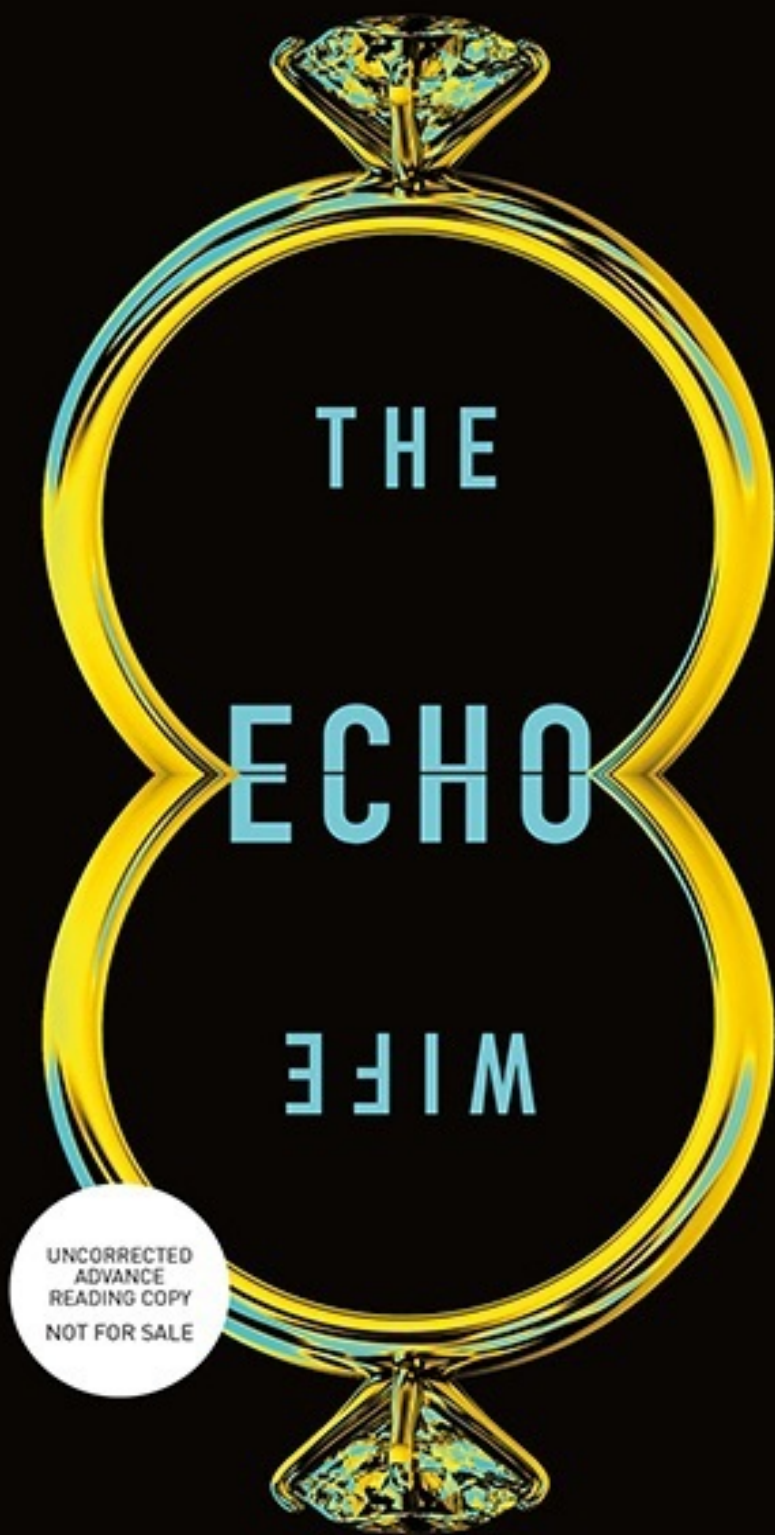


SARAH GAILEY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MAGIC FOR LIARS



A LIFE IS A DANGEROUS THING TO SHARE

SARAH GAILEY

S A R A H

**THE
ECHO
WIFE**

G A I L E Y

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  TOR NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE ECHO WIFE

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THE
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CHAPTER ONE

My gown was beautiful. It was the kind of garment that looks precisely as expensive as it is. I did not hate it, because it was beautiful, and I did not love it, because it was cruel. I wore it because wearing it was the thing this night demanded of me.

