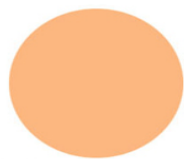




A Novel



# the\_atmospherians

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Alex McElroy

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# the\_atmospherians

a novel

**Alex McElroy**

**ATRIA BOOKS**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For what goes  
into your mouth will not contaminate you; rather,  
what comes out of your mouth will contaminate you.

—*The Gospel of Thomas*

l.

# one

THE MEN WERE outside my building: Four of them, ruddy, dressed in camouflage shorts. Hooded sweatshirts bulging over their bellies. They were hairy and amphibian-eyed, their skin Styrofoam white, banana-thick fingers waving homemade signs. On one was a pixelated printout of my face centered inside the crosshairs of a rifle. *JUSTICE FOR LUCAS DEVRY* and *REGISTER HER* in wet red paint—hopefully paint—were smeared across the others.

The death threats had begun two weeks ago—emails and phone calls and scissor-snipped letters. These men, though, were the first to show up in person. I blanched at the first sight of them. Instead of making myself available to them, I should have stayed inside. That was the right thing to do. The safe thing to do. But a night drinking vodka alone on my couch had buried a spike in my skull, and the next morning I needed a coffee. It was February in Hoboken; winter had sunk its fingers deep into the month. I left the building in my bulkiest clothes—black parka and jeans, no makeup, sunglasses, hair bullied inside a beanie—hoping the men wouldn't recognize me.

Of course they swarmed me on the sidewalk, shouting *Murderer*, *Nazi*, *Misandrist*, *Hag*—and *Fancy Lady*, which hovered uncomfortably close to a compliment. I sprinted across the street without looking and was nearly flattened by a mail truck. The men trailed me into the nearest coffee shop. They huddled at the door, pointing me out to the entering customers: “See that woman? In black? Dark brown hair? She’s the woman who murdered Lucas Devry.”

The cashier said: “He was a pastor.”

The cashier said: “A father of three.”

The cashier said: “A man of goodness and God.”

I said: nothing.

The cashier wouldn’t serve me. The men chased me back to my building but paused at the entrance like dogs barking at the edge of a cliff. I collapsed onto my couch. My phone buzzed in my parka pocket. Another threat, I figured, but my boss’s name showed on the screen.

“We love you, Sasha,” she said. “You’re a model employee. You exceeded every expectation we had for you. But the restaurant cannot employ a killer.”

“You can’t fire someone for their personal choices. That’s discrimination.”

“Half the staff has threatened to quit. I had to unplug the phone—we’re getting thousands of false reservations. I’m getting death threats, ultimatums.”

“You think I’m not getting death threats?”

“They know the names of my *children*.”

On the sidewalk, the men chanted: *Say it loud! Say it clear! Sasha is not welcome here!*

“So you’re abandoning me? Tossing me overboard to the sharks?” I made grotesque sucking and biting sounds. “Do you hear that? That’s the sound of the sharks eating me whole.”

“You’ve been like a daughter to me,” she said.

“That’s terrifying.” I hung up.

I hosted at an elite midwestern fusion restaurant in Lower Manhattan called Gravee. Our customers were posh Wall Street executives looking to clog their arteries with elegant revisions of cheese curds and funnel cakes. Fair fare for the 1 percent. My job was more model than host: I presented an image of beauty and health to contrast the consequences of eating our food. The work was demoralizing, deflating, and yes, I should have quit months ago.

But the pay cushioned my actual job: an online skin-care and wellness regimen called ABANDON. Six years of work had gone into the program. Two weeks ago, at my peak, I had nearly 1 million followers; 25,217 paying subscribers. After overhead costs, this amounted to a dollar a subscriber, too little money to live on and no sponsorships to supplement my income. For, unlike my peers, I was anti-sponsorship. My program helped clients eliminate products that damaged not only their skin but their psyche. I taught refusal,

relaxation, and patience: there was power in doing nothing; nothing required discipline, clarity, love. This resonated with people tired of being told what to buy, what they needed to do, how many times to apply something every morning and night. I appeared on a major morning show. Managers and publicists exhausted my inbox, desperate to work for me. My message was simple—and spreading.

That is until Lucas Devry clawed into my life. He tagged me in his live-streamed suicide. “Here is the world you wanted,” he said, tapping the gun on his chin. He sat at his kitchen table. Family portraits hung askew on the blue-wallpapered wall at his back. I had responded sharply to one of his comments; he took this to mean I wanted him dead. “You’re a murderer, Sasha,” he said. “You made me do this.”

