

**THEY
WISH
THEY
WERE
US**

JESSICA GOODMAN





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PROLOGUE

IT'S A MIRACLE that so many people get out of high school alive. Everything is a risk or a well-placed trap. If you're not done in by your own heart, so trampled and swollen, you might fall victim to a totally clichéd but equally tragic demise—a drunk-driving accident, a red light missed while texting, too many of the wrong kinds of pills. But that's not how Shaila Arnold went.

Of course, technically, her cause of death was blunt force trauma at the hands of her boyfriend, Graham Calloway. With trace evidence of sea water in her lungs, drowning may have been the easiest assumption, but upon closer inspection, the bump on her head and the puddle of thick, sticky blood that matted her long honey-blond hair was unmissable.

Blunt force trauma. That's what her death certificate says. That's what went down in the record books. But that's not *really* how she died. It can't be. I think she died from anger, from betrayal. From wanting too much all at once. From never feeling full. Her rage was all-consuming. I know this because mine is, too. *Why did we have to suffer? Why were we chosen? How had we lost control?*

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It's hard to remember what we were like before, when anger was just temporary. A passing feeling caused by a fight with Mom, or my little brother Jared's insistence on eating the last piece of apple pie at Thanksgiving. Anger was easy then because it was fleeting. A rolling wave that crashed ashore before it settled down. Things always settled down.

Now it's as if a monster lives inside me. She'll be there forever, just waiting to crack open my chest and step forward into the light. I wonder if this is how Shaila felt in her last moments alive.

They say only the good die young, but that's just a line in a stupid song we used to sing. It isn't real. It isn't true. I know that because Shaila Arnold was so many things—brilliant and funny, confident and wild. But honestly? She wasn't all that good.

ONE

THE FIRST DAY of school always means the same thing: a tribute to Shaila. Today *should* be the first day of her senior year. Instead, she is, like she has been for the past three years, dead. And we are due for one more reminder.

“Ready?” Nikki asks as we pull into the parking lot. She throws her shiny black BMW, a back-to-school present from her parents, into park and takes an enormous slurp of iced coffee. “Because I’m not.” She flips the mirror down, swipes a coat of watermelon pink lipstick over her mouth, and pinches her cheeks until they flush. “You’d think they could just give her a plaque or start a charity run or something. This is brutal.”

Nikki had been counting down to the first day of senior year since we left for summer break back in June. She called me this morning at 6:07 a.m. and when I rolled over and picked up in a hazy fog, she didn’t even wait for me to say hi. “Be ready in an hour or find another ride!” she yelled, a hairdryer blowing behind her into the speaker.

She didn’t even need to beep her horn when she showed up. I knew she was waiting out front thanks to the deafening

notes of Whitney Houston's "How Will I Know." We both have a thing for eighties music. When I climbed into the front seat, Nikki looked as if she'd already had two Starbucks Ventis and a full glam squad appointment. Her dark eyes glimmered thanks to a swatch of sparkly eyeshadow and she had rolled the sleeves of her navy Gold Coast Prep blazer up to her elbows in an artful yet sloppy manner. Nikki's one of the only people who can make our hideous uniforms actually look cool.

Thank God my nightmares stayed away last night and the near-constant bags under my eyes had disappeared. Didn't hurt that I'd had a few extra minutes to apply a thick coat of mascara and deal with my brows.

When Nikki pulled out of my driveway, I was giddy with anticipation. Our time had come. We were finally at the top.

But now that we're actually here, parked in the Gold Coast Prep senior lot for the first time, a shiver slinks down my spine. We still have to get through Shaila's memorial and it hangs over us like a cloud, ready to rain all over the fun.

Shaila was the first student to ever die while attending Gold Coast Prep, so no one knew how to act or what to do. But somehow, it was decided. The school would start the year off with a fifteen-minute ceremony honoring Shaila. The tradition would last until we graduated. And as a thank you, the Arnolds would donate a new English wing in Shaila's name. Well played, Headmaster Weingarten.

But no one wanted to remember Graham Calloway. No one mentioned him at all.

Last year's assembly wasn't so bad. Weingarten stood up and said something about how much Shaila loved math—she didn't—and how she would have been so thrilled to be start-

ing AP Calc if she was still with us—she wasn't. Mr. and Mrs. Arnold showed up, as they did the year before, and sat in the front row of the auditorium, dabbing their cheeks with cotton handkerchiefs, the old-fashioned kind that were so worn, they were almost translucent and probably held residual snot from decades before.

The six of us sat next to them, front and center, identifying ourselves as Shaila's survivors. We were chosen as eight. But after that night we became six.

When Nikki weaves through the parking lot and into the spot reserved for class president, Quentin is already waiting for us. "We're seniors, bitches!" he says and slaps a piece of notebook paper against my window flashing a hastily drawn doodle of the three of us. In it, Nikki holds her senior class president gavel, I grasp onto a telescope twice my size, and Quentin's covered in flaming-red paint to match his hair. Our little trio makes my heart melt.

I squeal at the sight of real Quentin and fling the car door open, throwing myself at his middle.

"You're here!" I say, burying my face into his doughy chest.

"Aw, Jill," he says with a laugh. "C'mere Nikki." She launches herself into our hug and I inhale the dewy scent of Quentin's laundry. Nikki leaves a sticky kiss on my cheek. In seconds, the others appear. Robert, with his slicked-back hair, takes the last puff of a mint-flavored Juul and shoves it into the pocket of his leather jacket. He *should* get a handful of demerits for wearing it in favor of his blazer, but he never does. "I can't believe we have to do this again," he says.

"What? School or Shaila?" Henry comes up behind me and rests a hand on the top of my butt, nipping my ear with his

teeth. He smells overwhelmingly male, like freshly cut grass mixed with expensive French deodorant. I blush, remembering this will be the first time we're seen at school together as a *we* and inch closer to him, tucking my shoulder into his armpit.

"What do you think?" Robert rolls his eyes.

"Shut up, you idiots," Marla says, whipping her platinum-blonde braid over her muscled shoulder. Her face is tanned from a summer spent training at the best field hockey camp in New England. Her stick hangs low over her back in a tie-dyed canvas bag, its taped handle peeking out the top. The ultimate sign of varsity realness. She wears it well.

"Whatever," Robert mumbles. "Let's get this over with." He walks ahead, leading us onto the grassy quad, manicured and untouched after a summer without students. If you stand in just the right spot, below the clock tower and two steps to the right, you can glimpse a sliver of the Long Island Sound just a mile down the road and the tall sailboats swaying carefully next to one another. The salty air makes my hair curl. There's no use owning a flatiron here.

I bring up the rear and gaze at my friends' backs. Their perfect silhouettes set against the sun. For a moment nothing exists outside the Players. We are a force field. And only we know the truth about what we've had to do to get here.

Underclassmen—Nikki calls them *undies* for short—trot along the paved walkways, but no one comes close to our little unit. They keep their distance, tugging at their too-stiff white button-downs, tightening belt buckles and rolling up their pleated baby blue skirts. None of them dare to make eye contact with us. They've learned the rules by now.

I am sweating by the time we reach the auditorium, and

when Henry opens the door for me I'm filled with dread. Most of the velvet-covered seats are already filled and big bug eyes turn to see us walk down the aisle to our places in the front row next to Mr. and Mrs. Arnold. They're both dressed in black. When we approach, they stand and dole out pursed-lipped air kisses to each of us. The smacking sounds echo through the cavernous room, and the scrambled eggs I had for breakfast curdle inside my stomach. The whole thing reminds me of my grandfather's funeral when we stood for hours, receiving guest after guest until my puckered mouth wilted like a flower. I am the last to greet Mrs. Arnold and she digs her crimson nails into my skin.

"Hello, Jill," she whispers into my ear. "Happy first day of school."

I manage a smile and wriggle my arm from her grasp after a moment too long. When I squeeze in beside Henry and Nikki, my heart beats fast. Shaila stares back at us from a gilded frame, sitting on an easel in the middle of the stage. Her golden locks fall in full, beachy waves and her deep green eyes have been made more electric with some help from Photoshop. She looks the same as she always did, forever fifteen, while the rest of us have acquired additional pimples, more painful periods, nastier dragon breath.

The theater smells like freshly xeroxed paper and sharpened pencils. Gone is the musk that had settled in by the end of last spring's school year. This place was the one thing the Arnolds got right for her memorial. The auditorium was Shaila's favorite spot on campus. She starred in every class play she could, emerging from afternoon rehearsals on a euphoric high I couldn't understand. "I need the spotlight," she said once

with her deep, full laugh. "At least I can admit it."