I bought it six months before the Neufmann Banquet, and, miracle of miracles, it still fit me exactly as well as it had when I'd tried it on the first time. Everything had changed in those six months. Everything except for my body. That, at least, was the same.

Still, I nearly dislocated my shoulder trying to get the buttons on the damn thing done up. Fifteen minutes of trying not to swear, fifteen minutes to do something that would have taken ten seconds if someone else had been there to do it for me. But I did it on my own, in the end. The help would have been convenient, but I didn't need it.

Twice in my life, now, I have buried myself in finery. Twice I have arranged myself within a great complication of fabric to prove that I understand the importance of a moment. It's clothing as contrition, a performance of beauty I have put on to pay penance to the people gathered to acknowledge me. They are here to see me, and I must apologize for requesting their attention, must make up for the weight of my demand by ensuring that looking at me will be a pleasant thing. Never mind the suffocation of the outfit, never mind the expense, never mind the impracticality. The transaction must be made: my efforts at beauty in exchange for their regard. And so, twice in my life, I have worn the cost of that recognition.

The process of defeating the buttons distracted me, and so it was only after I had my shoes on that I realized I had no way to see whether I'd achieved enough loveliness to satisfy the demands of the occasion. I used a kitchen knife to cut the packing tape away from my full-length mirror, feeling at once foolish and resourceful. After I'd peeled the layers of protective plastic wrap from the glass, there I was.

I allowed myself a breath of satisfaction: it was enough.

The gown was black silk. The skirt fell perfectly, the darts at my waist making the fabric bell over my hips before draping into crisp pleats. I, inside the silk, was the same person I always was, but the gown was a costume that gave me the right to be notable. It justified the evening I was about to face.

I tilted my head to see that my earrings weren't too much, ran my fingers across the high bateau neckline.

The task was accomplished. The result was good.

By the time I turned away from the mirror, it was six o'clock. My car was due in four minutes. I turned the lights off in my house and walked into the gray light of early evening to wait.

My wedding gown had also been beautiful, and expensive. It had been nothing at all like my gown for the Neufmann Banquet. Satin instead of silk, and suffocatingly tight. It had been white, gently cut, with a low neckline trimmed in Alençon lace. It had been aggressively soft, determined to be hopeful.

It had been vulnerable, where my Neufmann gown was severe. It had been tender, where my Neufmann gown was pitiless.

On the day that I had worn the kinder of the two gowns, Nathan had snuck into the suite where I was dressing. He walked in with exaggerated stealth, his tuxedo shoes squeaking as he minced pizzicato across the waxed wood floor. He gave me a velvet box with a necklace in it. The pendant floated perfectly above the dip of the lace. He wasn't supposed to see me—he'd bought the necklace to give me after the ceremony, but he said he just couldn't wait. He'd wanted me to have it sooner.

He clasped it behind my neck and kissed my cheek and fled before I could scold him for breaking the rules. Before I could bring up the traditions that neither of us cared about, but that both of us had been so determined to follow. When I walked down the aisle, the sapphire of the pendant caught an errant sunbeam and refracted light across the arm of Nathan's father's suit.

After the ceremony was over, Nathan touched the hollow of my throat and smiled, a small secret smile that was just for me.

I can't remember ever wearing that necklace again. It had been a ridiculous extravagance. When would I ever

wear a sapphire?

But I watched for that smile. I watched for it every time I dressed up for a date or an event, every time I came home from a conference, every time we made up after a fight. I filled my pockets with that smile. I tucked it away for later, to get me through the lean times when we couldn't look at each other.

Even then, I think I knew I'd need it.

Three and a half hours after I put the Neufmann gown on, I was ready to be finished wearing it. The silk was fitted closely through my ribs and waist, flattering enough, but as uncompromising as an ethics committee. I couldn't seem to get a deep enough breath. The banquet hall was full of people, all of them looking at me or talking about me or thinking about me. Or worse: not thinking about me at all. I kept catching people's eyes by mistake, flashing smiles that felt raw and strange on my face.

I wondered if there was enough oxygen for everyone present. I wondered if maybe there was some problem with the ventilation system, and whether the carbon dioxide levels in the room were rising. Everyone in the room exhaled once every few seconds. There was no avoiding that. They had to respire.

Every time they did, I felt the air grow a little heavier.