And people believed him. First, right-wingers and Men’s Rights Activists and Republican politicians—men hunting for cases of misandrist violence—then other influencers, my friends, my boyfriend, my clients, paying subscribers: they fell from me like clumps of hair from a scalp.

*Say it loud! Say it clear! Sasha is not welcome here!*

“I didn’t do anything to you!” I shouted at my window. I flipped them off through the glass. They hooted and whooped, pleased by my displeasure.

I called Cassandra Hanson—my former business partner, my best friend in the industry—hoping she might answer out of pity. She declined midway through the third ring. I tried my ex, Blake Dayes, and made it all the way to his voicemail. Before I could leave a message, his publicist texted: *Please respect Blake’s privacy during this difficult time.*

*Difficult?!* I texted Blake. *This can’t be difficult for you.*

*Go bug Dyson,* he answered. *He always put up with your shit.*

*Go exploit our relationship to boost your career,* I texted. Followed by three middle-finger emojis.

Dyson: my oldest and steadiest friend. He of unconditional love, he who would assure me that everything was fine, he who would tell my boss and Blake and Cassandra and the men on the sidewalk all to go jump off a cliff. But it seemed like cheating to call him—I wanted to *earn* encouragement, for someone who no longer liked me to lift me out of the dirt. Once it became clear that no



such person would emerge, I dialed Dyson's number. He didn't answer. I called him again and again and again and again and again and again.

*Say it loud! Say it clear! Sasha is not welcome here!*

That afternoon, four new protestors relieved the men and stood near my window. I watched this afternoon crew watching me, and I hoped that they might show signs of exhaustion or boredom. But they chanted with the vigor of the rested.

When not watching them I watched myself: I tracked my follower count. I had plummeted to the high hundreds over two weeks; with every refresh, twenty more followers would vanish. "Good riddance," I said, as if they were stowaways heaved off a boat, as if I wouldn't have begged them to come back.

I texted Dyson. I emailed him. I DMed him. I tagged him. I called his childhood home, but a new family's child picked up. "Why won't he answer my calls?" I asked the child. The child handed the phone to his parents.

*Say it loud! Say it clear! Sasha is not welcome here!*

The thought of fleeing my apartment flitted into my head and then out. There was nowhere to go. My parents were out of my life. I had no siblings. So I stayed put. Peering out my windows, buzzing in deliverymen who left my food in the stairwell—as I'd instructed—burning through savings, watching daytime TV, waiting for the world to forget me, for the men outside to disperse.

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Late one morning in April, two months after the first men had arrived, an eviction notice was slid under my door. My presence was causing undue stress to the other tenants. They had grown tired of the protestors. The restraining orders I filed never bore out—because I didn't even know the men's names. The super called the police, but the protestors knew their rights: the sidewalks were public; the men never obstructed pedestrian traffic. And they knew the police. In fact, some of them probably *were* police, trading shifts at the precinct for shifts at my building, badges tucked in their jeans.

My neighbors' distress didn't surprise me. This was New Jersey, after all, home to the insecure and impressionable. Jersey was a land of lacking, the slow-

footed little sibling to Manhattan: always never enough. My neighbors were tame, small-hearted gentrifiers who cared deeply about property value. Middle-aged men protesting their building eroded the image they had sought to cultivate and present. I was lucky I'd been able to stay as long as I had.

*Say it loud! Say it clear! Sasha is not welcome here!*

"You won!" I yelled at my window.

*Say it loud! Say it clear! Sasha is not welcome here!*

Someone knocked on my door. I tightened my arms over my chest. "Who is it?" I asked, too softly for the knocker to hear. Another knock: faster, heavier. I imagined thick-wristed movers lugging my stuff to a dumpster. Or worse: the protestors had entered the building, and now they would drag me by my feet through the halls. The knocking intensified to pounding, then unbearable beating.

I flung open the door. "Take everything! I don't deserve any of it!" After two months alone, resentment and fear had made me prone to exclamations of woe.

On the other side of the door was a flame, and beneath it a single pink candle, beneath the candle a carnival cupcake, and beneath the cupcake two cupped hands. It was Dyson.

