

An excerpt from

WATCH HER

EDWIN HILL

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To Michael

1997

MAXINE

Eighty-seven stairs, straight up from the sidewalk to the front door of her brand-new condo, and Maxine Pawlikowski adored every single one of them. Her brother, Stan, had his own thoughts.

“A walk-up?” he said. “In Roslindale?”

“What’s wrong with Roslindale?” Maxine asked.

“Nothing. If you like getting shot.”

“Don’t ruin my day.”

Stan was a cop, a detective with the Boston police, and Maxine suspected that no neighborhood in the city would have been good enough for his little sister. At thirty-two, he was five years older than Maxine and always—always—would be. He protected her. Or he thought he did. But what Stan didn’t know about Maxine’s life could have filled twenty of the U-Haul vans they’d driven here today. Besides, she loved her new street with its trees and children and dogs and houses filled with friends, or friends she’d meet soon enough. More importantly, she’d finally made it out of her mother’s house in Stoughton. And she had no plans to return.

“You have Mace, right?” Stan asked.

Oh, Jesus.

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“I drove through here last night,” he continued, “and the streetlighting sucks. There’s a blind spot about half-way down the block, in front of that yellow house. When you get home, park right here. And carry your keys . . .”

Maxine tuned him out. At six-foot-two, with a blocky build, Stan had size and strength on his side, but Maxine wasn’t much smaller than her brother. She could take care of herself. She *had* taken care of herself, in the back of cars, during college, at work, those secrets she packed away and kept from her brother. Stan couldn’t understand those dangers, or that real danger *was* everywhere, and that parking in a well-lit spot was her baseline. But Maxine was twenty-seven years old, single, and owned her own home as of today. Tonight, August 30, 1997, would be the first night Maxine could do whatever she wanted without having to report her whereabouts to anyone, and she’d do it in an eight-hundred-square-foot walk-up (eighty-seven stairs) with laundry in the basement and on-street parking.

“I know,” she said, cutting Stan off. “Use keys as a weapon. Shut up and get moving.”

She balanced a box on her hip. She stopped with one foot on the first stair because she wanted to remember this moment. She wanted it to be hers, and hers alone.

“Wait up!”

The moment evaporated.

Down the street, Nathan hurried toward them. Nate. Her boyfriend, in a way.

She’d forgotten about him.

Nate taught chemistry at Boston Latin and lived in Stoughton with his own parents, two blocks from her mother’s house. He was a year older than Maxine. “Facing the big three-o!” he said at least once a day, along with everything it implied. He’d say it at parties, over dinner,

while they lay in bed. And he'd wait for Maxine to fill in the excruciating gap that followed. What Nate—Nathan—didn't understand was that her gap was so different than his.

Nathan wore Dockers and a beige shirt that matched the color of his face and hair and eyes. Everything about him was beige. He jogged toward them and kissed Maxine on the cheek. "Hey, Max," he said.

She hated being called "Max."

Maxine had stunned Nathan when she'd told him she'd bought this condo, that she planned to move here on her own. And waiting till two days ago had been cowardly, she admitted. She'd listened to him cry and beg her to stay in Stoughton. Finally, she'd told him to meet her here after she'd finished signing the papers. Because she needed the help moving.

Soon, Nate would have to go, and not in the temporary way. In a way that hurt, sometimes for months, sometimes forever. Or so Maxine had heard. No one had broken Maxine's heart; not yet. She almost looked forward to the feeling.

"Grab a box!" she said, leading the way up the first flight of stairs, through tiered gardens overflowing with perennials, to a porch suspended twenty feet above the sidewalk. A woman let herself out the front door. She had braids cascading down her back, and a bag slung over one shoulder.

"I'm on the second floor," she said. "Brandy," she added. "Like the singer."

Maxine introduced herself and Stan and forgot to mention Nathan.

"She's on the third floor," Stan said. "Once you get to know her, she'll talk your ear off."

"Be careful to close this door," Brandy said. "It doesn't latch on its own."

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“We’ll get that fixed,” Stan said.

Brandy left them on the porch, heading down the stairs to a red Geo Metro. Later, Maxine promised herself, she’d ask Brandy over for drinks and make sure they became friends. Maybe she’d invite her over to watch *Friends* with her friend Jennifer on Thursday night. Maybe they’d drink Chardonnay.

