself. Orla hated tapas. She hated so much about food in New York: six inches of meat in the sandwiches, block-long lines for mutant pastries, the way people talked about chefs as if they knew them intimately. (“That’s one of Boulud’s places,” Ingrid had said casually the other day, as if she sometimes played pickup basketball with him.) Most of all, Orla hated brunch, how it went on all day, pulling everyone out of their apartments and dumping them on the sidewalk, making her seem glaringly alone as she passed by with her solitary bagel.

But there was one good thing about brunch: on Sundays, Florence left to go have it. Orla would hear her in her room—the apartment’s real bedroom—agitating her phone into an endless flurry of chimes before finally using it to call someone and rave about her hangover. Vowels stood in for each other at random. “Hay gurl hay,” she would whine. “Faaaack. I’m hungover as fuuuuck.” The call would conclude with Florence agreeing to meet someone somewhere in twenty minutes. “Getting in a cab now,” she would sign off. Then she’d sleep for another hour before clattering out the door.

The Sunday after Orla took the business card, she heard Florence through the walls, braying her way through one of these exchanges. Suddenly, Florence stopped talking, so abruptly that Orla was scared her roommate might be choking. She crawled to the foot of her bed and pulled her laptop from her desk to the comforter. She was Googling the Heimlich maneuver when she heard Florence say, in the unmistakable manner of someone getting another call: “Shit. Call you right back.” Orla closed her laptop. She stayed very still. There was something about the way Florence sounded that made Orla wonder who was getting through to her.

“Hi, Mommy,” Florence said. There was a flinch in her voice, but a steeliness, too, like she was ducking something sharp before it could be thrown.

“What’s wrong with her?” Florence went on, worry leaping into her tone. “Oh. That’s no big deal. You scared me. Her paw’s always like that.” A pause. “Are you kidding? Put her *down*? She’s not even sick. You just don’t want to take care of her—”

The air-conditioning unit under Orla’s window rattled into action. She leaped up and switched it off.

“Just don’t do anything, please,” Florence was saying, “until I can afford a flight home. I’ll come and get her and bring her back with me—please, Mom.”

Orla imagined, rather than heard, the tinny hum of someone protesting on the other end.

“I know you don’t believe me,” Florence said, “but I’m getting real traction. People out here love my voice. They get me. I’m meeting so many— Give me a few weeks, okay? Forget air-fare to Ohio—if things keep going like this, I’ll have a record contract soon. I can buy you a new house.”

Another pause, then Florence rushing her words out like she regretted it, in a voice so small and beaten Orla almost ran down the hall and hugged her. “No-no-no,” Florence said. “I love our house, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just something famous singers do.”

This time, Orla was sure she could actually hear mocking on the other end.

“Well, *I* think I could be,” Florence said quietly.

After that, there was nothing—no signoffs—and then Orla heard Florence pacing. Orla lifted herself off her bed, avoiding the creaky pit in the mattress, and came to sit on the ground beside her door, one shoulder and ear leaned against it.

Florence was making more calls—short ones.

“I sent you my demo a few months back— Oh, you did?”

“And you thought you might have a spot in the showcase— Oh, it was?”

“I saw your posting about needing models for— Hello?”

“Yes! That’s *so* sweet of you. I mean, I’ve been working on

those songs since— Oh. No. I'm sorry, I have to stop you—I'm not blonde. No, I was the brunette. Sure. I understand. I'll be at this number if you want to— Okay. Bye.”

Orla held her breath, waiting for things to resume. She could picture, vaguely, the sort of people Florence must be calling: the so-called promoters and producers who were always male, who claimed to know everyone and have a hand in everything, who did all their business from their cells rather than an office, who picked up the phone on Sundays. The sort who only ever seemed to see potential in pretty girls, sidling up to them at bars to set meetings which, invariably, took place in the man's apartment.

After a minute of silence, she heard Florence murmur, in the stilted tone of someone leaving a voicemail: “Following up on the entry-level programmer position. *Fuck*,” she finished softly. Orla hoped she had hung up before that last part. Ten seconds later, Florence left for brunch.

After an hour of enjoying being alone in the apartment, Orla got bored and went to the office, walking directly into the sun as she moved east on Twenty-Third Street, toward the not-old, not-new Gramercy building Lady-ish shared with dentists and accountants. She wanted to get a jump on her posts for the week. Sage had been dead six days. The slideshow of celebrities walking into her funeral had gotten nine million clicks and counting, but the pace was tapering off. Orla's follow-up, a trend piece on a hat three stars had worn to the services, had done about twice that, despite everyone on the internet pretending to be horrified by it. **SO INAPPROPRIATE!** a Lady-ish reader had screamed in the comments, echoing Orla's original thoughts on the post. Ingrid had only said, “If we didn't do it, someone else would have.”

Orla liked the office on weekends—the half light, the natural coolness it took on when jittery bodies weren't packed along

the tables. She sat down and closed her hand over her mouse, nudged her computer awake. She was scanning social media, looking for actresses who might have cut their hair over the weekend, when she saw Ingrid's office door sliding open out of the corner of her eye.