People were talking to me, endlessly talking to me, and I knew that there were hours still to come, hours and hours of people looking at me and moving their mouths and raising their eyebrows and waiting for me to say things back that would satisfy their vision of the person I was supposed to be. Hours of their opinions and compliments and complicated insults. Hours of smiling.

There were seven other people seated at my banquet table, their wineglasses kept in a perpetual state of half-emptiness by a series of bored waiters. The man seated to my left was a senior jurist from the selection committee. He was talking to me, just like everyone else, and I arranged my face into a shape that would seem pleasant and interested. He was important. I should have known his name.

David? No. Daniel?

"I've been terribly impressed," the man was saying, "by the finesse your technique displays. I've never seen such singular control of the acute hormonal mode of neuropsychological conditioning." I smiled and nodded, pretended to take a bite of risotto as though I could possibly have swallowed it. It rested on my tongue like a pill. It tasted like nothing at all, like the flesh of the roof of my mouth, like the edge of the wineglass in front of me. I could not eat it. I had to eat it. The man on my left (Douglas?) was looking at me, waiting for me to accept his compliment.

There were hours still to go.

After much too long, the risotto slid down my throat and the name appeared fully formed in my mind. "Thank you ... Dietrich," I replied. "It's been a team effort, of course—"

"Nonsense," he said, and my throat clenched the way it always did when a man in my field interrupted me with that word. "You have a fantastic research team, there can be no doubt of that—but no, Dr. Caldwell, this is about your work. Your legacy. You get the credit, yes? *You* are the pioneer of the Caldwell Method. It's all right to bask in it, at least for tonight."

He lifted his glass. I obligingly raised mine to meet it, because *don't be a bitch, Evelyn*. The movement caught the eyes of others around the table, and soon, everyone held their glasses aloft, their faces expectant. Dietrich led them in a toast. "To Dr. Evelyn Caldwell, changing the world."

Federlauer, his last name came to me at last, Dietrich *Federlauer*, how could I have forgotten? Stupid, stupid.

Six people repeated my name, and they touched their glasses together, and the heavy air rang crystalline. The woman across from me exhaled as she drank, the glass near her nostrils fogging. She caught my eye and smiled, and I looked away before I could even try to make myself smile back.

The lights in the room began to dim. A spotlight illuminated the podium at the front of the room.

The air was so heavy.

I held my breath for a few seconds before swallowing my mouthful of wine, willed my heartbeat to slow down. There was no reason to be nervous. There were no surprises coming to get me. That silver helix up on the podium had my name engraved on it. The speeches that would take up the next hour were already written, were about me and my work. My face was the one on the posters lining the banquet hall. *An evening to honor and celebrate Dr. Evelyn Caldwell*, that's what had been on the engraved invitations.

Everything was good. Everything was already decided. Everything was for me.

Nothing would go wrong.

Your legacy, Federlauer had said. This, tonight, this would be what I was remembered for. This would be the focus of my eulogy. Not the other thing, not the shameful disaster that my life had briefly become thanks to Nathan.

No one would be talking about that—about Nathan and his weakness. It would be this, just this, my work and my research and my success.

I lifted a hand to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, then arrested my arm in the middle of the movement, Nathan's voice ringing through my memory. *Don't fidget. You look exactly like your mother when you fidget.*

He'd been right. He'd been cruel about it, cruel on purpose, but he'd been right to remind me. I already looked so much like my mother that, in my graduate program, the jokes wrote themselves. *Wow, it looks like the cloning research is going well!* It was bad enough to have the same colorless hair, the same dishwasher-gray eyes, the same thin mouth as that woman. I wouldn't act like her too.

I'd left that behind long ago—being anything like her, doing the things she did to get to the end of each day intact. I'd left that behind and I'd never looked back.

Poise, that was the way. No twitching. No fidgeting. Poise.

I lowered my hand to my lap, curled it into a fist and nested it inside my other palm. No one would be able to see me clenching that fist, digging my nails into the soft valleys of flesh between the tendons of my hand. Even to the forgettable Federlauer, I would seem composed.

The room was full of eyes, and I reminded myself that I could hide from every single one of them. I knew how to walk quietly. I knew how to slip by unnoticed. I knew how to be the thing they wanted to see, the thing they wanted me to be.

I knew how to hide when I needed to.

I had gotten through the previous year of impossibly hellish obstacles. I had survived the discovery and the betrayal and the fallout. I could handle this banquet.