"Good morning, Gold Coast," Headmaster Weingarten bellows. His bowtie is slightly askew and his salt-and-pepper mustache looks recently trimmed above his pointy chin. "I see many new faces among our ranks and I want to say welcome from the bottom of my heart. Join me."

People turn to the newbies, kids who had spent their previous lives in public schools and up until today thought the first day of school meant homeroom and roll call, not saying what's up to a dead girl. Now, in this new and strange place, their bewildered expressions betray them. They are obvious. I was one of them once, back in sixth grade. My scholarship came through only a week before classes started and I came to Gold Coast Prep not knowing a single soul. The memory nearly gives me hives.

"Welcome!" The rest of the auditorium says in unison. Our row stays silent.

"You may be wondering why we are here, why we start every year in this very space." He pauses and wipes a tissue across his forehead. The air conditioning whirs on overdrive, but he still glistens with sweat under the bright stage lights. "It is because we want to take time to remember one of our best, one of our brightest, Shaila Arnold."

Heads turn toward Shaila's portrait, but Mr. and Mrs. Arnold keep their focus on Headmaster Weingarten straight ahead.

"Shaila is no longer with us," he says, "but her life was radiant, one we cannot forget. She lives on in her family, in her friends, and within these halls."

Mr. and Mrs. Arnold nod their heads.

"I am here to tell you that Gold Coast Prep is, and will always be, a family. We must continue to protect one another," he says.

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"We will not let another Gold Coast student be harmed." Nikki's elbow presses into my rib cage.

"So take this as a reminder," Headmaster Weingarten continues. "At Gold Coast Prep, we strive to do good. We aim to be grand. We see ourselves as helping hands."

Ah, the Gold Coast motto.

"Join in if you know it," he says, smiling.

Five hundred and twenty-three Gold Coast Prep students, ages six to eighteen, raise their voices. Even the new kids, who were instructed to memorize the stupid words before they even set foot on campus.

"At Gold Coast Prep, life is good. Our time here is grand. We see ourselves as helping hands," the chorus says in a creepy sing-song.

"Very good," says Headmaster Weingarten. "Now, off to class. It will be quite a year."

We are no longer mourners when lunchtime rolls around. Paying tribute to Shaila is a hurdle we have cleared.

My stomach flips when I catch a glimpse of the senior Players' tables. The juniors and sophomores have already assembled, but the perfect table, the one reserved for us, is empty and beckoning.

It occupies the best real estate by far, nestled smack dab in the middle of the cafeteria, so everyone has to pass us and bear witness to the *fun* we can have, even at lunch. The ones that ring around us are saved for the other Players, the undies, and then from there, how far away you sit from us determines everything.

My feet tingle with excitement as Nikki and I weave

through the salad bar, dropping massaged kale, marinated feta, and hunks of grilled chicken onto our plates. When we pass the dessert table, I pluck a piece of raw cookie dough from the glass bowl. Having the little buttery ball on your tray has been a sign of cool girl vibes for decades. Shaila ate it every single day she was here. A bunch of freshmen let us cut them at the cashier, as they should, and we make our way to the table we always knew would be ours. Even now, I'm still surprised to find my spot empty, waiting for me. Seeing that open chair, the one that's undoubtedly mine, still elicits a weird thrill. It's a reminder. After all this, I belong. I deserve this. I survived.

Nikki and I are the first ones here and when we slide into our seats, the familiar feeling of being in a fishbowl begins to take over. We know we're being watched. That's part of the fun.

Nikki flips her long black hair over her shoulder and unzips her backpack, retrieving a neon paper box. "I came prepared," she says. The lid pops open, revealing dozens of mini Kit Kats in flavors like pumpkin, green tea, and sweet potato. Her parents must have brought them back from their recent business trip to Japan—without her, of course. A few sophomores crane to see what glamorous treat Nikki Wu has brought to school.

"Another gesture from *Darlene*," she says, motioning to the brightly colored wrappers. Nikki rolls her eyes when she pronounces the second syllable of her mother's name.

Nikki's parents are textile magnates and they moved here from Hong Kong when we were in seventh grade. During her first semester at Gold Coast, she was mostly seen hunched over her phone, DM'ing with friends back home. She was totally disinterested in this suburban life. Her indifference to us gave her an untouchable chill factor. That spring, she became besties

with Shaila while they were working on the middle school musical. Shaila had scored the lead role as Sandy in *Grease*, to no one's surprise, and Nikki had signed up to work on costumes. It was there we learned she was basically a fashion prodigy, designing slick leather leggings and poodle skirts that looked ready for Broadway.

When it became clear that I would have to share Shaila as a best friend, I tried to stomp out my jealousy. I was determined to navigate their newly shared tastes ("Bravo, not Netflix") and catch up after they drank for the first time at the cast party ("beer before liquor, never been sicker!"). It worked, mostly, and by eighth grade, we were fused together.

But throughout Shaila's last year, Nikki and I silently battled for Shaila's attention, orbiting around each other. It was stupid though, because Shaila didn't play favorites. She was loyal to us both. When she died, Nikki and I went from frenemies to inseparable. Our link to one another had been severed, so we forged a new one. It was like all that tension evaporated and we were left with just each other and the hungry need for intimacy. Ever since then, Nikki became my Shaila. And I became hers.

"Red bean's my favorite," she says now, unwrapping a bar and popping it into her mouth. I reach for the box and tear into a bright pink one. It's sweet and sticky in my palm.

"Nuh-uh," I say. "Strawberry forever."

"Only when it's paired with matcha."

"Pfft. Snob."

"It's called having taste!"

"What about dark chocolate?"

Nikki chews, mulling over the suggestion. "Simple. Classic. I'm down."

"It's iconic."

"Just like us." Nikki flashes her megawatt smile then swipes a lavender-colored wrapper. "Life's too short to have just one."

"Too real."

Behind me, the buzzing hum of the cafeteria becomes a roar. I turn to see the boys amble towards us. Freshmen and sophomores scatter, making a path for them. Robert's a few steps ahead of the others, barreling through the room. Henry's not too far behind. His backpack is slung over one shoulder and his thick sandy hair flops neatly to one side. His tie hangs loose around his neck and he fist bumps Topher Gardner, a stocky, acne-prone junior Player thirsty for his attention. Quentin brings up the rear, winking at some cute sophomore on the baseball team as he strides by. The kid turns the color of a tomato. Robert crashes into his seat first and rips the cap off a soda, chugging half the bottle at once.

"Hey, babe," Henry says, sliding into the seat next to me. He presses his lips to the little triangle where my neck meets my collar bone. It sends a shock through my limbs and I hear a gasp from the table behind us. A group of wide-eyed freshmen girls with their skirts hanging a bit too long have grabbed front row seats. If they think they'll lay claim to that table for the entire year, they're wrong. That one's reserved for us, too. We'll give it to the freshmen Players like a present. They'll see.

But for now, the girls break into giggles, whispering behind cupped fingers, their eyes darting in our direction.

Marla collapses into her seat and, like that, we're all together again. It's roomy since the tables are made for eight. Shaila and Graham made us fit. But we've learned to spread out and take up more space than we should. It helps. And now since all

of us Players are here, the game is on.

The air between us is frenetic with fractions of conversations meant to propel us toward the weekend, always the weekend.

"I heard Anne Marie Cummings will give you a hand job if you say you like her shitty band."

"Reid Baxter promised he would bring a handle tonight. Don't let him in if his connect pulls out."

"Well, if you didn't want to get Sharpie all over you, don't get so wasted next time!"

Little clips of conversation float over our heads and disperse throughout the room, carrier pigeons, sharing the most important news with the rest of the school. Some days, we lean in so close, I imagine our heads look like a Wiccan symbol from overhead. But other times, we curl inside ourselves, forming partnerships and alliances. *Who is on my side? Friend or foe?*

"Ahem!" Nikki smacks a knife against her can of seltzer.

Robert groans but smiles in her direction. If it's a good week, they usually spend lunch mouthing filthy phrases to each other over their trays. If it's a bad week, she pretends he doesn't exist.

"Turd." Nikki sticks her tongue out and presses her arms to her sides, making her chest perk up so her boobs sit right under her chin. Robert leans back and raises his eyebrows, impressed. Already, this week seems to be excellent.

"Fine, Miss Wu," Quentin says. "Spill."

Nikki leans in and lowers her voice so we have to crane to hear, although none of what she says will be new information. She will throw tonight's party. (No shit.) Her parents are gone, jetting off to Paris for the weekend. (Sounds about right.) There will be a keg. (Of course.)

Henry turns to me and his hand finds my thigh under the

table. His thumb rubs my bare skin in small circles. "I'll pick you up at eight thirty," he says.