Maxine led the way up the remaining two flights, over orange and brown shag that had to be twenty years old. On the landing outside her apartment, she balanced the box on her knee while fishing out the key.

“We’ll get that door replaced,” Stan said, tapping the opaque glass on the top pane. “We’ll put in a dead bolt and make an appointment with the alarm company.”

The door glided open. Inside, the walls were covered in pink and gold wallpaper. The kitchen had yellowed linoleum tiles and chipped Formica counters and a refrigerator that jutted into the center of the room like an afterthought, but all Maxine saw was the promise of gleaming hardwood floors and windows in every wall and stunning views of the Boston skyline. She saw the future.

“What a dump!” Nathan said.

He dropped his boxes by the door even though she’d labeled them KITCHEN in thick, black Sharpie, but she forgave him. He’d be gone soon enough.

“That van won’t unload itself,” she said.

They spent the next two hours going up and down those stairs till cardboard boxes lined the walls in each room and sweat soaked their T-shirts. When they finished, Maxine ordered pizza using the wall phone and cracked open three bottles of Rolling Rock. Outside, on her front deck, she toasted her new home while the sun set.

“I’m proud of you,” Stan said.

“We can spend weekdays here and weekends in Stoughton,” Nathan said. “This’ll make my commute so much easier.”

“Sure,” Maxine said.

Stan’s phone rang, one of those cell phones, the ones that had taken over coffee shops, the ones that people yammered on in loud voices. Stan wanted Maxine to get one so that he could “check on her,” but she couldn’t imagine a phone following her wherever she went.

He took the call inside. Nate lifted his beer and smiled, his mind seeming to churn as he tried to think of something to talk about. “Great place,” he said.

“Do you go by Nathan or Nate?”

Shouldn’t Maxine know this? They’d dated off and on for years. Since high school!

“Either’s fine,” Nathan said. “It’s like you. Maxine or Max. It’s all the same.”

Stan leaned through the doorway. “Duty calls,” he said. “Over by Ruggles.”

“The pizza isn’t even here,” Maxine said.

“I’ll grab something later.”

She listened as he thundered down the stairs. Out on the street, he waved before driving off in his sedan.

“Good guy,” Nate said.

“He’s a pain in the ass,” Maxine said.

“What should we do now?”

Nate sat on a pile of cardboard boxes that matched his khakis. He shielded his face from the setting sun as an attempt at the salacious touched his beige eyes. Sometimes, Maxine slept with him because they had nothing better to do. She even considered it now.

“You should go,” she said, surprising even herself.

“But . . . the pizza.”

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Nate was nice. Too nice. Maxine was done with nice.

“And I’m facing the big three-o,” he said.

“Find someone who wants to face it with you.”

To his credit, Nathan got angry. His beige face even turned red. “Are you dumping me?”

Maxine hadn’t dumped anyone before, but she knew to take the blame herself. “It’s not you,” she said. “It’s me.”

When the pizza arrived, Maxine learned that the buzzer to the front door didn’t work, so she trotted all the way down two flights and back up. She dug her clock radio from one of the boxes and turned the station to NPR, but the news was all about a car crash in Paris, endless updates, speculation on who would survive, and it was too sad, too depressing to imagine that beautiful body mangled in a highway tunnel. Maxine turned to WBCN and danced through the apartment.

Her apartment.

Fiona Apple felt like a criminal. So did Maxine. And like Fiona, she didn’t mind. So, when the phone rang, she ignored it, assuming it was Nate, ready to beg.

She was happier than she’d ever been in her entire life. Right now.

The phone rang again, and when it rang a third time, Maxine checked caller ID. It wasn’t Nathan. It was Jennifer. Jennifer Matson. Maxine’s best friend. She let the call go to voice mail. Tonight wasn’t meant for sharing.

Maxine had met Jennifer when Maxine’s boss, Tucker Matson, had asked her to the house for a barbecue to meet his family. She’d even brought Nathan with her. Like Maxine, Jennifer was twenty-seven years old, but the two of them had made such different life choices it was hard to believe they were the same age. Maxine still had one foot in adolescence, while Jennifer already had two children, a

Newfoundland named Shadow, and, in Tucker, a thirty-seven-year-old husband with money to burn since he owned the art school where Maxine worked as the director of admissions. Jennifer and Tucker lived a few miles away in a Queen Anne-style mansion with a name—Pinebank. It was right on the shore of Jamaica Pond, and its renovation had been recorded all spring on *This Old House*. Most Thursdays, Jennifer would leave the girls with Tucker and come over so that the two of them could watch *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, with *Suddenly Susan* in between. Jennifer, who had long, straight blond hair, would say, “I’m like Phoebe and you’re like Monica,” even though Jennifer, with her perfect life and perfect family, was nothing at all like any of the characters on *Friends*.