"Happy Twenty-Ninth," he said. More than a year had passed since we'd seen each other—dinner, two Christmases ago—and his slenderness startled me. Veins terrained his arms. His neck was like a delicate branch. Under his familiar freckles, his cheeks appeared melon-balled, milky. Between his teeth pistoned peppermint gum so potent it made my nose tingle. His brown hair was buzzed to the scalp—so unlike the precisely styled, expensive haircuts he had worn in L.A.—which gave him a farm-boyish beauty, haunted, naïve. He wore a thick white T-shirt, dark jeans, no belt, and black Pumas—a picture of contrived effortlessness.

He was the last person I wanted to see, and the only person I wanted to see.

I licked my fingers, then snuffed the flame of the candle with them. "You're two days late."

"So you're not inviting me in."

I hammered a fist on his chest. "I'll invite you in when you answer my calls."

"Let me in and I'll explain."

“Explain what? That you’re done with me? Like everyone else? I already know that, Dyson. You’ve made that perfectly clear.”

He set the cupcake down in the hallway, laid his hands on my shoulders. “Oh, Sasha,” he said. It had been months since I’d heard my name spoken with tenderness. His hands slipped from my shoulders to my back and I wrapped my arms around him, ran a finger up the mountain range of his spine. The last person I had hugged was Cassandra—a good-bye hug before I taped an interview—and I’d spent the intervening months despondent over her refusal to see me. As I held Dyson and was held by him, my animosity loosened and fell like a towel to the floor.

I tidied the apartment: gathering clamshell to-go boxes stacked into a tower, dusty clusters of hair, sticky forks strewn over the floor. There was a smell, too, though I couldn’t smell it. Dyson described it as socky. Later, he told me he had nearly buckled from sadness upon seeing my situation. Perhaps he expected me to greet him how I began my ABANDON videos: perched in front of a blank white wall, hands clasped on a cedar table, wearing leggings and a racerback tank, my cheeks pillowy, hair straightened, my smile bright and unstainable: *Welcome back*. But isolation had made me shaky and foul. My hair, naturally straight, stretched to just under my clavicle and shined from going unwashed. Loose, food-splattered clothes—a torn Disney T-shirt and pajama bottoms—hung from my quivering frame. My nostrils were encrusted. My arms were splotchy and pale after two sunless months. I was embarrassed by myself. Dyson warned me he couldn’t stay here much longer.

“We need to get going,” he said.

“Going where?”

“I sent you an email.”

“You didn’t.” I refreshed my email hundreds of times a day, hoping someone I’d once been important to—Cassandra or Blake or Dyson—would reach out to tell me they loved me, were thinking of me, and maybe offer me work. But my inbox never held anything but knives. Harassers had begun veiling their death threats in subjects like *Employment Opportunity* and *Wonderful Kittens* and *Ca\$h 4 U Now*.

Dyson said, “When you didn’t respond, I was convinced you hated me. But I thought: If you answer the door at eleven AM on a Tuesday, then it’s fated. And here you are. Think of everything you could’ve been doing.”

“Crying,” I said. “Watching reruns of game shows.”

“But you were *home*,” he said, as if no one had ever been home. “That means something. More than our little minds can *truly* comprehend.”

His speech reminded me of Cassandra’s meditations scripts: cheerfully empty, mindlessly mindful. “I’m done with mindful people,” I told him.

“Me, too,” he said. “Mindfulness is the swamp of aspiring quacks. Where I am—where you’re gonna be—is so far beyond mindfulness it’s a crime to even compare them.”

“Is it a crime to explain to me what you mean?”

“Long explanation or short explanation?” he asked.

“Some explanation.” I pinched my fingers together. “Even this much.”

“Promise you’ll come with me.”

“Just tell me.”

“You promise?”

The men sang *We don’t want no / Sasha Marcus* to the tune of Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall.”

I promised.

“Good,” he said. “Because me and you: we’re starting a cult.”

## two

TODAY, WHEN I'M asked about Dyson, everyone expects stories of a charismatic manipulator, tales reminiscent of cult leaders they've seen on TV. But that wasn't his way. The Dyson I'd known my whole life didn't persuade; he listened. When I was in trouble, he let me talk. He nodded along, encouraged my grudges and gripes—many of which emerged in the aftermath of relationships, when Dyson would trash the men I believed I had loved. More than anything, he knew how to remind me of what had brought us together.