On stage, a woman I'd never met was talking about my early research. She clutched the microphone in a white-knuckled stage-fright grip, and described the initial stages of my work in glowing terms. It was, quite frankly, mortifying. Neuropsychology, neurobiology, hormonal conditioning—it seemed so entry-level now, so sophomoric. At the time, it had seemed like the biggest thing in the world. It had seemed worth every late night in the lab, eating takeout with Nathan while samples spun in the gravity centrifuge.

The woman onstage called that work brilliant, and I choked back a startled laugh. We were so young then, balancing notebooks full of handwritten lab notes on our knees, trying not to spill noodles on the pages. Falling in love. We had dreamed of a night like this: me in a ball gown, him in a tuxedo. Two names engraved on a silver double helix.

A legacy.

I caught myself balling up my napkin in my fist, reflexively clutching at the fabric. I smoothed it out, creased it carefully, and set it next to my plate. I folded my hands. *Poise, Evelyn*, I repeated to myself. *Poise.*

This banquet was supposed to be my night. It was not a night for regret; it was a night for *satisfaction*. After everything that had happened, didn't I deserve that much?

I crossed my legs, drank my wine, arranged my face into a gracious smile, and pointed my chin at the podium. There was no point in dwelling on the things that the Evelyn of a decade ago had wanted. I told myself that I had been a different person then, practically a child, with a different life. Different goals.

Things change.

Things die.

And now, here was a banquet hall filled with intellectual luminaries. Wine and waiters and flowers and programs. Rented gowns and uncomfortable shoes, speeches and seating charts, all to celebrate me. All for me.

I did not allow my hands to tremble. I did not grit my teeth. I did not climb up onto my chair and tear the silk from my ribs and scream at the top of my lungs about everything that was wrong and broken and missing.

There was nothing to feel upset about. Not a single thing.

CHAPTER TWO

I tried to pace myself at the reception, but glasses of champagne kept appearing before me, pressed into my hands by people I'd never met, but who seemed to know me. Everyone wanted to be the one to give me a fresh glass, everyone wanted to hold the award, everyone wanted to talk to me. It had been hours and there was so long still to go. There were at least a hundred rented tuxedos standing between me and the door. The end of the night was well beyond the horizon. There were too many people, thousands, it felt like, and I couldn't possibly keep up, so I sipped champagne and smiled at all of them and tried to let myself feel swept away instead of half-drowned.

"Isn't that thing heavy?"

"What will you be working on next?"

"I have a question about your use of cognitive mapping in the developmental process."

"How on earth did you come up with the idea to sidestep the Mohr Dilemma?"

"Where's Nathan?"

This last question snagged me like an errant briar; I only just caught my smile before it faltered. It was Lorna van Struppe asking—and, yes, handing me yet another glass of champagne, my half-drunk one whisked away already.

Lorna was my old mentor, the woman who had developed the practice of telomere financing to extend the lives of research subjects. She was also the one who showed me how to gracefully deflect academic misogyny. Lorna was tall and brawny and intellectually terrifying to most of her peers. She had always reminded me of a darker-complected Julia Child. Her resonant voice cut easily through the hum of congratulations, and the swarm of men whose names I would never remember fell quiet before her. They always did that when Lorna started talking.

Normally, their silence would be a relief—a safe harbor created by Lorna's overwhelming presence. But her question hung in the void, stark and obvious, and I absolutely could not answer it. I raised my glass to her and deflected as hard as I knew how, forcing bright affection into my voice. "Thank you for this. The other one was almost ten seconds old! The bubbles were nearly elliptical already." It was an old joke from the first time Lorna and I had drunk champagne together, celebrating a publication. We'd gotten silly, started laughing about the bubbles going flat; champagne in two dimensions, we called it. Not funny unless you were drunk and giddy, which we had been, and so the memory of our laughter had fueled that joke in the intervening years.

But the deflection didn't work. Lorna was as intent as ever, infuriatingly focused on the one question I didn't want anyone asking. The question I was sure everyone was whispering about when I was out of earshot.

"Where's Nathan?" She was so loud, heads were turning, people were listening, and if they weren't already wondering they would start to, and they would talk about it. *Damn you, damn you, damn you, Lorna.* "I haven't been able to spot him all night, and I want to have a word with him about the research assistant he sent me last quarter. Nowhere near the caliber I'd expect, don't know what he was thinking—" Lorna craned her neck and looked around, not one to be caught up in praising me when there was an opportunity to excoriate Nathan on the table. As she listed the defects of the research assistant, more than a few members of our audience lost interest, thank God.