"Hey," Ingrid said when she reached Orla's desk. Orla looked up. Ingrid's hair was even greasier than usual. Her boss had a six-step lip routine involving liners and glosses and setting powders, but she seemed to only wash her hair roughly once a moon cycle. "How was your weekend?" she said, like it was already over, and without waiting for an answer went on: "Can you cover a red carpet tomorrow? It's this what's-her-name who's going to be there, her publicist's always bothering me, and we need to keep the publicist happy because she also reps that—you know, that YouTube girl, with the harp?"

"Tomorrow?" Orla rolled her eyes sideways, grasping for an excuse.

"I just thought you might have some extra time," Ingrid said meaningfully, "now that the Sage stuff is going away."

Orla nodded. She would do it. The year before, a handsome European prince who was constantly falling down outside clubs got sober, joined the armed forces and largely disappeared. As a result, one Lady-ish blogger lost her job. Orla was determined not to lose hers—after all, if she lost it, she would never get to leave it. And this was something she fantasized about constantly: her quitting Lady-ish after selling her book, just like her Tinder-star colleague. In the fantasy, she carried a box of her things, though she didn't have things at the office. Her desk was just a two-foot section of a long cafeteria-style table shared by nine other bloggers. No one had drawers or plants or picture frames—they barely had supplies. "Where's the pen?" one of them would cry out a few times a day, and whoever had it last would send it skidding down the row.

She knew she wasn't the only one who dreamed about quit-

ting. When she and her colleagues sat in the conference room, watching Ingrid run her laser pointer over a screen filled with top-performing headlines (“You Won’t BELIEVE What This Megastar Looks Like WITHOUT Her Extensions”), Orla would think about how every one of their minds was somewhere else, lusting over their next moves, reminding themselves they were better. Better than this job, and better than the girl in the next seat doing it, too. That last part was important. Orla believed it fiercely: she would be gone someday, on to greater things, and the next girl down would still be in her chair. She better still be in her chair. Someone had to stay to be who Orla was before.

But before what? That was the question in her mind at dawn, when Florence slammed over the threshold and woke her, and at night, when she lay staring at her phone while she should have been writing or sleeping. More than anything else—to be an author, to have a boyfriend, to learn how it felt to breathe without being forty thousand dollars in debt—she wanted the answer to the question. She was living in the before of something, and she was getting tired of it. The dangerous thing about the way she felt, Orla knew, was that she didn’t know exactly what she wanted to happen, and she didn’t care that she didn’t know. Almost any change would do.

CHAPTER TWO

Marlow

Constellation, California

2051

The morning was for numbers. Marlow woke at seven to take one pill in front of—she gave a mental glance at the dashboard that kept track of her followers, blinking on the screen inside her mind—eleven-point-six million people, as of this moment. She hooked the quilt beneath her armpits in two places—wardrobe malfunction prevention had installed loops on all her bedding, had sewn prongs into the lace edges of the short silk gowns she wore to bed. Then she sat up and took three deep breaths, opening her eyes on the last one. She blinked four times, unhurried. Smiled twice. The first smile was meant to look sleepy, to hint at consciousness emerging. The second was meant to look spontaneous, giddy, as if she had just remembered that she was alive and felt unspeakably blessed.

To look, in other words, as though the pill worked that fast. Lately, Marlow had been adding some movement to this sec-

ond smile, sighing and stretching her arms over her head. But the network had sent her a clucking note yesterday, reminding her to *aim for consistency wherever possible. Departures from long-held routines can seem to the audience like signs of emotional trouble.* Her followers had other concerns. After Marlow lowered her palms this morning, she closed her eyes just in time to see a comment scrolling: **Is it me or does Mar have kinda chubby armpits?**

Marlow looked at Ellis, sleeping stomach-down beside her. She couldn't ask him if he thought her armpits were fat. To bring it up on camera would be to acknowledge the follower's comment, to acknowledge the existence of followers at all. This was against employee policy. Which was a total farce, of course; her followers knew she knew they were watching. They knew she could see them talking about her. But the fact that she and the other talent never let on, that they pretended to just be *living*—this was what her followers wanted. They liked to feel like voyeurs; they didn't want to be looked in the eye. And so, as her contract stated: *The Constellation Network has a zero-tolerance policy on spell-breaking.*

She got up and padded across the bedroom, listening to the faint saw of the cameras in the shiplap wall's grooves sliding on their tracks to follow her.

The writers had been editing her closet again, Marlow saw when she pulled its doors open. Yesterday, as the day stretched empty before her, Marlow had reclined in her backyard cabana, let her eyelids close behind her sunglasses, and intuited lazily, just for something to do: *vintage fashion images.* The browsing turned into obsession; the obsession turned into a wardrobe request that was filled within the hour. As Marlow sat cross-legged in her sarong on the dove-gray cushion, eating a spinach salad with strawberries, a drone descended from the sky and landed on the deck. It unfurled its arms to release a metal bar hung with the clothes she had asked for: jeans with the knees cat-clawed out,



shoulderless blouses that billowed in the breeze as they settled down in front of her.

When she put everything on, Marlow grinned at herself in the mirror, feeling like a twenty-teens pinup. But then she saw her dashboard throbbing with feedback. **Those pants just made me second-guess being on the same meds as her,** someone wrote.

That night, as she lay in bed, Marlow heard the overnight drone making more noise than usual. After it cleaned and filed the dishes, after it folded the blankets she and Ellis left slopped on the couches when they ambled to bed, she heard the drone pushing its way into her closet, clattering around. Sure enough, this morning, all her vintage looks were gone.