I fit my mouth into a smile and try to ignore the heat between my legs. His skin glows like summer, and I swear I can still make out the tan line his sunglasses left on the bridge of his nose the day he asked me to make it official. It was one of the hottest afternoons in June, sweltering on land but cool on his parents' boat in the middle of the Sound. The group text was dormant. Everyone else was on vacation before their elite summer programs began. I still hadn't started my counselor stint at the local planetarium. We were the only ones around.

You like stars, right? Henry texted off-thread.

Everyone knew I was obsessed with astronomy. Well, astronomy *and* astrophysics to be exact. It had been my *thing* for so long. I became fixated with everything up above when I was five and Dad started taking me out to Ocean Cliff after every rainstorm, when the sky was the clearest, to point out constellations, galaxies, planets, and stars. It was the highest point in Gold Coast, an enormous stone formation that extended out over the Atlantic. "This is how to make sense of the chaos," Dad would say as we sat on the rocks. He said he had always wanted to be an astronaut, but instead became an accountant for some reason I could never really understand. When we got home that first night, he stuck a bunch of glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling in spiral configurations.

Now, being able to spot *things* up there, little miracles that have been around forever and ever, puts me at ease. It makes the nightmares go away, the darkness easier to deal with. Well, sometimes.

Duh, I responded to Henry.

Sunset ride on the boat?

I waited a beat before typing back. Henry doubled down.

I have a telescope we can bring.

Henry had been chasing me like this since school let out, dropping by the house, offering to give me rides to parties, sending me bizarre news clips that he thought would make me laugh. I was sick of saying no, sick of waiting on someone else. So I said screw it and agreed.

I'm there. But I've got the hookup. No scope needed.

The travel-size Celestron Dad got me for Hanukkah last year sat tall on my nightstand.

A few hours later, we were halfway to the Connecticut shoreline, aboard his small runabout, *Olly Golucky*, named for Henry's twelve-year-old golden retriever. The sun had gone down and the heat was finally starting to let up. A breeze puckered, and the first little stars began to break through the clouds. I breathed in the salty air and laid down on the damp deck. Waves crashed around us as Henry delighted me with surprisingly funny stories about his first week as a summer intern at CNN. His face grew flush when talking about seeing his idols in the halls. It was totally adorable. Then he grabbed a bottle of rosé and a tin of Russian caviar he found in the little hideaway fridge. He presented them to me with the question, his eyes wide and hopeful. "So, do you want to do this? Us?"

The answer was obvious. He was the captain of the lacrosse team and anchor on the school news channel. More eloquent than most of our teachers. Sweet when he was drunk, that awful time when most of the other guys became monsters. It didn't hurt that he was also beautiful in a totally obvious Nantucket J. Crew model kind of way. Thick blond hair. Green eyes. Nearly

perfect skin. He was bound for greatness. He was a Player. Being with him would make everything so easy.

Plus, the person I really wanted to be with, the guy who had inadvertently led me to this exact place, was hundreds of miles away. It was a no-brainer. Henry was here and willing. Adam Miller was not.

"Of course," I said. Henry dropped the tin and wrapped his sticky hands around my waist. Fish eggs clung to my bare back. He never could have known that while his tongue was in my mouth I was willing Adam to see me, to know what he had let go.

The bell rings and Robert kicks Henry under the table. "C'mon, man. We've got Spanish."

"English," I say, turning to Nikki. She throws her head back in despair but links her arm in mine and pulls me out the double doors and into the quad. The sun shifts as we walk, and if I squint, I can see past the staff parking lot behind the theater, and all the way to the oyster stalls pulling down their canvas curtains and packing up crates, closing up shop for the day.

Nikki and I make it across campus just as the bell rings and slump into our side-by-side desks. I pull out my copy of *The Great Gatsby*, a classic, Mr. Beaumont noted in his summer reading assignment.

"Hi, girls," Mr. Beaumont says, as he walks by our desk. "Good summer?" Nikki cocks her head and looks up mischievously.

"Great summer."

"Excellent." Mr. Beaumont smiles and pushes his thick-rimmed glasses up his nose. He looks more bronzed than last year, like he had spent the entire summer swimming in the Hamptons, like he's a grown-up version of one of us, which, I guess in some ways, he is.

He came to Gold Coast three years ago, starting just after Thanksgiving when Mrs. Mullen left on maternity leave. He had Nikki, Shaila, and me for freshman English, right when we learned about the Players. On the first day of class, he won us over with a dare.

"Don't screw with me and I won't screw with you." He said it with a smile. A joke. He said *screw* so he must be cool. He must *get it*. My phone buzzed with a text from Shaila right in the middle of class. *OBSESSED*, she wrote with a few red hearts. I looked up and caught her eye.

"Dreams," I mouthed.

After he arrived, it only took a few days before we all found out he grew up in Gold Coast. Graduated ten years ago now. He's goofy as hell on his yearbook page, with a wild mop of dark hair and a dirt-stained lacrosse jersey. Henry thinks he used to be a Player. There were even rumors that he started the whole thing. I never quite believed them, though.

Headmaster Weingarten was so pleased with his work that year that he hired Beaumont full time and gave him the AP English Lit class, reserved only for seniors. Now, he calls our class his "firstborn."

As he launches into a monologue about East Egg and West Egg, I scribble furiously trying to take down everything he says. "I don't know why you do that," Nikki whispers, pointing at my notebook with a ballpoint pen. "It's not like you need notes."

She's right, obviously. There's a fat stash of *Gatsby* info in the Player Files, alongside hundreds of insanely thorough study guides for Gold Coast midterms and finals. There's also a slew of past SATs, copies of AP exams, and off-the-record college essay advice from the deans of admissions at Harvard

and Princeton. I saw those little manuals last spring sandwiched between a bunch of college-level organic chemistry finals, sent back from a Player whose name I didn't even recognize.

"They never change the questions!" he had written. "Get that fucking A!"

The Files are our entry into the elite within the elite. A way for us to excel, even if we could have on our own. They are passed down as a reward for our loyalty, a way for us to enjoy everything that comes with being a Player. The parties. The fun. The privilege. They alleviate some of the stress, the pressure. The Files make everything easy. Golden. Never mind the crushing guilt and shame that creeps into my stomach whenever I open the app that houses them. The Files are our secret insurance.

Especially for those of us whose parents can't afford the tutors and the private college counseling that cost nearly as much as Gold Coast Prep tuition. Or who have to maintain a 93 average to keep our scholarships. The others don't need to know that little detail, though.

"Miss Wu," Mr. Beaumont calls out to Nikki. "What is Miss Newman writing about that is so interesting to you? I'm surprised to see you looking at something other than your phone."

Nikki sits up in her seat, her straight dark hair falling over her shoulders. "Mr. Beaumont, you know I loved this book so much, I was just seeing what Jill thought about it."

"And Miss Newman, what do you think about Gatsby?" He asks me like he really wants to know.

"Well—"

The bell sounds.

"Another time, Miss Newman. Have a good weekend every-

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one. Be safe.” He says it to everyone, but I feel his eyes on me, like he knows our secrets, like he knows what happens to the Players. Everything we had to sacrifice. Everything we had to do to survive. Especially the girls.

TWO

“JILL!” HENRY LEANS against his car, a nearly new Lexus that he lovingly calls Bruce. “Let’s get outta here.” Warmth blooms in my chest and I make my way to him, feeling every pair of eyes follow us.

I climb up into Bruce and set my bag at my feet, next to a stack of hardcovers.

“Oops, don’t mind those,” he says, waving his hand at the books. “New haul.” They look bleak as hell with words like *war* and *democracy* printed on their back flaps. Henry flicks the radio to NPR, his favorite, and I bite back a smile. It’s too cute when he nerds out on journalism.

“We invited some freshmen to come to Nikki’s tonight.” Henry turns sharply out of the school parking lot, waving goodbye to Dr. Jarvis, the elderly physics teacher who always has food on his tie but low-key adores me.

“Already?” I ask. “Isn’t it too early for new undies to be hanging around?” I try to remember when I first started going to Player parties, when Adam told me to come along with him. It smelled crisper, more like crunchy leaves than leftover sun-

screen. We're still firmly planted in SPF season.

"Robert started scouting the little dudes at lax preseason," Henry continues. "He says we got some winners already."

I chew my lip. "It's still too soon, though, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Henry says carefully, like he's actually thinking it over, like my voice matters. "But we gotta start thinking of pops early. That's what every senior class always says, right?"