"He's not here," I said. The seam of my dress dug into my skin, merciless. "He's probably at home with his fiancée."

"His what? Oh," Lorna said, catching on and looking at me with deep, sudden concern. "I see. Tell me, do we hate him now?"

"No, no, of course not." I let my grip tighten on the silver double helix just a little, just enough to keep my voice steady. I couldn't tell if I was drunk or not. I wanted to be drunk. I wanted to be extremely drunk. "Very amicable."

Lorna raised one wild-haired white eyebrow. "I'll be taking you out for coffee later this week, and you can give me all the details. In the meantime, I'll commence hating him just a *little*, in case I need material to seed hating him a lot."

"I'd love to get coffee, yes," I said, my cheeks numb, and before I could add something about *really, though, there's no need to hate him, things just didn't go as we planned*, a hand was on my elbow. I endured an urgent introduction, another fresh glass of champagne. By the time I turned back, Lorna was talking to someone else.

It was a mercy, in a way. The whirlwind of the evening had kept too many people from asking about Nathan. I didn't think I could have stomached defending him, not to Lorna. Even if it was the right thing to do, professionally. It wouldn't have been good for me to be seen bringing my personal life into my professional circles, damaging Nathan's reputation in his academic ones. It would have been *justified*, but justification didn't matter in situations like this; no, I needed to be careful.

I had seen it a hundred times in the field that we'd chosen. I knew who always bore the weight of divorce. Nathan could afford all of this, would come out unscathed regardless of how clearly the entire situation was his fault. And no matter how obviously I was the wronged party, it would haunt me for the rest of my career if I slipped at all, even once, if I ever seemed hurt or angry or sad. I needed to maintain the moral high ground, which meant that if I was asked, I needed to insist that everything was fine. I was fine. Nathan and I were fine. *Amicable*.

I did not want to be asked. The internal battle between doing the right thing and doing the honest thing and doing the *tempting* thing was an ongoing one, and I just wanted a break from it, just for one night. I wanted to hide.

And there were so many hiding places in that crowd.

Any other night, my story of the development of synthetic amniotic fluid alone could hold the right audience rapt for an hour at a stretch—but of course, this crowd didn't want to hear about amniotic fluid, nor about the process of accelerating bone growth in nascent specimens without damaging skeletal integrity. No, this crowd knew about that work, had heard it all before. They wanted something different, something remarkable. They wanted to know about the work that had won me the Neufmann Prize.

The process of taking an adult clone and writing their personality into their neurological framework: It was mine. All mine.

Sleepless nights, research mishaps, hours and hours in the lab alone. Nobody cares about those solitary, devastating failures. They don't want to hear about that—they'd rather hear the story of the eureka moment. And mine was good. "I was making eggs for breakfast," I would tell them, "and I was watching the way they started cooking from the bottom up, and that's when I figured it out: the key is to begin programming before the tissues of the hypothalamic nuclei have solidified. I ran to write down my breakthrough ... and I completely forgot that the eggs were still on the stove. They burned so badly that we had to throw out the pan."

Things I never added to the story: the fact that Nathan had been the one to throw the pan into the trash, had been the one to open the kitchen windows to let the smoke out, had come into my study red-faced and shouting. The way he stormed out of the house without listening to my breakthrough. The way he didn't come home for days. Was I supposed to use the word "husband" or "ex-husband" for that part of the story? I could never decide, so I always told the story as though I'd been making breakfast for myself.

It was my breakthrough. It was my legacy, not ours. Nathan was already nostril-deep in academia then. It was all mine.

The Caldwell Method had never been a thing we shared.

"But aren't you concerned about the developmental mottling of the limbic system in early stages?" This question from a man in rimless glasses and a wrinkled suit, another person I'd never met before. I fielded the question as if I didn't chafe at the implications of such a basic objection to my methods. *No, you asshole*, I did not say, *it never occurred to me to keep an eye on the fucking limbic system, what a breakthrough, here, take my grant money*.

Poise. Patience. Be nice, Evelyn.

I answered questions, worked the crowd, took photographs. Someone asked me to sign a program, and I did, feeling ridiculous. I kept thinking that I wanted to go home, and then remembering that "home" didn't really exist anymore. I just wanted to escape. Right up until the moment when it was time to do just that. That's when I realized that leaving the suffocating press of the crowd would be the very worst thing in the world.