Now, she pulled a lime-colored hoodie and matching leggings off a hanger. If the network cared so much about what she wore, let them green-screen it in themselves.

Such a bold floral on that cardigan, but she's pulling it off! went the follower comment that appeared a moment later. **Clicking to buy!**

Marlow fought the gag that rose inside her at the phrase *bold floral*. She swore someone in wardrobe had it out for her.

On the other hand, she thought as she went into the kitchen and opened the fridge, she had a guardian angel in craft services. Science had definitively linked caffeine to anxiety recently, and the network had immediately freaked about the optics of Marlow consuming it. But someone in crafty had come to the rescue, developing a coffee, just for her, that could be dyed to look like cold-pressed juice. Now Marlow uncapped a plastic bottle with a label that read Carrot Apple, took a sip of terra-cotta-colored liquid, and tasted the bitter cool of iced espresso. The sensation loosened her instantly; her shoulders retreated downward, her heart rose, her face relaxed. She could sense herself having an attractive moment, and, as if on cue, she heard a muted snap. The camera in the brass knob on the cabinet door across from



her had detected, and captured, a still image perfect for the Hysteryl ad that would be patched onto the corner of her live feed in—Marlow counted—three, two—

She DOES always look so content though, someone piped up on her dashboard. **Next time they do a promo code for Hysteryl I might give it a shot.**

Doesn't anyone think it's weird the way she drinks that juice, someone else said. **She's like SAVORING the tiniest sips. I bet she's on coffee and they're CGI'ing shit.**

Marlow froze with her lips on the bottle. She waited a beat for the comment to clear, then tipped her head back and forced herself to take a giant gulp of her drink. She exhaled discreetly, to keep from releasing the telltale coffee char of her breath. Then she stifled a smile; her followers couldn't *smell* her. Her heartbeat stuttered as it always did when she came up with another thing, though sometimes she could go years on end without adding to the list: *Things I Have to Myself*. The hour before 3:00 and 4:00 a.m., when the network broke for ad interruption. Dressing rooms and doctor's office chambers and bathrooms, in her home and all over town. Her favorite was a toilet stall in the vegan gastropub downtown—as a teenager, she used a nail file to scratch mean things about some of her ruder followers into its enamel walls. And now: her smell. Something small, but hers alone.

This was how it had gone, at Jacqueline's parties, for nearly a decade: Marlow sat on the cantaloupe-colored sofa, against its right arm, her good side facing camera east. Ida slumped opposite her, on the daisy-patterned club chair, droning unbearably. Marlow had once liked being across from Ida, back when the woman was a bawdy, sloppy drunk. But these days, Ida was sober, and a stay-at-home mom, and she spent most of Jacqueline's parties performing small dramas about her allergies. Marlow had seen



Ida walk around an ottoman like it was a land mine, sniffing, “Oh, God, is that mohair?” Ida routinely flung herself across the room to close a window, whining, “Sorry, pollen, I have to.” Once, failing to detect Ida’s allergy profile from her device, a server bot had extended a tray of shrimp cocktail her way. Ida had gone to City Hall the next week, made a twenty-minute speech about her hives, and insisted that the network decommission—and *dismember*, Marlow recalled, with a scandalized chill—the offending machine.

But tonight, Ida was missing, recast without explanation. A new girl—olive-skinned and sleek, formidably cheekboned, with bronze lipstick and black hair parted into pigtail braids—sat in Ida’s chair with her bare feet pulled up under her, like she had been here forever.

Marlow looked at Jacqueline, who stood in the center of the thick, sand-colored carpet, holding up something called a “scrunchie.” At these parties, Jacqueline pushed things that, according to her invites, *changed her life*: ab gadgets, smoothies, ugly quilted handbags. Marlow knew—they all knew—that none of these things had really changed Jacqueline’s life. The network chose the items based on sponsorship agreements. Then Jacqueline threw parties where she raised them up and gushed about them to her dozen in-person guests and her roughly nine-point-nine million followers—plus all of her guests’ followers, too. The items the network chose reflected Jacqueline’s core audience demo: married mothers across America, aged twenty-eight to forty-four, who tuned in while folding laundry around 9:00 p.m. on weeknights. Though Jacqueline fit squarely in with her followers—she was thirty-eight, with two daughters—she was always embarrassed when someone mentioned her demo. “It makes me feel so old and boring,” she told Marlow once. “It’s better than mine,” Marlow had said. No one would argue with that.



“Where’s Ida?” Marlow called to Jacqueline, raising her voice above the scrunchie-induced *oohs* and *aahs*.

Jacqueline ignored her. She pushed the scrunchie onto her wrist and waved her hand around for all to see. “And it’s super cute as a bracelet,” she said.

“Jac?” Marlow repeated. “Is Ida on vacation?”

The end of her sentence slipped under the clatter of something breaking on the ground. The women turned to see a server bot bent over the shards of a wineglass. Marlow watched the lilies in the coffee table vase twist in the same direction, their scarlet pistils stretching to train their tiny cameras on the action. She could swear the bot had dropped the glass to drown out the sound of Ida’s name.

When she looked back at Jacqueline, her friend nodded once and dabbed at her lips. It was their signal for *Tell you off-camera*.