Still, it had surprised Maxine when, two years earlier, Jennifer had named her second daughter Rachel.

Maxine secretly yearned for alone time with Jennifer’s girls, four-year-old Vanessa and two-year-old Rachel. She loved when she drove through the trees to their house, and they greeted her at the front door like children from a Victorian novel. They’d take her hand and lead her to their tiny table with its tiny teapot and cups, where the one choice, the one challenge, was graham crackers or saltines.

Maxine sat on her front porch. Night had settled over the city. The people who’d packed the street during the day had retreated for the evening. A car alarm went off. She checked to be sure it wasn’t her own car, and then settled into her chair. See, she could get used to the city. She could get used to these noises. Once she had more than cardboard boxes as furniture and had covered the bare light bulbs with shades, she could call this place home.

A voice rose from the street.

Below, in a circle of light from a street lamp, Brandy

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danced with a friend before kissing the friend goodbye and heading up the stairs. The sound of her new neighbor's shoes hitting the floor echoed through the walls. It was good to have someone close. Someone to rely on. Maxine's body was sore from moving. A good sore. It was Labor Day weekend, so she'd have Monday off to recover.

Cool air blew through her hair. And the phone rang.

Jennifer.

Again.

TWENTY-FOUR
YEARS LATER

WEDNESDAY,
MARCH 31

HESTER

Freezing rain splattered the windshield and heat poured from the vents as Hester Thursby's non-husband, Morgan, tried to parallel park their truck on an industrial street in Jamaica Plain. A week into spring, and winter still had a hold on Boston.

"Success," he said, after the third attempt, cutting the engine and leaning across the cab to kiss Hester on the cheek.

Tonight, he'd tamed his red hair and changed out of the scrubs he wore at the veterinary hospital and into a navy blue suit that fit perfectly, a suit that made its way out of his closet about once a year.

"Hello, Mrs.," he said, kissing her again.

"Yuck! Quit kissing."

Hester's five-year-old niece, Kate, glared at them from the rear cab. These days, the girl seemed to drink in everything and anything that happened around her and didn't think twice about voicing her opinions. It was a good quality to have, though sometimes Hester had to remind herself to encourage it. Kate would finish kindergarten in a few months, and Hester knew she'd blink and soon enough the girl would be heading to college. She tried to make every mo-

ment with her niece special, even the ones that gave her a glimpse of the teenage years.

“How’s this?” Morgan asked, kissing Hester with exaggerated smacks. He rolled over the seat and into the back, and kissed Kate, too, who shrieked and shoved him away. “Uncle Morgan, you are disgusting!”

“Guilty as charged,” Morgan said.

“And saying no is your prerogative,” Hester said.

“It is!” Morgan said, having the good sense not to go in for a final smooch.

“What’s prerogative?” Kate asked.

“Your privilege. Your right. You’re in control of your body,” Hester said, quickly adding, “except when it comes to eating vegetables.”

“None of us has a choice when it comes to vegetables,” Morgan said.

“It’s pouring out,” Hester said. “We’ll have to run between the raindrops.”

“You can’t run between raindrops,” Kate said.

“And I can’t fool you with anything these days,” Hester said.

She opened the door to the truck and leapt to the asphalt below while yanking the hood up on her blue raincoat. When she stepped onto the running board, Kate had already undone her seat belt. “I can do it myself,” the girl said, slipping right past Hester’s outstretched arms and leaping to the ground.

Yes, you can.

Morgan dashed to their side, and the three of them hurried through the rain, down Amory Street, toward a long, brick building that took up most of the block. Banners for Prescott University, a local art school, spanned the building’s street face, and lights blared from plate-glass windows. A prominent placard over the entrance read TUCKER

MATSON STUDENT CENTER and beside it, their destination, THE MATSON GALLERY.

“Brand-new campus center,” Hester said. “Big change. I haven’t been to this neighborhood in a few years.”