Ah, the pops. Also known as pop-quiz-like challenges. Also known as the bane of my existence. I was sentenced to my first one a week after being tapped to be a Player. That asshole Tommy Kotlove instructed me to break into the middle school chem lab after tennis practice and swipe a beaker for his girlfriend, Julie Strauss, to use as a flower vase. I almost started crying on the spot. I didn't know then that would be one of the easier ones.

"Still seems early," I say.

"You know, Bryce Miller could be pretty good."

"He would," I say slowly.

"Adam say anything to you about it?"

The truth is that Adam *had* texted me this morning before school. It was just a thumbs-up and a few words: *Watch out for my bro, will ya? I know you've got my back, Newman.*

"I'm sure he's expecting it," I say.

Henry rolls his eyes. "Yeah, well Bryce will have to get in on more than his brother. Being related to Adam Miller doesn't just guarantee you the world."

"True," I say, willing the conversation to stop. Adam's name always sounds chewed-up and poisonous in Henry's mouth.

"We'll see if it's a fit. We always do." Henry pulls to a stop in front of my house.

My skin is crawling and I'm itching to get away from his questions about Adam. I plant a quick kiss on his cheek. "See you later, babe."

"Jilly! Is that you?" Mom says as I push the door open. "I'm in the kitchen. C'mere!"

She does this often, greeting me at home in boxy linen tops and wide silk scarves, her artist hands always pulling something out of the oven or her paint box. Today, she wraps a generous tray of lasagna in tin foil. She makes it every year as a back-to-school tradition. "How was it? First day of senior year!" she nearly squeals. Her excitement turns her blossoming wrinkles into craters.

"Great!" I say, smiling wide so she has no reason *not* to believe me.

"That Henry's car?"

"Yep."

She shakes her head and laughs. "What a guy."

On the depressing side of fifty, Mom is still the most dazzling woman in the cul-de-sac, active in three book clubs, the temple sisterhood, and Gold Coast's various community service projects—all while throwing elegant pots and twisty-turny vases that land her in the pages of *Vogue* and *Architectural Digest* once a season. Her *cool* factor makes it seem like we can keep up with everyone else at Gold Coast Prep, but the reality includes long hours teaching ceramics at the community college and giving private lessons to the uber-privileged Mayflower crowd. She says it's all worth it, to do what she loves and give us the childhood she never had. Her parents were hippies, strung out at the end of the seventies, selling merch for B-list bands while driving around in an RV. Being able to send Jared and me to Prep is

a badge of honor for her, even if the whole situation makes me feel like I'm carrying her and dad's hopes and dreams around like a precious 8,000-pound weight.

I didn't really register their intense desire for my excellence until fifth grade, when Mom and Dad not-so-subtly suggested I apply for Gold Coast Prep's Alumni Merit Grant for Students in STEM. It was given out in secret every year, and afforded one lucky student full access to the school's multimillion dollar science wing, AP classes, and extracurriculars. Dozens of graduates end up in the best undergrad science programs every year, to no one's surprise. I've never seen Mom and Dad as happy as when I got in.

It's not like *scholarship* is plastered on my forehead, but sometimes I swear it must be obvious. No designer loafers to offset the pleated baby blue skirt. No car of my own. No summers in the Hamptons. "Who needs a beach house when you *live* near the beach!" Mom said when I told her Shaila invited me to the Arnolds' place out east back in middle school.

The grant doesn't cover everything—there are still extra expenses like uniforms and textbooks and Science Bowl dues. And all of Jared's tuition, of course. All of Mom and Dad's resources go into making sure we can stay at Prep with the hope that it will somehow pay off. That my baby brother and I will get into better colleges—Ivies, ideally—than if we went down the street to Cartwright Public High, where only half the class graduates.

How we would pay for college was always a sticky subject, one I tiptoed around on purpose. I pretended not to hear them fighting about it late at night in hushed tones after they thought we were asleep. "Just let her get in first," Dad always whispered. "We'll find a way."

But is it worth it? The long hours Dad spends crunching numbers in a soulless office? The fake smiles Mom puts on when she has to pretend those awful wine drunks are brilliant artists? To be determined. And, that's where the Player Files come in. They're my insurance. I need to do well. For me, but mostly for them.

But here in Gold Coast, Mom is forever optimistic. She's the mom who trusts just about anyone, *because people are inherently good, Jill, they just are*. Even after Shaila, she still says that.

It's that same motto that made her say yes one day during a temple sisterhood meeting when Cindy Miller suggested that her eighteen-year-old son tutor Jared in English.

"You're off the hook," Mom said when she told me I didn't have to listen to Jared read aloud anymore. "Adam Miller is going to do this with him."

"What?" I was shocked. Everyone at Gold Coast Prep knew Adam. Sure, he was unbelievably gorgeous, with long, lean arms, swoopy dark hair and blue eyes that could melt ice. But he was also brilliant. Adam had won the National Young Playwright Award three years in a row and was rumored to be shopping scripts around to different regional theater companies . . . as a *high schooler*. Colleges were practically begging him to join their writing programs. He was also, obviously, a Player.

So, why the hell did he want to spend Friday nights reading chapter books with a sixth grader?

Mom smoothed her chunky knit sweater over her jeans and fastened a heavy ceramic necklace behind her head. "Cindy suggested it. He wants some *real work experience*, or something. Probably for his college applications."

They were going out to dinner that night and I was sup-

posed to go to Shaila's for a movie marathon, but my brain basically short-circuited at the idea of getting to hang out with Adam.

Outside of school.

Alone.

Well, after he was done tutoring.

I quickly texted Shaila an excuse. *Sore throat. SORRY!!!!*

She responded with a wailing face, but I was in the clear. When I told Mom I was feeling sick and staying home, her mouth turned up into a small, knowing smile. "Sure, Jill."

Dad laughed and ran a comb through his hair. "Classic."

Then the bell rang.

I tried to be cool and only sort of rush to the door, but Jared beat me there.

"You're the tutor?" he said, eyeing Adam with a grin.

"Indeed, I am, buddy. You must be Jared." Adam flashed a wide smile that hugged his cheeks. It was lopsided and formed a J shape, pink and full. He crossed his arms over his chest, causing his thin white T-shirt to ripple over his biceps. They were so perfectly round and smooth and strong. He looked so much older without the blazer and khakis all the boys at Gold Coast had to wear. My neck flushed with embarrassment. I fought the urge to lick his skin. "And you," he said. "You must be Jilly."

"I—uh," I said. "It's Jill."

"Jill." Hearing him say my name was intoxicating. *Say it again*, I willed. "Jill," he said, like he read my mind, "I didn't realize you'd be here, too."

Before I could respond, Mom burst into the foyer.

"Adam! We're so glad you're here to help Jared. We're head-

ing out for the night, but our numbers are on the counter next to your check. Pizza's in the kitchen. Help yourself to whatever you want." She and Dad were off.

Adam threw me another one of those body-melting smiles and then turned to Jared. "Ready, dude?"

Jared groaned but then disappeared with Adam into the kitchen. I plopped down on the couch and turned Bravo on the lowest volume possible, to make it seem like I was busy and definitely not eavesdropping.

An hour passed before Jared tore through the room. "My turn." He grabbed the remote and switched it to some stupid superhero movie.

When Adam didn't follow, I tiptoed into the kitchen, curious if he was still there.

"Hey," he said when I appeared in the doorway.

My face instantly flushed. "How'd he do?"

Adam stretched his arms overhead, revealing a thin strip of skin and a faint trail of curly, feathery hair between his jeans and his shirt. I had to suppress a sharp inhale.

"Pretty good. Kid's a sweetheart." He gestured to the half-empty pizza box on the counter. "Join me? I hate eating alone."

He didn't wait for me to answer. Instead, he picked up the box and walked toward the back of the kitchen, leading out to the deck that jugged out over our backyard. I followed him through the screen door. He dropped the box down on the glass table and disappeared back into the kitchen. When he returned, he was holding two glasses full of ice and two cans of soda.

"Thanks," I said, when he handed me a cup.

But before he took a sip, he dug into his pocket and pulled

Then, he reached over and slipped my phone out of the pocket of my jeans, a motion that made my insides turn to jelly, my toes curl. "Here," he said, typing with flying fingers. "I'm texting myself so I have your number."

Later that night, hours after we had finished the last of the cold pizza crusts and he had driven away in his vintage Mercedes sedan, my phone buzzed.

I know who you are, Adam wrote.

Oh yeah? Do tell.

My new critic. His typing bubble paused, but then Adam sent an enormous block of text followed by an explanation. *The first scene from my next play. You're the first to read it. Tell me what sucks, Newman. I can take it.*

My heart thumped as my eyes decoded the words. I bit back a smile and responded.

I'm honored.

That's how it started.