An hour later, as Marlow passed the powder room, Jacqueline’s arm shot out of it and pulled her inside. “Ida’s gone,” she said, as she pulled the door shut.

“Gone?” Marlow saw herself in the mirror. One of Jacqueline’s hair drones, its silver talons clacking near her ear, had pinned a ridiculous silk bow barrette into her dark waves.

“Yup,” Jacqueline said. “Just up and left Mike and the kids. Blew right through the perimeter. Left the fucking *state*.” She walked her fingers on an invisible path through the air. “Check your map. She’s in *Denver*. And for god’s sake, Marlow—don’t mention her on camera again.”

“But what about her contract?” Marlow said. “I thought she and Mike were doing the whole on-the-rocks thing this year.” She unlatched her barrette and massaged her scalp, ignoring Jacqueline’s puffed breath of protest.

“They didn’t even stage a hunt for her, supposedly,” Jacqueline said, adjusting the pearl comb at her temple. She sucked her cheeks in and glared at herself in the glass. “How shitty would *that* feel? It’s like they don’t even care she’s gone. I honestly think



the network was glad to get the chance to sub in that new girl. Diversity and all.”

“Jacqueline.” Marlow spoke in a firm voice. This was something she had been trying to do more since she turned thirty-five—the age felt, to her, like a cosmic deadline for being strong and self-possessed. Complete. “Hunts aren’t real,” she said.

“They certainly are,” Jacqueline returned, in a tone that trumped hers effortlessly, and Marlow let it go. Jacqueline was an incorrigible know-it-all. It was what Marlow loved most about her. Her friend’s brazen authority always made her feel safe.

Jacqueline’s eyes flitted away for a moment. She nodded, but not at Marlow. Her device was telling her something. “Gotta get back out there,” she said. “Talk later.”

Alone in the bathroom, Marlow twiddled the twigs in the diffuser on the sink and closed her eyes. *Find Ida Stanley*, she intuited.

In her mind’s eye, California shrank and plummeted away, making Marlow’s stomach flip, like she was the falling thing. Her map shifted, streaking past hundreds of her neighbors’ symbols in a blur, and brought her down again in Denver. Ida’s symbol—the red stiletto that had always depressed Marlow—hovered over the city. There she was, proudly gone, in the state of—Marlow had to zoom out to remind herself what state Denver was in—Colorado. Marlow pictured Ida on a purple-flowered mountain. Sneezing.

The black gem at her wrist nicked her gently. *I have a message from production, came the voice in her brain. I should return to an on-camera space. I have now been off-camera five minutes. I have lost seventy-eight followers during this off-camera time.*

Marlow watched herself blush with guilt in the mirror. It was as if the network knew what she was thinking about just then: what it would be like for her to leave, too.

I have lost eighty-nine followers during this off-camera time, the voice followed up.



Eighty-nine followers was nothing. Marlow averaged an audience of over twelve million. And that was why Ida could run, she thought, and get away with it, whereas she wouldn't. Ida had, what—one, one-point-five million followers? Hardly a fan favorite, especially after she transitioned from the party-girl ensemble to a standard housewife arc. She didn't even have a sponsor. Marlow, by contrast, was the most looked-at woman in the room, presented by a marquee partner: Hysteryl. Her followers—the people who observed every move she made—were spread across the rest of America and various races and age groups. What they had in common was that they were troubled. This was how the network marketed her: as the poster child for troubled, the Constellation star who got what they were going through. The network mined public data, looking for adults whose devices clocked too much crying or eating, for kids whose heartbeats surged to panicked levels during gym class. *Meet Marlow*, went the ad the network would beam straight to their devices. *She knows just how you feel*. The sad people, glad to be talked to, would opt right in and start watching her. They would see that she moved through her days with buoyant normalcy, and they would be reminded, every so often, that Hysteryl had made her this way. It was Jacqueline's job to show America what they could buy to keep them happy. It was Marlow's job to show them what to swallow.

She calmed herself at the sink, willed the redness to fade from her cheeks.

I should return to an on-camera space.

Marlow's hair was bent and snarled where she had pulled out the bow. She dug the clasp back in, even tighter this time, and went back out to the party.

CHAPTER THREE

Orla

New York, New York
2015

The red carpet Ingrid sent Orla to was at a terrible club on a terrible block. Bits of trash stuck to the filthy red carpet slapped down at its entrance. A bouncer stood at the doorway, staring straight ahead, as if trying to block out the Container Store directly to his right.

Orla scanned the ground and found her place, a square of sidewalk the size of a cereal box, marked with a laminated printout: ORLA CADDEN, LADY-ISH.COM. She elbowed her way in next to an anxious waif who wore a gown that plunged to her belly button. She was dressed, Orla knew, like she was hoping to be invited inside later. A chubby Hispanic guy in horn-rimmed glasses held his phone up to the waif, filming her as she said: “We’re here at the launch of Hilaria Dahl’s dog sweater line, and all the hottest celebrity animal lovers have tuned out for the occasion.”

“Turned out!” Horn-rimmed Glasses shrieked as if he had just caught fire.

Hilaria Dahl was a judge on a reality show that pitted cancer survivors against each other in baking contests. By the time she made her way to Orla, Hilaria had submitted to eighteen other interviews, and the corners of her mouth were caked with spit. She smacked her lips together. “I love Lady-ish!” she squealed, her long earrings jangling at either side of her jaw.