As teenagers, we spent hours on highways singing along to moody mix CDs that he meticulously arranged. The bands were independent and neglected, far too brilliant for popular recognition. We pretended we were the only people alive who knew these songs existed—not even the bands, we joked, knew of their songs. Dyson transferred the contents of the mixes onto a massive playlist for the drive. By now, nearly a dozen years later, these songs frequently played in car commercials or life insurance ads or over tinny speakers at corporate bagel shops, and although hearing these songs in public, reduced to jingles and Muzak, filled me with the shame of crossing paths with an ex, hearing them that day, with Dyson, I fell quickly into singing along. We both had good voices, though mine was better, and he knew when to silence himself to prevent the timid lilt of his voice from holding me back. The playlist was an attempt to blot my mind with nostalgia, to distract me from wondering where the hell we were headed. It nearly worked, too. But once we got out of the city, I asked Dyson where exactly we were going. “My grandparents’ place,” he answered, then turned up the music to signal he wouldn’t say any more. I welcomed the distraction. For the first time in months, I felt unburdened.

I mistook this feeling for safety.

An hour into the drive, Dyson stopped at a towering three-story mall to stretch his legs. He straightened his arms against the roof of the car, resting his weight on one leg and swinging the other pendulum-like in front of his body, as if preparing for a race. I lounged on the trunk, swallowing the sky with my eyes.

A few rows away from our car, in an empty corner of the parking lot, five white men crowded around a station wagon raised on a jack. They were changing the rear passenger-side tire in total silence—not one mumble of small talk—working via some ant-like understanding of the task, passing tools and unscrewing bolts, dropping screws into the cupped palms of their partners, cradling the spare like a child. Two of the men wore torn T-shirts and sweatpants and had the foggy, undershaven faces of the terminally unemployed. The other three men must've come from work, two in khakis and button-downs, the last one wearing fashionable jeans and the black employee polo of an electronics store. I was too far away to see their eyes—in news reports, their eyes had been described as gluey, dulled—and I would've inched closer were it not for the woman behind the wheel. She slapped her window and shouted, "Leave me alone!"

Her fear of the men gave me reason to fear them.

Dyson took a step toward the car. "I've never seen a man horde in person," he said.

I hadn't, either. "Can't you hear that woman screaming?" I asked, hoping to minimize his curiosity, and mine. I didn't want to get involved.

"Maybe we ought to go help her."

"There was the one in New Hampshire, last week, who chopped down the trees in front of the courthouse. They might have weapons for all we know."

Over the past year, more and more men—always white men—had been hording together unprompted to perform mundane social activities. There was no way of telling how a man horde would act once it formed. Some, like the horde at the mall, changed strangers' tires. Others washed windows at retirement homes. One broke into a duplex and folded all the homeowners' laundry. Another broke into a duplex and strangled the homeowners' beagle. The men who horded never remembered joining a horde. When shown footage of their

actions, they laughed in disbelief, insisted they were watching actors; some spontaneously wept. Hordes had become popular subjects on the local news programs I watched every day, and I considered myself an expert on the whims of the hordes.

The men lowered the station wagon off its jack and departed in separate directions. They would probably never speak to one another again. The driver sped away, flipping them off out the window.

“What a letdown,” said Dyson.

“Not exciting enough for you?”

“A letdown for people like you who think the hordes are dangerous.” He started in the direction of the mall.

The mall’s shadow stretched over the lot like a stain. The air was chilled, shiver-inducing. I felt a pang of anticipation as we drew closer. We had grown up in a rural patch of New Jersey notorious for ample skies and groundwater toxicity. Ours was a town of paranoia, of grief. We had lost two classmates to cancer. The disease had taken dozens more in the surrounding grades. As teenagers, we obsessed over escaping—partly out of generic adolescent angst, partly out of an unconscious impulse for self-preservation. We were drawn to expressions of life that seemed endless and immortal, and nothing suggested immortality more than commerce. After school, we darted onto highways en route to movie theaters and restaurants and arcades and flea markets and magic shows and specialty grocers—but most often we drove straight to a mall.

Malls were repercussionless places. There, the future didn’t exist. You ate pizza slices thick as bricks or grease-leaking pretzels under the pretense that no discomfort would follow. The elderly roaming the promenade ignored the grip of mortality. There *was* no mortality in the mall. There was no paranoia—only praise from employees who wrote our names in script on dressing room doors, who told us how pretty we looked in clothes we couldn’t afford, who lifted samples of meat to our mouths like servants feeding a queen in her castle.

The mall was the kingdom where nobody died.