“I went to high school a few blocks from here,” Morgan said.

Hester tensed at this tidbit of information. For most of their nine-year relationship, Hester and Morgan had had an unspoken rule: they didn’t talk about their pasts, including dating history or family. It was like they’d both appeared on Earth fully formed on the day they’d met. Lately, though, Morgan had begun to dangle factoids like this one, tiny windows into his past. She could have asked follow-up questions—What school? Were you in the marching band? Did you date the head cheerleader?—but she let the statement hang between them.

Kate, however, did not.

“Can we see your school?” she asked.

“I don’t think it’s there anymore,” Morgan said. “They tore it down.”

“When?”

“Maybe ten years ago.”

Kate considered the answer for a moment. “Before I was born,” she said, her latest obsession being the time before her own existence.

“Long before,” Morgan said.

Hester yanked open the glass doors to the gallery and led the way into an atrium that spanned the length of two buildings. The noise from the crowd thankfully drowned out any more of Kate’s questions.

“I didn’t know this would be such a big deal,” Hester shouted.

Banners fell from the soaring ceilings announcing BOSTON’S

THIRTY UNDER 30 IN GRAPHIC DESIGN while servers in black ties circulated among the crowd of women in cocktail dresses and men in expensive glasses. Hester recognized familiar faces from TV, local newscasters and politicians, even a state senator. She pointed to a photo on one of the banners. "There's Jamie," she said, grinning at the image of their friend's beaming face.

Kate took a step toward the banner, into the throngs surrounding them. Hester grabbed her hand. "Stick with me," she said.

Kate glared at her. "I'm not a baby," she said.

"I know, but stay where I can see you anyway."

Morgan checked their coats and offered an arm. "Should we dive in?"

Hester smoothed the fabric on her black cocktail dress and put a hand to her hair, which she'd tied into a bun. She'd even dug out contact lenses and makeup for this event. She occasionally attended cocktail parties at Harvard, where she worked as a research librarian, but most nights she spent at home with Morgan and Kate and their basset hound, Waffles, or, occasionally, out with a tight-knit group of friends, one of whom, Angela White, Sergeant Detective Angela White, walked toward her now.

"I'm like a fly in milk at this shindig," Angela said.

Usually, Angela wore tailored suits and practical shoes that made it easy to move on the job, but tonight she'd opted for a multicolored caftan and had wound a scarf around her thick, natural hair and tied it in an elaborate knot. She even wore heels. "I went for artistic," she said, when she caught Hester eyeing her getup. "Don't get used to it. These shoes are killing me."

Hester brushed a few dog hairs from Angela's dress. "George travels with you, even when you leave him home."

"Damn dog," Angela said, shooting Morgan a glare. "I

still blame you for foisting that creature on us, Dr. Maguire.”

Angela’s wife, Cary, appeared and handed her a plastic cup of white wine. “She loves George,” Cary said, in her soft, therapeutic voice. “Even when he slobbers.”

“He’s a pain in my ass.”

Isaiah, Cary’s seven-year-old son, tugged at Hester’s sleeve. Unlike Kate, Isaiah was shy and avoided speaking unless Hester crouched to let him whisper in her ear. “I won the hundred-meter butterfly,” he said.

“Like Michael Phelps,” Hester said. “Show me the ribbon next time I’m over.”

Just as Angela hated most dogs, Hester, as a rule, wasn’t a fan of most kids other than Kate. She made a few rare exceptions, and Isaiah was one of them.

Morgan sidled up to her. “Don’t you want to know more about my high school?” he whispered.

A server swung by with a tray of well-timed hors d’oeuvres. “Lobster and corn empanada?”

Hester shoved one into her mouth to keep from answering, but Morgan waited patiently for her to finish chewing.

“You could tell me something too,” he said. “It could be a game. One question a day. Ask me anything. We both have to answer, no matter what.”

“That sounds like a terrible game,” Hester said.

“Come on. Tell me something little. Did you play the clarinet?”

“Do I look like I played the clarinet?”

“A thespian?”

“Not even close.”

Morgan tilted his head.

“You look like Waffles waiting for a treat,” Hester said, and when he still wouldn’t let it go, she added, “Tomorrow, at work, I’ll find any answer I want. Maybe I’ll figure

out what Jamaica Plain schools were demolished. I'll find your yearbook, and I'll do it all in secret. Happy?"