Orla nodded and stretched her face into a smile. “So, dog clothes! What inspired this project?”

Hilaria shifted in her heels. “Well, it’s really close to my heart.”

“What is?” Orla said.

“AIDS,” Hilaria answered.

“AIDS?” Orla looked to Hilaria’s publicist, a black-clad woman in a headset.

“Ten percent of the proceeds from the line benefits AIDS,” the publicist snapped.

“And I love animals,” Hilaria added. “I loved the idea of putting my name on something that would keep them warm, the way they keep *us* warm.”

Next to Orla, the waif was nodding fiercely, a hand pressed over her heart.

“We’re just targeting dogs right now,” Hilaria went on. “But I’m also really passionate about cats. So we’re looking to expand into the cat market as well.”

Orla couldn’t stop herself. “Couldn’t cats just wear the clothes you make now?”

Hilaria looked at her publicist. “I guess cats could wear the small ones, right?” she said uncertainly. “Like the alpaca cowl-neck?”

“Cats could wear the small ones,” the publicist confirmed, glaring.

“And every piece is one hundred percent vegan!” Hilaria shouted.

“Didn’t you just say something’s alpaca?” Orla said. “An alpaca is an *animal*. It’s kind of like a llama.”

“That’s all the time she has,” the publicist said, taking Hilaria by the elbow and guiding her toward the doors. She looked back at Orla. “Fuck you,” she said plainly. “Not you,” she added, into the headset. “But maybe you, soon, if you don’t find out where Isabelle went.”

There was a lull in the arrivals. The waif was complaining to Horn-rimmed Glasses, claiming her improv teacher had called her too pretty for comedy, when Horn-rimmed Glasses waved his hand in her face and bellowed, “GIRL SHUT THE FUCK UP HERE SHE COMES.”

Orla perked up and craned her neck toward the SUV that had just pulled up. Hilaria’s publicist had likely emailed Ingrid already, demanding that Orla apologize. Maybe Orla could redeem herself with a quote from whoever was making Horn-rimmed Glasses clap tiny, overjoyed claps.

Flashbulbs popped so brightly that Orla had to look down. Then she could only see the pair of legs coming toward them, oiled and deliberate. Next to her, the waif leaned forward and said breathlessly, “Floss, it’s like the *hugest* honor.”

Standing in front of the waif, Orla saw as bursts of light cleared her vision, was her own roommate. Florence.

Orla stared at her from the side. She was closer to Florence now than she had ever been in their apartment. The skin that ran from her ear to the corner of her mouth shimmered with such pearlescence that Orla could see her own shadow in it. Florence’s eyes, dark and liquid, blinked slowly, sleepily, beneath the weight of her thousand-legger eyelashes. She had more hair than she did at home, and they were laughably bad, the extensions—limp, and shiny, and stinking of something chemical. Florence had on the same things Orla wore on formal occa-

sions: a strapless, nude bra and stomach-slimming nude panties that continued down the thigh. But Florence wasn't wearing anything over them.

She was beautiful, the type of beautiful that made Orla wish that she knew more of Florence's bad qualities, so she could soothe herself by listing them out loud.

Then, suddenly, Florence was air-kissing the waif goodbye and stepping into Orla's little space. "Hi," Florence trilled. Orla startled at the sound of her public voice. It came from somewhere high in her nose. "Oh," Florence went on, "I love Lady-ish."

"Florence," Orla said.

"Call me Floss!" Florence giggled. She pulled all of her hair over one shoulder and stroked it like a pet.

They were at an impasse: Floss didn't recognize Orla, and Orla didn't know who Floss was supposed to be. As Orla tried to decide what to say next, Floss's publicist—she had a *publicist!*—jumped in.

"Jordie from Liberty PR," he said. "You of course know Floss Natuzzi from the reality competition *Who Wants to Work at a Surf Shack*." His voice had a defeated sort of hum, like he no longer got up in the morning hoping people would take him seriously. Orla could envision the half-finished law school application on his desk at home. "She's also a fixture on the Akron fashion scene," Jordie added, "where until recently she lived with Columbus Blue Jackets star Wynn Walters."

"The Athens fashion scene?" Orla said.

"Sure, let's go with that," Jordie sighed, at the same time Floss said loudly, "No, Akron. Akron, Ohio."

Jordie shot Floss a look, then laughed and threw his hands up. "Yes, Akron," he said wearily. "It's mostly, ah, underground. Very avant-garde. LeBron James..." He trailed off purposefully. It wasn't a lie; he had merely said the words "LeBron James." Orla nodded appreciatively. He would do well at law school.

She looked at Floss, who seemed not to be listening. She was

peering down at the printout Orla was standing on, then back up at Orla's face. As Jordie tugged her toward the next reporter, Floss seemed to realize something. "Wait," she said, blinking, looking back. "Omigod."

Orla waved at her stupidly.

"Come inside then," Floss called over her shoulder. "I want to talk to you." She tottered off on her heels. Orla watched as Jordie stepped forward to pull something off Floss's wrist. It was Orla's own yellow hair elastic. She had left it on the sink that morning.