But there was no choice. The night was finally over, and home was waiting. I climbed into the back of a black car with my award in one hand and my tiny, useless clutch purse in the other. I leaned my head against the window. Behind my eyes, the champagne-hum was already turning into a headache that would be devastating come morning. The streetlights that passed were blurry, haloed by the winter air. I tried to remember why that happened—ice crystals in the atmosphere? No, that was the thing that put a ring around the moon. Maybe it was something wrong in my own eyes, something that I should have recognized as a warning sign. *Should have known*, I'd say later. *No one else ever mentioned halos around streetlights*.

It was past two o'clock in the morning by the time I walked in through the backyard of the little town house I'd rented, letting the gate slam shut behind me. I kicked my shoes off next to the sliding glass door and made an involuntary noise at the relief of standing flat-footed. The carpet was new, installed just before I signed the lease, and it was a mercy to curl my toes into something soft. I put the silver double helix down on my newly assembled flat-pack dining-room table.

I'd put the table together just that morning, half an hour with an Allen wrench and an illustrated manual. It

existed for the express purpose of holding two items: my award, and an inch-thick stack of papers bristling with sticky-note flags.

Finding out what Nathan was doing should have been so much easier than it was. Once I started looking right at things, it was obvious. He had gone to no great lengths to hide her from me. His nightstand was littered with receipts—for clothes and jewelry that never made it to our house, and meals at restaurants I'd never had time to eat at. He didn't bother to make excuses for late nights out, for strange bruises on his shoulders and scratches on his back. Was there ever lipstick on his collar? Did I ever pay close enough attention to find out?

I don't know if he thought I was too stupid to see what he was doing, or if it just didn't matter to him that I might catch him.

Now, I padded across the unfamiliar dining-room tile to the open galley-style kitchen and filled a coffee mug with water. Drank the whole thing, yes, must be responsible about hydration, then refilled it and took the mug back with me to the table. My belly sloshed uncomfortably with water.

Now was as good a time as any, I figured. I'd sign the papers while I was still a little buzzed and riding high on the ego-flush of the evening. I'd get it over with, and in the morning, I probably wouldn't even remember doing it.

I fished a pen out of my leather shoulder bag, the one I took to work with me every day. It was big enough to fit a few shirts, a few pairs of underwear, a pair of slacks, a toothbrush. It was small enough that no one noticed I was living out of it, the week after I'd found out about Nathan. It wasn't unusual for me to stay in the lab for a couple of hours after everyone else was gone, and no one commented on the way I was there before anyone else in the morning. No one had needed to know that I was sleeping in my office during that terrible week.

I pressed the tip of my pen to the bottom of the first page, above the first yellow sticky flag, a line with my name on it. My married name. My name for good, since all my publications were under it. My doctorate had been issued to that name, even. I was so young when I married Nathan, so sure that he was good enough, that he was what I wanted. So sure that we'd go on to conquer the world together. So ready to give up the name I shared with my mother and my father. So ready to become someone new.

My award glinted in my peripheral vision, the silver double helix shining in the fluorescent light from the kitchen. I put it on top of the thick stack of divorce papers and let the weight of it compress the pile.

"Worth it," I whispered to myself. I let the pen in my hand fall to the ground. I could sign the papers in the morning, with coffee and aspirin and whatever headache was waiting for me. I decided that I would lean right into the misery of it, make it a whole pathetic tableau.

I walked upstairs and wilted onto my bed, on top of the covers. I yanked at my gown until I felt the buttons between my shoulder blades pop off. I tugged the silk over my head and gasped at the feeling of freedom, my ribs expanding further than they'd been able to for hours.

I could breathe. I could finally breathe.

CHAPTER THREE

The weekend gave way to Monday like fog dissolving in sunlight. I drove to the lab with too much gratitude, embarrassingly relieved to be out of the little house I'd never wanted. The lab, by contrast, was something I'd wanted with the kind of mania some women reserve for childbearing.

It had been an incredibly hard win. The Artemis Corporation hadn't initially wanted to give me my own space for my research—they'd claimed that, without military contracts, my work was too controversial to be profitable. It took years of fighting to convince them that my work could have other applications, the kinds of applications that would bring in immeasurable profit from private sources. Years of measuring out the size of the waves I could afford to make. Waves just big enough to keep the conversation going, but not so big as to make me into a *problem*. Years of sharing my space with people who could never begin to understand the kind of work I was doing. Except for Seyed, of course. He always understood the work. He always understood me.