But time had overtaken this mall—as it had overtaken so many other malls. Fluorescent lights gagged overhead. The air reeked of the cleaning solution used to mop up the vomit of children. The mall teetered between its decay and a naïve

faith in its revitalization. Harried managers carnival-barked from the entrances offering sickening discounts: 30 percent, 40 percent, 50 percent, 75 percent. “The Death March of Discounts,” Dyson called it. Stores’ façades masked in plaster apologized for their dust but promised to transform into exciting new enterprises: and soon! At the entrance to a record store was a cardboard cutout of Blake Days gripping a guitar by the neck. “The You I Knew,” the title of his latest single, appeared in red script across his body. It took everything in me not to topple the cutout. Four stores down, a poster of Cassandra promoting noise-canceling headphones hung in the window of a laptop store.

Dyson was going off about his cult. He rambled to me about men, the dangers men faced, how men were depressed and threats to themselves. He waved his arms, pointed, nodded diligently, and blathered with the scattered enthusiasm of a child giving a TED Talk. It wasn’t unusual for him to speak in such perplexing extremes, hopping from truisms to clichés to conclusions as if they were rocks in a stream. He ended on a solution: our cult.

“We’ll call it The Atmosphere,” he said. “The men will be Atmospherians. It’s a film term. Another word for extras: people who provide the atmosphere and stand in the background. What better aspiration for men? To cede power, the spotlight, to let others speak, let the action continue without them.”

“Give me a pen,” I said. Dyson was one of the few people left who still carried a pen.

“You don’t need to take notes.” He tapped his forehead. “It’s all in here.”

“Just give it to me.” He handed one over. I marched to Cassandra’s poster intent on drawing an *X* over each eye, but the poster was hanging inside the glass.

“If you’re interested in a poster I can get you an excellent deal,” said a pouchy man in a tucked polo shirt. He had a face like an electrical outlet. “I’ll throw it in free with a pair of Ear Locks.”

“She’s a bad person!” I said.

“Plus my employee discount. That’s fifteen percent on top of the twenty-five you’re already saving. It’s an unbeatable deal.” He spoke like someone who had never been excited.

“Your company shouldn’t associate with bad people,” I said.



“I do commercials,” Dyson said to the employee. “A ton you’ve probably seen. Movies, too. Blockbusters. And I’ve heard terrible things about how Cassandra treats people. She’s notorious for it. She’s the worst-kept secret in wellness.” Professionally, he was an actor—a career extra in films, TV, and ads—and loved elbowing his experience into conversations. I normally found the habit grating and insecure, but today I was heartened by his defense of me.

“Soon you’ll know!” I shouted. “Soon you’ll all know.” I sensed people staring and covered my face with my hand to prevent anyone from recognizing me. Any one of the men from my building might be in this mall. “We need to keep moving,” I said to Dyson.

Dyson and I rode an escalator to the second floor and skirted the food court. Cashiers thrust cuts of teriyaki chicken into our faces. Dyson refused, so I took his, and mine, then his and mine when we circled past a second time.

He said, “It’s my fault I haven’t been here for you. But I want you—if you can—I want you to tell me how you are, *where* you are emotionally. Cults are founded on honesty, Sasha. And trust. We can’t get where we’re going if you don’t tell me where you are.” Had these words come from anyone else, I would have cackled. But he was calming, sweet. And familiar. That meant more than anything else. “Don’t leave a single thing out,” he said.

The past three months tumbled out incoherently: A man who left explicit comments on my photos and videos, the same man who emailed me pics of my head cropped into porn videos, the same man who made new profiles every time I reported him and who used a VPN that the police were too lazy to trace—that man had taken his life after I told him to leave me alone. My ex couldn’t associate with me after the scandal. Cassandra used my downfall as a chance to boost her career. Then the men with their signs. Now the eviction. My mouth emptied as tears rinsed my cheeks. “I’m so embarrassed,” I said. “Crying in a mall on a Tuesday afternoon.”

“No one’s watching,” he said.

I peered around me. People passed without looking, their avoidance intentional. My anonymity was a relief. After Lucas Devry, I’d become recognizable, a point of discussion—exactly what I’d desired for years. In an effort to remake my image—and to pay rent—I had applied for jobs at a number

of charities: the ASPCA, the Organization for African Children, Save the Peruvian Mice, Médicos Sin Fronteras, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Make-A-Wish, Have A Heart, Break A Leg, Give A Lung, Teach For America, Cats in the Schools, and L.A.M.B. But even the laziest Google search disqualified me from being hired.

“Where we’re going,” he said, “none of what happened will matter.”

“You haven’t *told* me where we’re going. I’ve never been to your grandparents’ place.”