"What, you know her?" Orla heard the waif say, sullenly. Out of some instinct, Orla didn't respond. Floss was only the last to arrive at a party for dog shirts in Midtown, but she was clearly someone to someone, and she had told Orla to come inside. Orla didn't have to talk to the waif anymore.

The girl at the door with the list was unimpressed. "I'm a personal guest of Floss Natuzzi's," Orla said again. "She'll be so upset to hear about this." The girl just looked behind her, waving someone forward. Orla stepped back to let an Afghan hound in a beret and its handler walk through.

She walked along Fifty-Seventh Street and found she could see into the event, which spilled into a courtyard fenced in by wrought iron. Floss was just a few yards away, talking to a short, sweaty man with his shirt buttons mostly undone.

Orla put her face to the bars and hissed into the party. "Floss!"

Floss looked up. She turned away from the man while he was still midsentence and came trotting over to Orla. "What are you doing? I said to come *inside*."

"They wouldn't let me," Orla said. "Can you get me in?"

Floss looked down at Orla's scuffed ballet flats and murmured, "Those, probably." She took a glass of champagne from a waitress and slid it through a gap in the fence to Orla.

“You can’t—” the waitress began, and Floss fixed her with a cold smile. “Did they resolve the oyster situation yet?” she asked the waitress. “Would you please find Gus and find out? I’ll wait here.” The waitress scurried away.

“Who’s Gus?” The champagne glass felt so delicate in Orla’s grasp, she had to focus on not crushing it.

Floss rolled her eyes. “There’s no Gus.” She drained her champagne and motioned for Orla to drink hers down. “Wait there,” she said.

Three minutes later, Floss was walking toward Orla, one arm in the air, hailing a cab. When one stopped, she stood there blinking at it until Orla stepped forward and opened the door, then stepped back to let her in first.

Jordie skidded out of the club toward their cab, the soles of his needle-nosed shoes slipping on the pavement. He stuck his head through the window. “Where the hell are you going?” he said to Floss. “Do you know how I had to beg to get you into this party? You’re nobody, honey.” A drop of sweat eased out of a crease in his forehead and landed on Floss’s thigh, right where the nude shorts disappeared into the boot that stretched over her knee.

Floss dabbed at the mark. “If you had to beg that hard,” she said calmly, “I guess you’re nobody, too.”

The light turned green. As the cab pulled away, Orla glanced over her shoulder at Jordie. She thought he’d be staring after them, reeling from the exchange, but he was already back on his phone, skating toward the party.

Perhaps it was because Orla remembered how he looked from that distance—freckles you could sense a block away—that she recognized Jordie’s photo on the cover of the *New York Post*, more than a year later, while she was still walking toward it. She would never forget him. Nobody would. Jordie was the very first to die in the Spill. The story about his death didn’t mention his working with Floss, which surprised Orla at first. By



then, even a minor interaction with Floss would be the starriest thing that had ever happened to most people, and any reporter with a brain and a LinkedIn login could have dug up Jordie's connection. Then Orla remembered: the reporter who wrote about Jordie dying wouldn't have been able to see his LinkedIn page—wouldn't even have been able to Google him. The reporter must have had to rely on word of mouth and yearbooks. Jordie's aunt was quoted as saying that he had just been accepted to law school. When Orla read that—her snarky prediction in print—she let out an actual howl, and crushed the paper in her hand. The newsstand attendant, who had been staring at the white grid on his useless, frozen phone screen, startled. "One dollar, you know?" he said to Orla. But he sounded scared, like he was only suggesting it. Orla dropped the paper and kept walking, kept crying. This was back when things had gotten as bad as everyone thought they would get, and when no one knew yet how bad things would actually go on to be. There were still jokes about the chaos on the late-night shows. There were still late-night shows.



When Orla and Floss got back to Twenty-First Street, the doorman grinned at them in a way that let Orla know they looked drunk, and the smile she gave back to him made her feel like she was someone else, someone used to being part of things. In the elevator, Orla reached for 6, but Floss batted her hand back and sent them to the roof. Orla hadn't been up on the roof since a few weeks after she moved to the city. She had gone up there one night with a book and a glass of warm white wine, because she was twenty-two and didn't know to chill it yet. The roof was a disappointment. There was nothing to see from the one bench rooted next to the cluster of air handlers. A neighboring, newer building stood in the way of the view. Orla had spent fifteen minutes rereading the same page before she gave up and



went in, imagining the people whose windows faced the courtyard laughing at her over their dinners.

The one corner that escaped the adjacent building's shadow was reserved for residents of the penthouse. But Floss walked straight toward the gate to the penthouse's private patio and rattled it open. She stepped inside without looking back to see if Orla was following. She was.

The patio had a modest outdoor dining table and a row of hostas in wooden planters. Floss kicked at a red and yellow toddler car in her path, then reached into one of the planters and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. Above the top of the patio fence, the view stretched, uninterrupted, toward New Jersey. The sun was already gone, dragging the last of its light down over the Hudson. Orla sensed another glow behind her and turned to see, beyond a pair of sliding glass doors, a giant television flashing out the news. Opposite it, a man leaned back on his couch. His feet, in black socks, rested on the coffee table. Without smiling, he raised his glass to Orla.

"Jesus Christ," Orla hissed. "Floss, he sees us."