Soon, he was over once a week to read and do worksheets with Jared. And then hang out with me after. Fridays usually. Sometimes on Wednesdays when Mom taught evening classes and Dad had late nights. Never Saturdays. Those were Player nights.

At first, I told no one. I wanted to keep my time with Adam secret. I was greedy for more of it. At school, I watched him flit between classes and occupy his place at the senior Players' Table. He wasn't Toastmaster but he anchored their unit. Everyone turned to him for approval, to make sure he laughed at their jokes, to hear his wild, winding stories.

We had an unspoken understanding. My house was safe. School was not. Instead, we exchanged secret smiles in the halls only once in a while. Then, one Thursday, when I walked by

him in between second and third period, he changed the rules. Adam stuck out his index finger and pressed it to the back of my shoulder just for a moment. His touch traveled through my veins, zapping me into an alternative reality.

That's how Shaila found out. "What was that?" she said, gnawing at her cuticle, a gross habit she was always trying to kick. I picked it up too after she died. "Why does Adam Miller know who you are?"

I tried not to smile. "He's been tutoring Jared. I think our moms are friends."

"Huh," Shaila said, her eyes trained on Adam, who was gliding down the hall, turning into the math wing. A wake of students rippled behind him. "He's dating Rachel, you know," she whispered. "Rachel Calloway." My heart sparked and cracked. Rachel was Graham's stunning older sister. Captain of the field hockey team. President of their class. She was a towering goddess. A senior. A Player. That made it all so much worse.

"I know," I lied.

"I saw him over the summer once or twice," she said. "With Graham."

I stayed silent, seething that Shaila had yet another thing to show me up. First a boyfriend, then Adam's attention.

But perhaps she picked up on this because she quickly ceded the power. "He never really wanted us around, though," she said.

I had always been jealous of Shaila, of the way her clothes smelled like summer and were super soft when you rubbed them through your fingers, and how she seemed so comfortable with her long legs and her growing chest. She never had oily little pimples on her back or weird fine fuzz growing above her lip. Even her hair stayed in place, unbothered by the Gold Coast mist.

I was jealous that things were so *easy* for her. That she could be the number one student in our class, run miles, star in plays, and dazzle anyone without much effort at all. She claimed to have only one real fear. A totally benign, normal one. Heights.

"Nope. No way," she said back in seventh grade when I begged her to join me on the Ferris wheel at the annual Oyster Fest. It was always set up right at the mouth of Ocean Cliff, so when you reached the top you felt like you were falling into the abyss. "You *know* I don't do heights." She grimaced as her eyes scaled the metal monstrosity.

Otherwise, Shaila could make everything seem glamorous, mysterious, an adventure. Like if you stuck with her, you'd never be bored again.

She even looked special. Her eyes were a grassy shade of green that grew brighter when she was excited. Shaila was the first one in our class to wear a bra. Mrs. Arnold even bought her the ones with extra padding that pushed everything up and out. Her body always looked like it was morphing into itself at conflicting speeds. I was still terrified of myself and the power I did or didn't have. But I must have had *something* Adam liked, *something* that kept him hanging around, even if he did have a girlfriend. My ability to listen, maybe. My willingness to say yes. For forever, I wanted to have something Shaila didn't. Now I had access to Adam. It was a weird imbalance, one I could milk.

"Maybe I can come over one time," she said quietly. "When he's at the house?"

"Would that be weird with Rachel?" I said, trying not to let my annoyance show.

Shaila shrugged. "Nah. Rachel's like my big sister. She'd be psyched. Plus, it could help us get into the Players. Rachel said she couldn't guarantee anything."

She knew I couldn't fight her on that one but I made her promise not to tell Nikki. Three would feel like an ambush, I argued. We didn't want to seem like we were fishing for invitations to parties. She agreed.

That Friday, when Shaila came home with me after school, I was anxious. Concerned he would like her more than he liked me. Worried there was only room for one of us in his freshmen-girls-who-I'm-friends-with crew. I spent the nights he was here on stilts, trying not to fall over, to misstep. Adding another whole person to the event felt like narrowing the platform.

The doorbell rang and Shaila bolted for the stairs. I was a few steps behind her but she opened the door, pushing her body into the frame, between Adam and me.

"Shaila," he said. A surprised smirk took over his face.

"I'm spending the night," she said.

"Fun." His eyebrows shot up at me, amused. "Graham out of town, too?" he asked.

She nodded. "One last weekend out East."

"Rachel was *pissed*," Adam said.

"Graham, too." Shaila wrinkled her nose.

I tried to follow their chatter but it sounded like a different language. One spoken by people intimately in the know about a certain family's quirks, the things they keep behind closed doors. But as my unease came to a boil, Adam moved past Shaila and brought me in for a bear hug, resting his head on top of mine.

"Hey, Newman," he murmured into my hair. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling his heat. That was the first night I knew for sure that Adam and I were friends. And Shaila saw it firsthand.

For the next hour, Shaila and I watched YouTube until Adam

emerged from the kitchen and Jared rushed down to the basement to play video games.

"Deck?" Adam asked us. He didn't wait for a response and instead headed for the door. By then he knew which wooden board was creaky, where to step to avoid the sticky patch of sap. He took his seat, the one under the apple tree that had never produced a single piece of fruit, and fumbled in his pocket.

Shaila and I sat on either side of him. She nibbled her fingers and tore her skin with her teeth.

"I've got a surprise," Adam said, setting his hands on the table.

"Bourbon?" I said, trying to find the line between knowledgeable and desperate, hoping not to step over it.

He shook his head. "Better." Opening his hands like a magician, he revealed something small and oblong, rolled up like a messy straw wrapper and pinched at one end.

Shaila giggled. "Yes!"

"You blaze before?" he asked her. I shot her a look. It was a line we hadn't yet crossed.

"Once with Kara," she said. "She had dank shit from the city." *Dank shit*. Two words I'd never heard come out of Shaila's mouth, especially not when referring to her chic family friend who also summered in the Hamptons.

Adam nodded and raised his eyebrows at her, impressed. "*Et tu, Jill?*" he asked, jabbing the little cigarette my way. I shook my head. "Well, then. Big day." He gave my knee a squeeze and my stomach clenched. The joint dangled from his mouth, so pink and full, and he flicked on a lighter, inhaling deeply.

"Ah," he breathed out. The air smelled of musk and dirt and

faintly like Mom's pottery studio, and I wondered if my parents had done the same back there, if I was the one who was slow, always catching up. I took the nub from Adam and followed his lead, inhaling until I thought my brain would combust. My lungs expanded and I wondered how long I was supposed to hold this odd air inside me. Adam nodded, and I let it go, releasing smoke. My limbs were heavy and I felt good. Another task completed. Another line crossed.

We passed the joint around and around, and when that one was finished, Adam revealed its twin. Soon, we polished that one off, too. We were starving and silly. Adam made nachos and we danced around the kitchen to Motown music. Shaila and I sandwiched Adam between us, holding hands as he jumped up and down. We collapsed onto the couch and Adam cackled furiously when I insisted we watch a clip of pandas rolling down a hill.

"Jill! I can't, I can't!" he said, gasping for air. Tears rolled down his cheeks, he was laughing so hard. And through the haze I felt accomplished and satisfied. I had made Adam Miller laugh. It was I, the funniest freshman at Gold Coast Prep.

Shaila soon fell asleep and Adam carried her upstairs. When he returned, he said, "Let's sit outside."

I followed him to the deck, but this time he walked down the stairs and to the white woven hammock on the edge of our yard, hung between two leafy cedar trees. He motioned for me to join him. Slowly, I sunk down next to him so we were lying side by side, head to toe. His mouth was so far away but I could see it taunting me.

I tilted my head to the sky, trying to spot something I recognized. But a fog had settled over the inky night. There were

only clouds. I was alone with my tangled nerves.

He rested his head against my feet and I said a silent thankful prayer that I had painted my toes a bright canary blue earlier that morning. The breeze from the bay picked up and I nuzzled into his legs. They were warm and the little hairs tickled my chin when I got too close.

"You're not like everyone else," he said.

"Neither are you."

He stroked my feet, closing his fist around each toe. "You should come hang out with me and my friends sometime."

"Okay."

"They'd love you."

"Maybe," I said.

"I've been telling people about you," he said.

A lump formed in my throat. "What do you say?"

"That you're the shit." He laughed and wrapped a whole hand around my foot. I bent it at the arch so he knew I was there. "That you're one of us."

I mulled over his words, unsure of what he meant.