Morgan grinned. "You wouldn't do that. We trust each other too much."

She wouldn't. But it was nice to know she could.

"Mathlete?" he asked.

"Fine," Hester said. "Chess club."

"That, I should have guessed," Morgan said.

"Where did the kids go?" Angela asked.

Hester turned in the crowded room, but Kate had managed to slip away. So had Isaiah, though Hester would bet money that Kate had led the escape. "I'll find her. Get me a whisky. Neat."

Morgan saluted and headed toward the bar.

"You go that way," Angela said. "I'll go this way."

"Text if you find them."

Hester shoved her way into the crowd. She also shoved down the fear that still gripped at her heart whenever Kate was out of sight. They couldn't have gone far.

Not in thirty seconds.

BARRET

A little girl with curly, honey-colored hair pushed her way past Barret. “Where are the snacks?” she asked.

Barret pointed toward the table of hors d’oeuvres on the other side of the room that he’d helped set up earlier, and the girl shoved her way into the crowd, tugging a boy behind her. A moment later, a tiny woman in a black dress flashing a photo asked if he’d seen the girl. “Wearing a light blue dress,” she said. “Bossy.”

“They were looking for food,” Barret said.

“Figures,” the woman said, jostling her way forward.

Barret had already filled his stomach with as many of the hors d’oeuvres as he could pilfer, even if he’d been told that staff should wait till the end of the evening to eat. He’d also stuffed the pockets of his rented suit with more to eat later. He’d make at least two meals out of the spoils, because he’d spent what he’d earn tonight on renting this getup—black suit, black shoes, thick-framed glasses with non-prescription lenses—to look like an artist. Someday soon, he’d be one of the Thirty Under 30 in something. He was convinced of it. Now, he had to convince the rest of the world.

He grabbed a crab cake from a passing tray as the

woman in the black dress reemerged, this time dragging the two glum-looking children behind her. “You can’t run off like that,” she said.

“We were hungry,” the boy said.

“What if the fire alarm went off?”

Barret could practically feel the girl’s eye roll through the stuffy air. “We’d find the helpers,” she said.

The woman stopped in front of him. “Thanks,” she said. “They were exactly where you said they’d be.”

A waiter swung by, and the woman took two plastic cups. “Let me buy you a drink,” she said, handing him a cup of red wine. “The finest box around.”

Barret couldn’t have picked box over bottle to save his life, but he took the cup anyway, even if he’d been warned—upon threat of immediate dismissal—not to drink tonight, especially since he was underage. He swallowed the wine in one gulp and got rid of the evidence.

“Hester Thursby,” the woman said.

Barret introduced himself.

“This place is a zoo,” Hester said, before disappearing into the throngs again.

Barret surveyed the room. The woman in charge of the event, Maxine something, stood against the wall, probably taking notes. She had to be fifty, at least, and had a pouf of auburn hair that hovered over her sagging face. She worked at the school in an administrative role and had hired him as temporary staff for tonight’s grand opening. All Barret knew was to stay out of her way.

Barret was nineteen and heading toward the end of his first semester at Prescott University. The one thing that had saved him from going completely broke was that he’d been in the drama club in high school and knew how to work a sound system. Somehow, he’d earned enough cash

to scrape by in his first months in this new city. He pushed his way through the crowd to where the soundboard was set up and checked the mics and amplifier. The program would start in about ten minutes, but everything here seemed ready.

Someone tapped his arm.

“Are you in charge of sound?”

Gavin Dean appeared beside him, standing close in a way that made Barret’s skin crawl. Gavin was the CFO of the college. He was probably around thirty and wore a houndstooth suit the color of the winter sky. “The mic rubs against my beard,” he said. “Can you test it?”

Gavin’s five o’clock shadow had probably taken a half hour to perfect.

“We’ll use a lavalier instead of the headpiece,” Barret said. “It’ll be on your lapel.”

“Great. Call when you need me,” Gavin said, heading toward a small group of guests, where he laughed, his hand lingering on a woman’s lower back.

Not a surprise. He was a certified creep.

Barret had met him before—alone, in Gavin’s office—but since then, Barret had cut his blond hair and dyed it black. He’d also pierced his ears with flesh tunnels and tattooed a snake on his neck, all with the goal of transforming into someone new. Apparently, he’d succeeded. Gavin hadn’t seemed to remember him.