"It's okay." Floss took a sip of whiskey. "He lets me use the deck. It's just his crash pad anyway, 'cause he works here. He really lives in Delaware." She passed the bottle to Orla.

"But..." Orla looked at the toddler car, then back at the man in the penthouse. He was still watching them. "But it's weird."

Floss shrugged. "Whatever. He's, like, Ukrainian."

They drank and talked, but did more of the former than the latter, the conversation stalling constantly. Orla sensed that Floss wanted both of them drunker before she said what she wanted to say. Finally, as Orla answered Floss's demand to know who had lived in her bedroom before her—big-haired Jeannette, with the sportscaster ambitions, then shy Priya, with the endless visiting relatives—Floss cut her off to confess something.

"So, like, I know who you are," she said. "I mean, I know your name. I just didn't know that *you* were my *roommate*. To be



honest, when we met that first day, I forgot your name as soon as you said it—you know how that happens? I decided it was Olga.” Floss spread her hands, swinging the whiskey by the neck. “And here, all along, you were *Orla Cadden*. I know your work.”

“My work?” Orla repeated. It seemed too grand a term for blogging.

Floss didn’t hesitate. “Sage Sterling,” she said. “Pretty sad, her dying and all.”

“It was sad,” Orla agreed. She actually, absurdly, did kind of miss Sage.

“You wrote about her one hundred and twenty-three times in the last year,” Floss said, swiping her manicured finger over her phone. Orla could see her own name and head shot atop the list of headlines on the screen. “Here’s the one where you listed what was in that salad the paparazzi always snapped her eating,” Floss murmured. “I liked that.”

“It was the best traffic anything on her ever did,” Orla said. “Even better than when I wrote she died.”

Floss waited for a siren to fade, then said: “Do you think you could do that—what you did for her—for me?”

“Um,” Orla said. “I just called the salad place, and they told me what she got. It was just a standard Cobb with edamame, if you think about it.”

“Not that.” Floss took a swallow of whiskey and set the bottle on the edge of the roof. “The first time you wrote about Sage,” she said, “she was just the daughter of some studio executive. She was nobody.”

“Right, but then she started to act,” Orla protested. “She got the *Some Like It Hot* remake pretty much right away—”

“No.” Floss shook her head hard. A segment of her fake hair was starting to come loose, its sticky root sagging into view. “No, she did *not* get it right away. First she was in that photo, when all those models went to one of those dumb strip mall places where you drink and paint the same paintings. They In-



stagrammed it, and you did that post identifying everyone in the picture.”

Orla had forgotten that that was how it started.

“That, just that, was enough to get her a publicist,” Floss went on. “And the publicist got someone to send her those boots, the white leather ones with the rainbow laces. And she wore them, so the boot people sent the pictures to bloggers. You remember getting those pictures?”

Orla nodded. The post she had turned them into was headlined “Sage Sterling’s Boots: Trippy Or Trippin?” “I don’t think we should say ‘trippin,’” Orla had protested to Ingrid, before she hit Publish. “I think that’s like a black thing? And we shouldn’t appropriate it? It might seem racist?” Ingrid had overruled her. “*You’re* the one being racist, trust me,” she had said.

“So then you did a post about her boot style, with photos of all the boots she’d ever worn.” Floss smeared the gloss off her mouth with her palm and wiped it on the back of a cream-colored chair cushion. “You called her a boot icon. A couple months later, the boot people named a style after her, which you covered, which made the boots sell out. So some fashion line invited her to curate—” here, Floss raised her fingers and made air quotes that punctured the air so forcefully, Orla winced on its behalf “—a whole *line* of boots for them. That got her to Fashion Week. She was supposed to sit in the second row, but her publicist brought sheets of paper with her name printed on them and stole the seats of front-row girls who didn’t show up. That was smart. I liked that move.”

It had grown dark. A floodlight tacked up over the sliding doors went on. It was too bright for the small space, meant to shine over someone’s endless suburban backyard. It might have made Orla homesick, if she wasn’t busy wondering whether the Ukrainian man could now see up her skirt as she leaned over the rim of the building, into the night. She felt thirsty and picked up the whiskey, found it didn’t help.

“You put her in a roundup of Fashion Week It Girls,” Floss went on. “A reader asked you who she was, so you did a post with, like, facts about her. Remember?”

“9 INSANE Facts About Sage Sterling.” Never ten facts—readers hated the number ten. It was too perfect, too choreographed. Suspect.

“And you found that old photo of her with the kid from that boy band, the one who’s hot now,” Floss went on.

“Yeah,” Orla said. “I thought they dated in high school.”

“Wasn’t true,” Floss said, “but it didn’t matter. You wrote it, and then you corrected yourself, but someone had already put it in their Wikipedia pages. I bet you it’s still there now. And the publicists were into it, so they went with it. They made them date.” Floss hugged herself and shivered. It was August, warm enough to be out on a roof near the water, but not warm enough to do it in just shapewear. “And then you *really* wrote,” she said.

Orla remembered. “Sage and Finn—Uh, We Mean SINN—Step Out Together for the First Time.” “Every Sinn-gle Thing Sage Wore On Tour With Finn’s New Band.” “Sinn Has a Sexy Hawaiian Veterans Day—Pics, Right This Way!”

“And then, Jesus Christ,” Floss said. “She got that haircut, the grandma haircut with the platinum and the curlers.”