"I see you looking at lunch," he said. "The table will be yours one day. Don't worry." I felt a tiny prick of moisture and snuck a look at Adam just as he planted his lips on the tender side of my foot. The movement sent a spark through my body and heat rushed to my thighs. I flinched and in an instant, we were both on the ground in a pile of limbs and hair and blades of grass. Adam's eyes found mine. They were fiercely blue, bloodshot. He wrapped his hand around my wrist.

"I have a girlfriend," he whispered.

I inhaled sharply as my heart cracked open. "I know." I ducked my head so my hair shielded me from his gaze.

THEY WISH THEY WERE US

“We’re friends. You and me.” The way he said it, the word *friends*, had a cosmic, tender pull, as if there were no greater honor he could bestow.

“Friends,” I said.

Adam touched his forefinger to my chin and raised my face to meet his. “Friends.” His lips softened into a smile. Headlights flashed, a signal Mom and Dad were home, and Adam released me. He entered the house and I was left alone.

THREE

“BIG PARTY TONIGHT?” Jared leans against the doorway in my bedroom and reaches into his hair, wrapping one of his curls around his pointer finger. They’re the color of ink, just like mine, and in photos we look like twins even though I’ve got three years on him.

“Over at Nikki’s,” I say, turning my attention to the overflowing sack of makeup in front of me.

“Yeah. I heard some kids in history talking about it. Your boyfriend invited them.” His voice cracks with the word *boyfriend*.

“Henry? He mentioned that.”

“Yeah.” Jared looks down at his hands, and I wonder for a moment if I should stay home with him instead. We could put on pajamas and flop down on the couch with mom’s extra-cozy blanket, only reserved for movie nights. He just started reading *Catcher in the Rye* for Mr. Beaumont’s freshman English class and I really want to convince him Holden is a straight-up asshole before he starts to glorify the smug little guy.

“Can I ask you something?” Jared says.

“What’s up?”

“Can I come one time? To a party?”

“Why?” I ask. The question pops out before I can stop it and it sounds a little harsher than I meant it. But why would Jared want to come to a Player party? Most of his friends play in the school band with him. They spend Saturdays digging through stacks at the old comic book store downtown or rewatching NBA highlights on YouTube. It was a relief that he hadn’t shown interest in the parties, the desperate, hungry need to let go in the darkness, the urgency that we all felt to destroy something and prove ourselves. I wanted it to stay that way, to keep him safe. “I mean, why do you want to go?”

A stray curl falls down over his brow. “I don’t know. It sounds fun.”

“Maybe.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” I regret it immediately. I don’t ever want him to see a Player party. He doesn’t belong there. But Shaila did belong, more than any of us, and look how that ended.

His face lights up and when I stand, ready to go, he hugs me tight. He is now taller than me and his shoulders are bony where they had once been soft. My baby brother is no longer a baby.

Henry walks in front of me, pushing us through the crowd like a bodyguard. A mix of Players and hopeful wannabes scatter as we pass, and a few cocky boys offer him half-hearted high fives or fist bumps. Over the summer, Henry told me Anderson Cooper was his hero because of the way he ingratiates himself with sources, gets them to trust him, and then goes in for the kill, pulling out the best, most shocking pieces of information.

Now I wonder if that's Henry's strategy for dealing with high school and everyone here.

Deafening hip-hop streams through the stereo and Nikki's house already reeks of sticky, spilled beer and stale air. Red plastic cups cover the entire dining room table, just barely hiding the chip that Robert kicked into it last summer. Nikki's parents never said anything, even though it's made of crystal and was a gift from some famous Swiss artist. She's not even sure they noticed.

Now, Nikki is hard to miss. Suspended over a keg with her legs up in the air, she's upside down, grasping the metal handles. Tyler Renford, a quiet kid on the golf team who's been obsessed with Nikki for years, holds her feet and someone else shoves the spout into her mouth.

"Ni-kki! Ni-kki! Ni-kki!" the crowd shouts. She'd been a keg stand natural since freshman year. I guess she had a lot of practice, though. She had to do one at every single Player party for an entire semester. That was one of her recurring pops. I slip out of Henry's grasp and find Marla at the kitchen counter, now covered in half-full bottles and plastic cups.

"Thank God," she says when I hug her tight. "This place is overrun with undies. We needed backup. Drink?" she asks, holding up a handle of vodka. It looks deadly.

I nod and she splashes some into a red cup, topping it off with seltzer and pineapple juice.

"Bottoms up," she says.

"To the final year." I raise my eyebrows at her and she lets out her tiny, warm chuckle.

"At last."

The first sip is sharp against my throat. Before I can decide otherwise, I gulp down half the cup. It won't be long until the

familiar feeling of electric warmth courses through my blood. I feel around the dark living room for Nikki, who's now standing upright.

"Where've you been?" Nikki wraps me tight, resting her cheek against mine. She's strapped stilettos to her feet so she has to stoop to be at eye level with me. "This vibe is nuts!" she shouts over the music. "Come on. Let's go upstairs for a bit. Grab everyone."

I catch Henry's eye and motion toward the spiral staircase, planted in the middle of the room. Marla points to it and mouths, "Up?" I nod and she grabs Quentin and Robert from the dining room, where they had been trying to organize a game of flip cup.

The six of us bound up the stairs, leaving the party to itself. Nikki throws open the door to her bedroom and we file in, just like we've done hundreds of times. At first it was weird to be down two whole people after nine months of nonstop hanging out. But slowly, we started to fill in the blanks. Nikki began speaking with Shaila's unfiltered, dry sarcasm and when I got stressed, I tied my hair into a loose knot, just like Shay did when she was buried in a script during rehearsal. Marla even borrowed Shaila's clomp-style walk that could be heard throughout the Gold Coast halls.

The boys took nothing from Graham. Not even Robert, who was his best friend. It was like we erased him completely.

Quentin takes a running leap toward Nikki's California king bed and lands in the middle, ruining the neat duvet. Nikki turns on her disco ball, giving the room a perfect, cheesy feel.

"There are tons of people here," Henry says as he plops down in the velvet purple armchair in the corner. I perch on his lap and he wraps his arms all the way around my waist, hugging me to

his hard torso. "I saw the freshmen I invited on the back porch. Think they're having fun?"

"Yeah, dude. How could you not enjoy this? It's all fun and games until we crush them with pops," says Robert.

"It's barely September. We've got all the time." Nikki shoves his shoulder and Robert sinks down next to her against the pillows, heaving an arm around her shoulders. "This is going to be the best year of our lives," Nikki says, and I really want her to be right.

"I hope so," Marla says. "We're finally at the top. We run this shit." Quentin elbows her and they tumble into Robert.

Henry rolls his eyes but jumps on top of them, dragging me with him, so we all collapse into a big dog pile. If it's true that we *run this shit*, it means we can change it.

"I love you guys!" Quentin yells, tapping his head to mine.

"You are way too emo for me right now," Robert says. "Let's goooo!"

Robert moved to Gold Coast from Manhattan in sixth grade and he never really shook the slick city kid vibe. His image was aided by the fact that he could get anyone into any club in SoHo—or so he said—and that he was the first one of us to have a fake ID, copped in some basement in Queens. That's why he was picked to be a Player. Didn't hurt that he had an insane streetwear collection or that his dad owned a bunch of resorts in Puerto Rico while his mom was a former Miss USA winner. He was overconfident and pretentious, a know-it-all who somehow charmed us into friendship.

All of this made Robert unpredictable and wild at parties, a feral cat testing the limits of those around him. How far could he push us suburbanites? It's probably why he volunteered to demonstrate last year's All-Player Winter Pop.

“So, it’s gonna go like this,” he’d yelled from the top of Derek Garry’s parents’ staircase. Robert slid a couch cushion under his seat and propelled himself forward, head-first. But before swinging his feet around, he’d slammed his skull straight into the wall with a too-loud *thwack*, landing himself a sorta-serious concussion and a trip to the hospital. “Fell off my bike,” he told the doctor with an asshole grin.

“Uh, let’s take a break,” Derek had yelled over the blasting music. For once, we didn’t make anyone else attempt it.

Robert had appeared at school the next week without a scar. “No pain, no gain!” he said when set his tray down at the Players’ table. It took us a few weeks to realize he was a little foggy and more cruel than before. The Players brushed that one under the rug. Never spoke about it again.

Now, he leaps up from Nikki’s bed and makes a break for the stairs, bumping into the banister and sloshing liquid onto the rug as he descends.

Henry and Quentin follow him, racing back to the party. Marla breaks the silence. “Wanna Juul?” She whips her head around and flashes a sly, toothy smile. “Don’t tell Coach.”

Nikki pretends to zip her mouth and I wink. “Colleges don’t want athletes who partake,” Marla said once last year after her habit kicked into high gear. “Star field hockey forwards with 4.0 GPAs on the other hand? Golden.”