But then, one day, the fighting was over, and the lab was built. Tempered glass tubes filled with artificial amniotic fluid, tables made of tungsten instead of steel or aluminum, a fume hood big enough to fit an adult specimen if necessary. I still had to fight over funding every year, of course, but maybe the Neufmann would change that. Maybe *results* would change that.

Either way. My lab felt more like *home* than any iteration of *home* ever had.

"Did you bring it?" Seyed never greeted me with a "hello." He considered that kind of formality a waste of time. It was part of why I'd hired him in the first place.

Seyed was already waist-deep in the fume hood. I couldn't see him until after I went through the airlock, positive-pressure ventilation pulling a few strands of my hair loose—but I could, as usual, still hear him. He always started talking as soon as he heard the affirmative *beeps* of my entry code.

Now, his muffled voice reverberated through the vents of the hood as I walked into my lab. "Of course I brought it," I said, setting the Neufmann on a bare patch of lab table. "You'd quit if I didn't."

Seyed emerged from the fume hood, scrub brush raised high, and yanked off the respirator that covered the lower half of his face. He was small, rail-thin but with a round face that made him look like an undergrad. A soul patch sat in the center of his chin, groomed with the great pride a man shows the only facial hair he can reliably produce. He stared at the silver double helix with a critical eye. "It's smaller than I expected," he said.

I dropped my things on my desk and told him to get used to it. "You'll have ten of them someday, if you keep practicing your fume hood maintenance." He saluted me with a finger, pulled his respirator back on, and vanished into the fume hood again. "What are you doing in there, anyway?" I asked. "Did something explode?"

"No," he said, "not technically. Don't worry about it, I ordered the replacement parts already."

I didn't worry about it. I never worried about anything that Seyed told me not to worry about. Some of my colleagues would flinch at the idea of trusting an assistant the way I trusted Seyed, but he'd earned it. He was smart, sure, but anyone could be *smart*. I would never take on an assistant who wasn't *smart*. I demanded more than smart—brilliance was the bare minimum required to keep up in my lab, and *not* keeping up wasn't an option. Not keeping up was dangerous.

Seyed was more than just brilliant. He was competent, independent, and fearless on a level that matched me pace for pace. I spotted it in him for the first time when Nathan brought him home for dinner, when he was a graduate student threatening to become Nathan's protégé. The questions he asked me about my research that night went well beyond polite interest. His teeth were sharp and he was hungry, too hungry to be satisfied by the kind of growth Nathan could offer him.

I told him so, that night, and then I offered him a job where he could flourish, and that was that. I don't remember if Nathan was upset or not. I suppose that, by then, I'd stopped paying attention to that kind of thing.

Most of the time, it was just the two of us working together, and it was easily the best working partnership I'd ever been half of. I trusted Seyed's judgment like I trusted my own. I trusted him without question.

So I didn't bother looking into the fume hood to see what he was doing. Instead, I grabbed a clipboard from the

side of a specimen tank and started reviewing nutrient updates, as recorded by the weekend intern I'd never wanted to hire. I hated trusting data collection to someone other than Seyed or myself, but there were labor laws to consider.

The subject in the tank, 4896-T, was eight days into the growth process and was already recognizable as an adult humanoid. She appeared to be progressing well, but her HGH levels were uneven, which was concerning. I eyed the major muscle groups on the subject's thighs, looking for signs of atrophy—the only visible indicator of the compartment syndrome that would result from the subject's muscle growth outpacing the flexibility of her other tissues.

Of course, if there was atrophy, it was already too late to fix the problem. If there wasn't atrophy, it would be tough to tell if there was any compartment syndrome at all without getting involved in some seriously invasive diagnostic procedures. Those procedures would interfere with the programming process significantly enough to make the subject useless for research purposes, and the waste would be a nightmare to justify when I was trying to get my budget for the next year locked down. I tapped my pen against my clipboard, mentally flipping through options.

It was a habit Nathan hated—the way I drummed out a beat while I was thinking. It was an indulgence I allowed myself only in my own lab, now, where he had never once set foot. It felt like a stolen luxury, a finger dragged through the frosting on an uncut cake.