Now, Barret watched as the man floated from one group to another, easily making his way through the crowd. Students stopped to talk to him, and Barret wondered how many of them had endured similar experiences behind closed doors.

He took out the headsets and lined them up. Across the room, he noticed a swish of Botticelli curls and the wild eyes of Libby Thomas, Barret’s girlfriend, at least the clos-

est he'd been to having one since Alice, back home. **What are you doing here?** he texted.

Free wine! she wrote a second later.

Hang out till I'm done. We can leave together.

Everything about Libby was intense, from those tight curls and green eyes, to the way she tackled every project in her architecture program. Tonight, Tucker Matson, with his thick, white hair and eyebrows like caterpillars, stopped to talk to her, as though they knew each other. She leaned against the wall, chatting away.

"We should get set up. It's almost time to start."

Gavin was back.

Barret handed him one of the lavaliers.

Libby stood against the wall, watching them both. Barret gave her a little wave.

"Do I know you?" Gavin asked.

Barret focused on the soundboard and mumbled, "Perv," under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"Run this up your coat," Barret said. "Attach it to your lapel."

Gavin snatched the lavalier as a woman with close-cropped blond hair and a sleeve of tattoos joined them.

"It's about that time," she said.

This was Vanessa Matson, the twenty-eight-year-old president of Prescott University. And Gavin Dean's wife. She was also the head curator at the Matson Gallery. In the few years since Vanessa had joined the family business, she'd discovered dozens of local artists. Barret would have given anything to have her notice him. He grabbed a headset for her and tripped.

"Steady there," Vanessa said, adding "it's okay," as she took the headset, looped it over her ear, and attached the transmitter to her dress. "I've put these on about a million

times. But you'll have to help my dad out. He can barely turn on the TV. Dad, get over here," she added, waving Tucker Matson over.

When the lights dimmed, Barret took his place in the sound booth. He looked to where Libby had been standing earlier, but she was gone.

HESTER

“Don’t run off again,” Hester said to Kate as they returned to their small group, and Morgan handed her a drink.

“But . . .” Kate began.

“No buts. Make sure I can see you.”

“The man of the hour!” Morgan said, as Jamie Williams joined them.

At six-foot-five and 250 pounds, Jamie towered over most people in the room, his dark complexion standing out, too, in a sea of white faces. “Causing trouble?” he asked Kate.

“No!” Kate said.

“Her?” Hester said. “Never.”

Jamie gave Isaiah a high five and lifted Kate in the air while the girl shrieked in delight. “Trouble or not,” he said, “glad you made it.”

He lived in the first-floor apartment of Hester and Morgan’s house along with his bichon frise, Butch. When Hester first met him, he’d had trouble speaking after suffering a head wound. Now, after years of speech therapy, he’d regained most of his speaking abilities, though he still stumbled over words.

“I wouldn’t have missed this in a million years,” Hester said. “None of us would.”

“How much of this did you design?” Angela asked, waving a hand at the banners and awnings throughout the room.

“All of it,” a middle-aged woman said as she joined them. “At least all the good parts. We’re trying to rebrand with the new campus opening, and Jamie’s been the best design intern I’ve ever had. Anything terrible, you can blame on me.”

“Maxine!” Angela said.

Hester remembered meeting Maxine Pawlikowski at Angela’s Super Bowl party in February, where the woman had spent the entire evening texting on her phone. Tonight, she’d teased her auburn hair into a cloud and wore an eggplant-colored pantsuit that somehow worked.

“Ms. Pawlikowski,” Morgan said.

“Dr. Maguire,” Maxine said. “And don’t call an old broad Ms. It makes us feel decrepit.”

“Maxine, then,” Morgan said. “Maxine brings her dogs to my practice.”

“I forgot I’d hooked the two of you up,” Angela said. “Maxine hired Jamie, too. She’s the general manager of Prescott University.”

Maxine banged out a text on her phone. “Excuse me. I have to deal with something,” she said, as she disappeared into the crowd.

Hester drank down her whisky and grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing tray. The lights dimmed. “Time for toasts,” she said, checking to be sure that Kate hadn’t used the darkness to stage another escape.