“Erm, Marilyn Monroe WHO? Come See Sage Sterling’s New ’Do.” Ingrid had added the “erm” after Orla left the office for the day.

“*That’s* when she got *Some Like It Hot*,” Floss said bitterly. She pointed at Orla. “After you said she looked like Marilyn Monroe. She looked like a goddamn Golden Girl!”

Floss sounded so upset that Orla almost apologized. Instead, she reminded Floss that the movie was made by the studio Sage’s dad ran, that she probably would have gotten the part even if he was the only one who knew who she was. “Besides,” she added, feeling suddenly defensive of Sage, patron saint of her dispos-

able income, “are you trying to tell me you’re jealous? She got addicted to heroin and *died*.”

Floss waved it away. “She got sloppy. I’m not like that.”

Orla stared at her. She thought about going downstairs and into her room, about putting the flimsy fake wall between her and this strange, scheming girl. She thought about telling her super, Manny, about the weirdo in the penthouse, watching young women on his deck when he should have been home with his kid in Delaware.

“This is the part,” Floss said patiently, “where you ask what’s in it for you.”

Orla shook her head. “What could possibly be in it for me?” she asked. “Also, no offense, but you’re a little old to start trying to be famous. I mean, you’re, what...?”

“I’m twenty-eight,” Floss said. “Just like you, right?”

Orla straightened herself with what she hoped seemed like authority, with the air of someone who had put Sage Sterling on the map. “And you’re just *now* getting into dog apparel parties,” she said.

Floss smoothed her hair away from her face, flicked it over her shoulder. “At least I’m not working at them.”

The line was cruel, but Floss made it sound like a joke they’d had for years. And that was what got Orla—Orla, who had told herself on the day she moved to New York that the hollow way she felt would subside once the cable got hooked up, and who had gone on feeling empty every day for six years.

She said, “What’s in it for me?”

“If we do this right,” Floss answered, “whatever you need. I’m sure you don’t want to blog forever. I’m sure you have, what? A book? So you need an agent. If you help me, if I get as big as I think I can, they’ll want to talk to you just because you’re standing next to me.”

Orla thought of her laptop sitting closed and cool, untouched in the dark of her room. She told herself that as soon as she fin-

ished this drink, she would go downstairs and write a thousand words without the TV on. "I don't need your help with my book," she said. "I can get an agent on my own."

Floss laughed. "Oh, really?" she said. "Are you sure? You better be sure. You better be sure that you're in, like, the top five writers in New York City, and that you know all the people they know, and that *those* people like you better, and that those people are the right ones to begin with. Because look, Orla." Floss placed her hands on either side of Orla's head and pointed it at the building next to theirs, the one that blocked the sky from the rest of the roof. "It's 10:45 on a Monday night, and everybody in that building has their lights on. You see? They're all still up. Just like we're still up. What do you think they're doing?" She aimed Orla's head, roughly, at another building beneath them, a low-rise in pinkish-gray brick. "More lights," she said. "How about them?"

Orla saw a girl in her sports bra bent over her computer, drumming her fingers on her chin.

"I've done the math," Floss said. "I've done the actual math. There are eight million people here, and all of them want something as bad as I want what I want, as bad as you want what you want. We're not all going to get it. It's just not possible, that all these people could have their dreams come true in the same time, same place. It's not enough to be talented, it's not enough to work hard. You need to be disciplined, and you need to be ruthless. You have to do anything, everything, and you need to forget about doing the *right* thing." She released Orla with a little shove and put her hands on her hips. "Leave that shit to people in the Midwest."

They were quiet as the atmosphere sucked up her monologue. Orla steadied herself and looked Floss over. She would never make it as an actress, she thought. She went a little too big, wanted a little too hard. But Floss, it seemed, didn't want to be an actress. She wanted to be what she already was, even

if nobody knew it yet: a celebrity. A person, exaggerated. And her point—the cold slap of the eight million dreams around them—unhooked something in Orla.

“I don’t know,” she said, shakily, finally. “That kind of sounds like bullshit to me.” She tried to hold back a burp and found that it wasn’t a burp at all. She leaned over and threw up on the deck. The whiskey burned twice as hot coming back up. Orla kicked her purse toward Floss. “Can you get me a tissue?” she gasped.

Floss dug through Orla’s bag. “Ohhhh,” she breathed after a moment, tugging something out. “This looks familiar.”

Panting, hands on her knees, Orla squinted up and saw Floss holding, between two egg-shaped nails, Marie Jacinto’s cheap business card. The one Orla had found by the elevator. Orla would never forget that: Floss standing there, grinning at her, flicking the card. She would think of it on that awful last day, as blood bloomed through her shirt and Floss said in low voice, for once trying not to be heard, that *this was the deal, and you know it*.

And they did have a deal by then, with lawyers and seals and duplicates, but Orla never felt that the scrawls she made numbly on those documents were as binding as her failure to argue with what Floss said next. Floss put the card back in Orla’s bag carefully, like she wanted it to be safe. She pushed the kiddie car away from the puddle of vomit and walked Orla off of the roof, leaving the mess untouched and the gate wide open behind them. Inside, as they waited for the elevator, Floss grinned and put her face in Orla’s hair. “I don’t think it does sound like bullshit to you,” she said into Orla’s ear. “I think you are like me.”