His father’s parents had left him property in southern Jersey, on the northern edge of the Pine Barrens. It was as off-the-grid as you could get without leaving the grid. No shouting, no protesting. “It’s the perfect place for the men to grow and reform,” he said.

“What men?”

“These men I’ve been working with. They’re harmless, but they’re so full of rage. They’re depressed. They’re at risk for... They’re like my father.” He inhaled, collecting himself. “If my father’d had a place to talk out his feelings, who knows what might have been different.”

Dyson’s father had died in a car crash while driving to work the summer between our junior and senior years of high school. It was an accident, we told ourselves, because we both suspected it wasn’t. No explanation *was* the explanation. But the simplicity of Dyson’s new equation disturbed me. If his father’s death could be reduced to cause and effect, maybe Lucas Devry’s could be as well, and I was more at fault than I wanted to believe.

On the third floor, we paused on a bench so close to the railing that our knees pressed into the glass. Dyson gave me a pep talk on all the barriers I’d leapfrogged, the ceilings I’d shattered: “You changed lives. You helped women who struggled with toxic standards of beauty. You gave hope to the despairing, the outcast, the ignored, the desperate, despondent.”

“All that work destroyed by one stupid comment.”

“All that work prepared you for this,” he said. “Everything you *thought* you did with ABANDON, all the good you brought to the world, all the people you helped, it’ll be nothing compared to what we’re gonna do. Cassandra Hanson, Blake Dayes—you know how meaningless *their* work will look beside ours?

Cassandra makes wealthy dullards relax. Blake writes earworms for idiots. But Sasha: We're gonna change the *world*. People will talk about us and The Atmosphere for generations after we're gone. We'll make the world safer for *everyone*. Because the world is full of terrible men. Despicable men like Blake Dayes and Lucas Devry who get worse every day. And nothing gets done. It might seem crazy to do this, but it's *crazier* to do nothing."

I pretended I couldn't tell he was flattering me. I wanted him to say more.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "But don't worry. Cult: it's an organizing principle. Strong leader at the top. Two leaders in our case who dictate how those below ought to live. Have there been bad apples? Absolutely. Jonestown. Heaven's Gate. The Manson Family. Rajneeshpuram. But the model is *perfect*. Because if any social group ever deserved forced isolation, ever needed their worldview shaped by trusted leaders—for the greater good—it's men. White men, especially. And we're the only ones brave enough to commit to this work."

"I just want this all to end."

"Wrong," he said. "You want vindication. Exoneration. Hell, you want revenge. You deserve it. Imagine Cassandra's face when she sees *you* interviewed on morning talk shows—spreading your message of radical transformation for men. Imagine how quickly Blake will call you, desperate to get back together, when he sees you're more famous than he is."

"I'd never get back with him," I said, though I'd often imagined it.

"Of course not. You won't even answer his calls."

I shaped my hand into a phone and spoke into it: "See you in hell, you goat-voiced fraud." Dyson was laughing. But the pain of losing Cassandra and Blake flooded back into me, and I curled over my knees. "You don't get it," I said. "People despise me."

"You said what anyone would have."

"I won't be any help." I regret it now, but I wanted him to tell me he needed me, for him to douse me in praise. I wanted to be convinced.

He intuited this: "You're organized. Brilliant. Persistent and patient—everything I'm not. I'm a big thinker. An ideas man. I shoot from the hip. *Pow! Pow!* But you have experience. You already made one program from scratch—

had it senselessly taken from you. You're an expert about group management, planning. I couldn't possibly do this with anyone else."

"You do need me," I said, stupidly confident.

"And you need *this*. You've hit rock bottom. You're broke. Evicted. The Atmosphere is your only path to redemption. I wish this could happen some other way, but this is the world we have: Americans love reckonings. They're obsessed with atonement. Reform some men, prove you can care for guys like Lucas Devry, and the media will slobber over your tale of redemption. Boom: you get your life back."

He insisted the plan was simple: The men would arrive at his property in a week. Over the next six days, he and I would prepare the camp, brainstorm strategies for transforming these men, strategies for bringing The Atmosphere to the public's attention—"For your sake," he said, though I knew Dyson was desperate for notoriety, albeit too proud to ever admit his desperation. He promised me a beautiful cabin in the woods and men who were ready to grow and evolve.

"How does that sound?" he asked.

"Too good to be true," I said.

"Sometimes things can be good *and* true. Have confidence in me for once. Just trust I know what I'm doing."