Out on Nikki’s balcony, the three of us stand side by side, our shoulders kissing in the night. The party has spilled out into the backyard and I watch as a few underclassman dance barefoot in the grass. Nikki’s house sits right against the water and beyond the yard, there’s a rickety wooden walkway that leads down to the beach. When I squint, I can make out two bare butts running into the sea. They must be freshmen trying to prove they’d pass

their pops. My eyes move back to the deck where two female undies kiss on a lounge chair by the pool while a group of guys cheer them on, holding their phones up to document. The salty wind picks up above our heads and I lift my eyes to the sky. *The Bull*. She's right where I expect her to be, just above Orion. I picture her spindly legs galloping through the darkness, doing cartwheels above her friends. It's the perfect night to see her.

"I don't wanna pick freshmen," Nikki says. She sips her drink and fiddles with the sliver of rose quartz that hangs around her neck. She got super into crystals after Shaila died. "I'm not ready to be the oldest."

"I know what you mean. It doesn't feel like it's time," Marla says, blowing faint vape smoke into the air. It floats above her like a halo.

The liquor buzzes in my ears. "Jared wants to be a Player," I say.

"And you're surprised?" Nikki asks, turning towards me. A stray leaf catches in her hair.

"Your brother?" Marla asks. "So what? He's kind of cute."

"Gross, dude," I say softly. I wonder if I should have told Nikki alone.

Marla was one of us, chosen after she had made varsity as a freshman and the senior boys dubbed her best ass when she arrived at Gold Coast Prep that year. She grew up with four older brothers and a near-perfect complexion, both of which made her enviable. But she was always a little aloof, off in her own, self-contained world. I've never even been to her house, don't even know where it is. She rarely joined our sleepovers, since she preferred, she said, to stay at home with her brothers, who all went to Cartwright and were strictly off-limits. That's what Marla told us when she caught Nikki drooling over them after a game.

They wouldn't have been interested anyway. They were totally unfazed by Prep, probably because they knew they would never lose her, that Marla just joined the Players to ensure she'd get into Dartmouth. Field hockey would help, she said. So would her stellar math skills. But she's shockingly bad at standardized tests. The wildly accurate study guides in the Files helped her get a near-perfect SAT score last year.

As did the morally questionable doctor who diagnosed her with ADHD so she could get extra time on the test. His kid was a Player a few years back.

Sometimes Marla's brothers would all come to pick her up from parties, speeding down the winding, wooded Gold Coast roads in their red Jeep Wrangler. When they came to a stop, they would call out in unison from the car, never stepping foot inside.

"Mar-la!" They'd howl until she emerged from whatever hazy doorway she had been inside. "Mar-la!" With a quick wave, Marla would be gone, her white-blond hair blowing behind her as she sat nestled in the backseat of her protectors' ride. They were ghosts to us, phantom drivers who rode in on chariots and disappeared into the night. But they couldn't protect her from everything.

I wondered if the allegiance I felt toward Jared was burrowed inside of her, but multiplied by four.

"I don't know," I say. "He's not like us. This isn't for him. I mean, imagine him dealing with the pops?" I picture his worried little face, confused and distraught.

Nikki puts her arms around me, hugging me from behind. "It doesn't have to be like that for him. We're the seniors. We're in control now."

"I know. I just . . . He's my brother."

"It's going to be fine," Marla says. She draws one final deep drag before pocketing the plastic pen. "Like you said, we're in control." She pauses. "We're changing everything."

My phone vibrates once, and then again, burrowing itself into my thigh. Jared, I bet. Adam, I hope.

"I gotta pee," I say and slip past them back into the bedroom. I close the door behind me in Nikki's en suite bathroom and plunk down on the toilet. My phone pulses again and then for a fourth time. I pull it out, expecting to find a familiar name. Adam, Jared, Mom, Dad. Instead, it's a number I've never seen before.

I open the text and scan the words quickly but they don't make sense.

I know you probably never want to hear from me again, but I have to tell you something.

Graham didn't kill Shaila. He's innocent.

It's all so fucked up. Can we talk?

My stomach is in my throat and Nikki's bathroom spins around me. The walls are on the floor and the sink is flipped upside down and I think I'm going to puke. Another text appears and my heart nearly stops. I grasp my phone so hard my knuckles turn white.

It's Rachel Calloway.

FOUR

THERE WAS NEVER going to be a trial. I knew it as soon as I saw Graham Calloway in handcuffs, his face red and puffy, blown up like a balloon. Maybe it was the shock of it all, but he didn't look like Graham then. He looked like someone disguised as Graham in pricey basketball sneakers and a Gold Coast Prep lacrosse hoodie. But when the police led him in front of us, so close that I could see the faint little cluster of moles behind his ear, the ones I stared at all through seventh grade history, I knew it was him, that he had killed Shaila.

Graham and Rachel had both been at Gold Coast since preschool. They were lifers. All the teachers, even the ones they never had, knew their names and their parents. Graham was well-liked in middle school, not because he was kind or funny, but because he just *was*. His last name guaranteed him entry into everything. When he asked the other boys to come over to his indoor swimming pool or ride sand buggies on the dunes, no one said no. He had big meaty hands that felt vaguely menacing, like he could knock you over with one finger if he didn't like what you had said. In class he'd make fart noises and blame

it on whichever girl had been assigned to sit next to him. He'd knock over test tubes full of chemicals just for fun. Once he even bragged about skinning a dead seagull he found on the beach.

But all that shit seemed to disappear the summer before high school. That was when Graham and Shaila started dating. I had gotten into an all-expenses-paid science camp in Cape Cod but was feeling unbearably guilty that all I really wanted to do was be at home with Shaila. She sent me handwritten letters diligently. "It's so much more *intense* than email," she said in her first one. "Plus, what if I become famous? Then someone will want to know all about *Shaila Arnold: The Early Years*." I devoured those notes like they were Mom's triple chocolate cake.

Her letters made it seem like I was away at the exact moment when everything seemed to shift. She and Kara Sullivan, her chic family friend who spent the school year on the Upper East Side, were enrolled in a Model UN course in the Hamptons. When the Calloways found out, they threw Graham in there, too.

At first Shaila's letters were filled with stories about Kara, how she was obsessed with artists like Yayoi Kusama, Dan Flavin, and Barbara Kruger, and how Kara showed her how to eat steamers without getting butter all over your face. She seemed impossibly cool. It didn't help that Kara's dad grew up with Shaila's and Graham's dads, too. They had all spent summers together since birth. They were the same. I was the one on the outside.

It wasn't until July that Shaila started writing about Graham, peppering her letters with little stories of them eating lobster rolls on her parents' dock, slipping nips of whiskey into soda cans, and sneaking into the locals bars meant for yuppies escaping summer in the city.

In one note, Shaila wrote that Kara had begun making out with some other kid named Javi from Manhattan, which basically forced Shaila's hand. She and Graham were dating now. That was that.

By the time I got home in August, they had become inseparable. Even Nikki was shocked. It was as if Graham had become a different person. He had shed his kiddie skin like a snake. All of a sudden, he was sweet, asking me questions about the bioluminescence in Cape Cod or suggesting I tag along with him and Shaila to play mini golf. He was nicer, too, actually calling me Jill instead of the nickname he coined back in middle school, Newmania, because he once saw me cry after bombing a bio test. I hated that so much. But his good streak only lasted a year.

The morning they took Graham away, we were still at the beach outside Tina Fowler's house. His sister, Rachel, trailed behind him. She was a horrified tornado, aware of her complicity. I remember her outstretched arms reaching toward Graham and the tears streaming down her face. Her voice alternated between a warble and a wail. I shivered when she shrieked. The police pushed Graham's head deeper into the backseat of the car and he was gone. That was the last time I saw him.

After the car drove away, Rachel turned to us and pointed a shaking finger. "You all believe this?" she screamed. Her eyes were red and her hair was a frizzy mess. It was the one time she looked awful.

No one said a word.

Rachel pleaded with Adam to come with her to the station. But Adam shook his head. He was the one who called the cops when Shaila disappeared. They found Graham half a mile down the sand, almost at the entrance to the Ocean Cliff lookout, with

Shaila's blood still sticky on his fingers and stained all over his chest. Flecks of sand clung to him like sprinkles to frosting.

"You're a coward," Rachel snarled, trying to pierce his skull with her eyes. "You're a coward!" She screamed it that time. And with a quick crack of her hand, Rachel slapped Adam across his cheek, leaving a bright red patch on his pale skin. I gasped.

He blinked but said nothing.

"After everything I've done for all of you . . ." Rachel whispered. "Fuck you."