"You missed a call," Seyed said, interrupting my rhythm. I tamped down irritation: it wasn't his fault that I hadn't found the answer to the HGH problem before he finished his work. I didn't bother to school my face to stillness as I turned toward him, though. I didn't have to do that with Seyed. He would commence giving a shit about my emotions the moment I raised them as a subject of concern, and not a second sooner. Inside my lab, I could afford to frown.

"Congratulations, I suppose? I won't be returning those calls," I said.

Seyed emerged from the fume hood with a bundle of rags. He held the rags at arms' length, walked them to the red biohazard bin next to the autoclave, and dropped them in along with his elbow-length gloves. With his bare hands he removed his respirator and, after a moment's consideration, dropped it into the bin too. "Someone named 'Martine.'"

The metal edges of the clipboard dug into the soft meat of my fingers.

I forced myself to loosen my grip. I replaced the clipboard, carefully threading the hole in the metal tab over the plastic hook that was affixed to the glass of the tank. The clipboard clicked against the glass, and the specimen in the tube twitched. I flinched. "Seyed, please do me a favor and line each clipboard in this lab with felt. Any neutral color. Back and edges."

"You got it," Seyed said, scrubbing his hands to the elbows with antimicrobial soap. "Deadline?"

"End of day," I called over my shoulder, not looking back for confirmation.

I walked to the lab phone. There was a trash can on the floor next to it, which held messages—one of the many ways in which Seyed had streamlined the systems in the lab since I hired him. The legal pad next to the phone was dominated by a running tally of who had last ordered takeout. S, E, S, E, S, S, S, E, E, S, E. Next to the column of letters, Seyed had written the name "Martine" and a phone number. His handwriting was architect-tidy. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"No," Seyed called back. "She just asked if I would pass along her regards and her 'request for a return call at your earliest convenience.' What kind of person talks like that?"

No kind of person talked like that.

My mother talked like that.

Martine talked like that.

I thanked Seyed, and my voice must have given something away, because he asked if I was okay. He never asked if I was okay, never. He would only have asked if I sounded truly broken. I swallowed another flash of anger as I told him that I was fine. "I mean, I'm not fine, but I'm fine," I added, hating everything about the conversation already.

"Right, sure," he said, his voice as steady as if I'd said something normal. As if he believed me.

That, I think, is the thing that made me tell him the truth. I hadn't planned to say anything, but Seyed sounded like he believed me, like he thought it possible that I could be fine at a time like this one. "Martine is Nathan's fiancée."

I didn't like to talk about Nathan. Especially not at work. Especially not with Seyed, whose connection to Nathan I'd so effectively severed. But there it was, in the room, right there where Seyed could hear it: *Martine is Nathan's fiancée*. It was the first time I'd ever said that exact sentence out loud, and it stayed on my tongue with an aftertaste, like tin and brine.

Seyed sucked his teeth. "He's engaged already? Shit, I'm sorry, that's fucking terrible."

“Yeah.” He was right. It was oddly satisfying to hear someone put it that way, because yeah. It was fucking terrible. “They’ve been together for a while now. I haven’t really talked to her beyond the bare minimum.” I shook my head. “I don’t know why she’d call me here.”

Seyed paused, his eyedropper of iodine hovering over a slide. “You’re listed in the staff directory.” He was being careful, staying neutral, trying not to step wrong. It didn’t suit him at all. “It was probably the only polite way she could figure out to contact you.”

A headache was spreading through my temples. I couldn’t tell if it was new, or the lingering remnants of my champagne hangover. “Right, no, I mean I don’t know why she’d call me *at all*.”

“One way to find out,” Seyed singsonged.

I glared at him, but he didn’t look up from his work, and after a few seconds the glare felt more like theater than anything else. I tore off the part of the legal pad with the phone number on it and tucked it into my breast pocket. It could wait.

Nothing Martine had to say to me could possibly be urgent.

Putting off the unpleasant business of returning Martine’s call was easy enough. The lab was full of work that urgently needed doing—assessing Seyed’s tissue samples, adjusting fluid levels in the specimen tanks, taking and testing new fluid samples from 4896-T, writing up a plan to level out the hormone ranges of several struggling specimens. I owed the lab director an expenditures report, and I needed to figure out how to massage the numbers in the report to justify a slow increase in costs. We were running through supplies faster than we could afford them, and the only solution was money.

Procrastination would have been easy enough, if not for the crinkle of paper in my pocket and the little blinking light in my brain: *Martine called. Martine called. Martine called.*

Why on earth would Martine call?