He was right: I had no confidence in him. But if something went wrong, I had confidence in myself to fix it, or escape. I stood and leaned against the railing, rested my arms over the edge.

Dyson took this for what it was: a sign I would join him. He edged in beside me, shoulder to shoulder, and I felt unexpectedly safe.

A young girl screamed from the ground floor of the mall.

She was pointing at a purple helium balloon that was drifting to the ceiling. "I got it!" Dyson shouted. It was a foolishly confident thing to say and even more foolish for him to stretch over the railing. I pressed a hand to his back to hold him in place. I was sure the balloon would slip past him, that a gust of central air would blow it beyond his reach and that he'd tumble over the railing to his death. But he palmed the balloon with one hand and cradled it to his chest. He rushed down the escalators to deliver it to the girl. Bystanders

applauded the miracle they had witnessed. The girl hugged the balloon. Dyson refused the mother's attempt to slip him some bills. He ascended the escalators as if gliding on a wave of his own self-satisfaction and pride. A bright, blinding light of inevitability shined inside me: Perhaps I had every reason to trust him. Everything he described would happen exactly as he described it. I was sure of it then.

The girl released the balloon. A collective gasp spread through the mall.

# three

IN THE ALTERNATE version of my life, I turn Dyson down and move to a dusty bedroom community with a name like Oak Bluff or Bounty or Franklin, any whitewashed suburb where the townsfolk brag about farmers' markets and walking trails and really breathing the air. In this life, I answer phones at a charter school. I marry a man named Kevin with soda can thumbs and a forehead the size of a billboard. He owns a landscaping company. He accuses me of cheating on him with every man we pass in the street. We create three unconscionably ugly children who adore plain bagels and lizards. I might appear happy—I might even convince myself of this—but I would be brittle with boredom, a musty husk of myself tumbling through a life I abhor.

Dyson knew I would never settle for such a life. I wanted the life I had earned, the life that had been taken away from me. I wanted to matter again. This was what he offered me, and I accepted the offer. I buckled in and moved to The Atmosphere, not only because I wanted to, as Dyson insisted, *make the world safer*, but because I was angry: at Cassandra and Blake and Lucas Devry and the hundreds of men who traded shifts outside my apartment and the thousands who'd threatened my life online and the millions who merely existed. I wanted to be better than them. I needed them to know that I was.

Nevertheless, I often daydream about that quiet life in the suburbs with three kids and a Kevin. It happens more frequently than I would like. That life is an escape hatch from the pressure I find myself under now. No, that life would not have satisfied me. I would not be *happier* there—which isn't to say that I'm happy today. But I would not feel so guilty. If I had chosen that life, Dyson would still be alive.

# four

DYSON AND I met on the bus on the first day of third grade. The summer just before, my mother had moved us into the house neighboring his. “Row six. Two-seater,” said the bus driver when I boarded. He was bulbous and gruff, with eyebrows as thick as pelts and a metal bar through his septum. Dyson sat in the three-seater across the aisle, the only other kid on the bus. He and I lived on the outskirts of town—people called it the boonies, though I hate the word *boonies*, with its whiff of condescension and terror—and our rides lasted half an hour longer than everyone else’s. The driver resented us for this. So he demanded silence from Dyson and me.

As the bus filled, Dyson made fart and sex noises for the kids passing his seat, or he clapped his puffed, freckled cheeks or lifted his shirt and shimmied to shake the flab of his stomach. He was a chunky kid who used his chunkiness to amuse. Sex and fart sounds were not, on their own, inherently funny, but to children these sounds were hilarious when delivered by a fat kid. They laughed in passing. They fondled his tummy. “Fuckin’ Dyson,” the sixth graders said. Sure, nobody sat with him—but they appreciated the work he put into debasing himself. They remembered his name. In class later that day, he imitated our homeroom teacher when she turned around to write on the board, her gestures distorted by the funhouse mirror of fatness. Dyson modeled himself after the TV fat boys who lived in the echo of laugh tracks. They spoke in the most idiotic of voices and ate too much to be smart. Their stomachs consistently jiggled. They fell on their faces. Their chairs collapsed under their weight or their asses got stuck in their chairs. Fat boys punctured conversations with thunderous farts. They grumbled, “Me hungry,” in deep, garbagy voices. The

benefit of being a fat boy, Dyson decided, was having your personality chosen for you. He had no incentive to become someone unique. He played the role of fat boy half out of convenience, half out of fear. He feared anonymity. He feared kids forgetting his name. He preferred the spotlight of ridicule to the chilly dignity of neglect.