To be safe, she rested a hand on the girl’s shoulder as, all around them, screens descended from the ceiling, and then a video began playing, featuring snippets of each of the

thirty artists being honored tonight. In Jamie's snippet, he focused on the importance of friends and family, and Hester punched him in the arm. "All true," he whispered.

When the video stopped, a young woman stood at the podium, a spotlight shining on her short blond hair. Two men flanked her, one older with a thatch of white hair that rivaled Albert Einstein's, the other younger and styled within an inch of his life. "Welcome, everyone!" the woman said. "We're livecasting this on Twitter," she added, "so keep the applause coming!"

"That's Vanessa Matson," Angela whispered. "The president of the college."

"How old is she?" Hester asked. "Twelve? She looks more like a club kid than a college president."

After fifteen years at Harvard University, Hester was used to a more austere leadership team.

"Her family owns the school," Angela said. "That's her father on the left. The one with the eyebrows. He stepped aside a year or two ago, and Vanessa replaced him as president. Vanessa's husband is the other one. Gavin Dean. He's the CFO."

"They keep it in the family," Hester said. "This is one of those for-profit colleges, right?"

"And all the profit goes to the Matsons," Angela said. "It's a privately held company. No investors. No stockholders. And sometimes it seems like they own half of Boston."

Most of what Hester knew about the school she'd learned on TV, from the ads that ran for it during late-night television. As she checked out the well-heeled and connected crowd here tonight, she doubted many of them would shell out tens of thousands of dollars for a school like this one.

"Maxine's worked here for decades," Angela said. "She runs the show, but don't tell that to Vanessa or Tucker."

Hester tuned in as the applause around her faded, and a black-and-white image of the building they were in appeared on the screen.

“If you came to this building a hundred years ago,” Vanessa Matson began, “you’d be standing at the center of a thriving sugar factory, one that processed cane shipped all the way from the Caribbean and employed hundreds of people. Twenty years ago, you’d have been lucky if rats didn’t run over your toes as buildings like this one all over the city were left to the elements. Prescott University acquired this site when my father”—Vanessa paused, turning to Tucker Matson and applauding softly—“envisioned a new future for our college. And tonight is the culmination of that vision!”

Vanessa led a more rapturous applause as Tucker raised a hand to wave.

“Tomorrow, the new campus opens with state-of-the-art classrooms, the latest equipment, and a faculty consisting of the leading thinkers from around the world! But first, let’s pause—and I can tell you, I could use a pause, because the last six months have been exhausting. Let’s pause to celebrate my own dream, the Matson Gallery, this beautiful, modern atrium where we stand tonight. The Matson Gallery will be used to showcase up-and-coming artists, and the very best students and faculty at Prescott University. We hope that it becomes a center for Boston’s creatives!”

Hester couldn’t help but be impressed by the space, with its steel frame and gleaming windows. She’d sat on enough committees at Harvard to know how much planning and negotiation went into the smallest decision, let alone a whole new campus.

“Now, for the main show,” Vanessa said, introducing Tucker. “He’ll present tonight’s *Thirty Under Thirty*, a series we hope to launch across many mediums. He’s not

only my father,” she added, “he’s the chairman of the board, and my boss.”

Tucker took Vanessa’s place at the podium. His voice boomed from the speaker. “And I can still fire you,” he said, to a smattering of chuckles while Vanessa offered a practiced smile.

For the next few moments, Tucker read off the names of the men and women being honored, while Vanessa and her husband, Gavin, handed out plaques. When Tucker reached Jamie’s name, Hester’s small group cheered as loudly as they could. Morgan lifted Kate on his shoulders while she clapped her hands over her head. Even from halfway across the room, Hester could see Jamie blushing as he beamed into the cameras.

At the end of the ceremony, Vanessa took to the podium again to thank everyone for coming. “And I might as well tell you now, this opening couldn’t have been delayed much longer,” she said, touching her belly. “Because there’ll be a new Matson in about six months.”

Gavin Dean leaned across her. “She means a new Dean,” he said.

“We can talk later, dear,” Vanessa said. “Did you hear that, Mommy? You have a grandchild on the way!”

Vanessa waved into the camera and blew a kiss before stepping away from the podium and out of the light.

As the ceremony ended, a young woman shoved her way through the crowd toward the exit, her eyes wild, her tightly curled hair trailing behind her.

“What do you think happened there?” Angela asked.

“Who knows?” Hester said. “Maybe they forgot her plaque.”