No one moved. Not Tina Fowler, her best friend since kindergarten, nor Jake Horowitz, who she drove to the hospital the night his appendix burst during one Player party. No one followed her, and soon the Calloways were gone.

Rachel didn't walk at Gold Coast graduation. Instead she left for Cornell a few months early, and the Calloways sold their house on Fielding Lane for \$6.2 million, according to the listing I saw online. Their Hamptons house went for more. They traded up for a duplex in Tribeca. No one knew exactly where Graham went. We all just heard he was sent away to some place for Bad Boys who did Bad Things but were too young and too rich to go to real jail.

Rachel and her parents didn't come to Shaila's funeral, obviously. Not that the Arnolds wanted them to. It would have been *gauche*, as Mrs. Arnold liked to say.

Shaila was buried during a frenzied, testy storm, the kind that could only happen at the start of summer when the ocean crashes violently before sputtering to a halt. It was almost too on the nose. A funeral in the rain. How sad.

I woke hours before my alarm bleated and stayed in bed until I heard a faint knock on the door. I pulled on the black sheath dress Mom picked out for me and tried to stand up straight in

my small frame. My chest was still so flat, there was no way I would fill it out.

Jared coughed. He stood in the doorway dressed in a dark suit.

"You coming?" I asked and turned back to the mirror. He'd only seen death up close when Grandpa Morty kicked the bucket two years before. But he was eighty-nine. Old people are supposed to die. Children are not.

"I want to, but Mom won't let me," he said, fiddling with a button on his dress shirt.

"For the best, probably."

Jared padded toward me in his socked feet and wrapped my stomach in a loose hug. I was still taller than him then, but only by a few inches and only for another year. Even with my new identity, my new label, I wanted to be young like him, to shield him from all of this. But I felt old and tired. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice soft and quivering.

My guts ached and there was a strange tug in my chest, as if my heart were trying to free itself from my ribs. "Me too," I said. His shoulders were putty under my touch. Jared held me tighter and I could feel the wetness from his face spreading over my dress. His body heaved just once.

The service was short, no more than thirty minutes, and ended with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," which Mrs. Arnold said was Shaila's favorite song. Maybe when she was six.

The church was packed with hundreds of people from Gold Coast and out east. Dozens of men in fancy suits lined the back row. Analysts at Mr. Arnold's hedge fund probably. Kara Sullivan, dressed in all black all designer, sat off to the side with her art dealer mom. She wept silently into her hands, clutching a piece of paper, likely Shaila's last letter to her. Shaila was always writing letters. That must have been how she kept in

touch with Kara during the school year, when she was in Manhattan and Shaila was here. I wonder if Kara's letters would be included in *Shaila Arnold: The Early Years*, too.

More like, *The Only Years*.

I took my place in the second row with Nikki, Marla, Robert, Quentin, and Henry. The first time we were together as six. Quentin sniffled into his shirtsleeve and squeezed Marla's hand every now and then. I sat still with my gaze down, drilling polka dots into my lap, just trying to ignore the guilt swelling in my heart.

We were there. We were all there. And we didn't save her.

At the funeral, Adam was right behind me, sandwiched in between Tina Fowler and Jake Horowitz. I sat up straight and looked forward, trying not to fidget in front of him. During Mr. Arnold's eulogy, Adam reached up and squeezed my shoulder, his fingers spreading over my bare skin. I was raw and cracked open, filleted like a fish and ready to be devoured.

The morning after Nikki's party, I wake with a start, my face cold and sweaty. Another nightmare. They used to be predictable. Teeth falling out. Being paralyzed during a test. All stress-related, Mom told me. But after Shaila died, I started seeing her all the time. Her bitten nails, her face, her long limbs. They all crept in. So did visions of that night. Wind whipping. Bonfire roaring. Her golden hair swinging as she marched into the moonlight. The stars on my ceiling helped sometimes, when I woke in the middle of the night. But I always kept the desk light on, too.

Last night's horror show was new, though. I squeeze my eyes shut and Rachel Calloway's perfectly symmetrical face barrels

toward me with narrowed eyes and a stretched-out mouth. My chest seizes and I flutter my eyes open. *It was just a dream.*

Rachel's reappearance in my life, however, was not. I pat around the comforter and under pillows until I find my phone nestled in between the wall and the headboard. I open her texts.

It's Rachel Calloway.

That one is almost worse than the others: *Graham didn't kill Shaila. He's innocent.*

Almost.

What a psycho. "Knock knock," Mom says from behind the door. "Can I come in?"

I stuff the phone under my pillow like it's contraband. "Mhm," I say.

The door swings open. "You really shouldn't be sleeping this late. The day awaits," she says. In a few quick strides, she's at the window, pulling the gauzy curtains open. The sun is hot and sticky, especially for September.

"I'm a teenager. Teenagers are supposed to sleep." I roll over onto my stomach.

"Can you take Jared to band practice today? Your father and I are going to run a few errands."

"Sure."

"He's got to leave in five. Car keys are by the door."

I groan but heave myself off the bed, slipping my phone into the pocket of my flannel shorts.

When I get downstairs, Jared is already waiting by Mom's car, chewing on his cuticles. He's picked up my bad habit. Shaila's bad habit.

"How was last night?" he asks.

"Fine," I say, and reverse out of the driveway.

"Wait. Where's your bass?" The back seat is noticeably empty.

"They have one there for me."

"But you always play *your* bass. You're gonna get all hunch-backed from carrying that thing around."

"Not this kind. It's electric."

"You don't play electric, dummy."

"Make a right here," he says, ignoring me.

I eye him across the seat. He's practically dug a crater alongside his middle finger.

"For real. Where we going?"

"Bryce Miller's."

I can't hide my surprise. "Really?" Adam and I tried to get them to pal around for years but Bryce was always kind of a shit, pushing kids around the basketball court, snapping girls' bra straps. He had a wicked playfulness that made him harmless to me, but scary and unapproachable to Jared.

Jared nods. "He plays guitar. Invited me to jam with him."

"All right." I smile and compose a text to Adam in my head. "Does Mom know?"

"Yeah. She was *just thrilled* to tell Cindy Miller that their *youngest ones were finally becoming buddies!*" he says, imitating Mom's over-the-top affect.

A laugh bubbles up in my chest. "This'll be good for you."

Jared rolls his eyes. "Whatever."

I sync my phone and queue up my favorite playlist. All eighties pop. Madonna blares through the stereo and I feel my stomach settle as I follow the route to Adam's. I know it by heart, could trace the curve along the brick-lined driveway with my eyes closed. Adam isn't due back from school until fall break next month but just being near his house, his stuff, makes my brain buzz.

"Thanks," Jared says when I make a full stop.

"Where's Bryce?" I ask. "I wanna say hi."

A wooden swing sways back and forth on their porch, creaking in the breeze. I remember how it sags when you sit on it, and how it sinks even lower with two people's weight.

"Lemme text him." Jared's fingers fly over the screen and within seconds, Bryce swings the front door open and walks toward us over the manicured lawn. A rust-colored bathing suit hangs low on his hips. He looks older than Jared and if I squint hard enough, he could be Adam.

Jared leaps out of the car, slamming the door behind him and they high-five.

"What's up, Jill?" asks Bryce, leaning into the passenger side window. "How've ya been?" Confident and composed, just like his brother. A senior Player doesn't scare him at all.

"Can't complain. How was your first week of high school?"

Bryce smirks. "Love it, obviously."

"Naturally."

"You talk to Adam today?"

I shake my head. "Not yet." "I'm sure he'll hit you up," Bryce says. "He just called Mom. He's coming home next weekend. Some National Young Playwright workshop thing at the county theater. I think he's teaching kids how to write stage direction or some shit."

"Nice." I try to conceal my excitement and bite down on my lip but Jared rolls his eyes. He's picked up on my not-so-subtle crush.

Bryce slaps Jared on the back. "Ready to jam?"

Jared beams. "Let's do it."

"See ya, Jill!"

I wave and wait until they head back inside to retrieve my phone.

JESSICA GOODMAN

Just dropped Jared off at your place . . . I guess he and Bryce are finally friends.

Before I can rev the engine, I hear a vibration.

FINALLY!!! Knew our master plan would work out someday.

My face burns and I tear at a cuticle with my teeth.

He says you're coming home soon?

Yeah. I meant to tell you. Make time for me? Breakfast at Diane's? Saturday?

My heart swells and I nod my head up and down as if he can see me.

Def.

I close out of our conversation but before I can look away, I see the last message from the night before, the one I had been avoiding.

It's Rachel Calloway.

But this time, I'm not scared. Adam will know what to do. He always does. We'll figure it out together. Saturday.