Performing for others depleted him, though, and during that extra half hour on the bus, when we were alone, he would fiddle quietly with a Game Boy to relax. Sometimes he let me play. My mother put strict limits on TV in our house—she hated the way women were portrayed on TV, in ads, in movies, and I was granted no more than thirty minutes daily. Video games were an unimaginable luxury. I played whenever Dyson offered. Over the course of the school year we developed a competitive alliance, passing the Game Boy back and forth to complete difficult levels in *Zelda* and *Mario*. Dyson raced easily through the levels but had trouble with bosses, whereas I hated the tedium of completing a level and often died from risky decisions made out of boredom. Yet I never needed more than two tries to conquer a boss.

One day, I mentioned a movie I wanted to see—an ad for it had come on during my allotted TV-viewing time the previous night—and Dyson invited me over to watch it. “You’re lying,” I said. The movie was still in theaters. He assured me his father always got movies before they were out. “And we’re allowed to watch it all the way through?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly, baffled by the question, and I was too embarrassed to bring up the movie policy at my house: My mother serialized them using an egg timer. She cut off watching even if only a few minutes remained.

At Dyson’s stop, I followed him to the door.

The driver grabbed my backpack. He snapped twice, opened his palm. “Gimme your permission slip.”

“You never ask for permission slips,” Dyson said.

“Change in policy,” he grumbled.

“This is discrimination,” Dyson said. “You hate us. You hate children.”

“You have ten seconds to find it,” said the driver.

I made a show of fishing through my backpack.

“It’s with the office,” said Dyson.



“Can’t let you go without a note.”

“Radio the office,” said Dyson.

“Yeah,” I said. “Call the office.”

“Don’t think I won’t drive you back to school.”

“Go ahead.” Dyson sat down on the nearest seat. “We have time.”

I sat across from him. “All the time in the world.”

The driver glanced at his watch. “Don’t do anything stupid.” He shoed us off the bus.

Dyson’s driveway was winding and pocked. We walked through the scent of something rotting—a fox, said Dyson—and crunched over branches that had fallen to the ground. On the walk, we celebrated our victory over the driver, repeating *Don’t do anything stupid* buffoonishly. The driveway opened up on a boxy white house with red shutters that was plugged at the foot of a hill. It reminded me of an ambulance without wheels. The unmown grass had gone to seed. Rain started tapping the leaves.

At the door, Dyson shushed me. Inside, patchouli and dust sharpened the air. Navy-blue curtains blanketed the windows. He pointed at my shoes, took his off. I kept waiting for a mother or father to appear and explain the rules of the house, for Dyson to use me as an excuse to negotiate for new rules. But no parents appeared. And Dyson hadn’t spoken since we entered. Perhaps silence was the only rule of his house.

In the kitchen, a single window above the sink cast a box of gray light onto the floor. Chanting sounded from the darkened living room beside it. “Daddy’s sleeping,” said the room.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Dyson?” said the room.

“It’s me, Mommy,” he said.

“Is someone with you?”

He sighed. “A friend.”

“What friend? Let me—you need to tell me when you—” His mother entered the kitchen wearing a mossy kimono that trailed her for several feet. She was a tall, snowy woman, pale and rounded, with gently pitted marks on her face. Her lips were thin, large eyes pinched close together, and she kept her dirty-

blond hair in a single braid flung in front of her chest. She cupped a cold compress against her forehead. "I am in no state for a guest," she said. "My exams are taking everything out of me." She was an aspiring doula, and for as long as I would know her, she was always training for exams, though I don't think she ever applied for certification.

I introduced myself.

"You must be Dyson's girlfriend."

He groaned. I looked at my feet.

"What have I told you, Dyson, about imbibing society's notions? You are *never* too young for love. Society imposes so many misguided ideas about the *right time* to love. I fell in love when I was seven years old. Much younger than you. And it was the finest love of my life." She squatted to our height. "But please don't tell your daddy. He's sensitive. It would hurt him too much to know I've loved other men."

Dyson's mother had the personality of a plasma globe: the crooks of light inside her awoke to the slightest human interaction. She ran an arm across my shoulders. Her touch was as light as a scarf. "I am a spiritually curious woman," she said without prompting. "I need to be. It is the only thing keeping me buoyant. I mean it. I've been through a lot. Dyson will tell you. Tell her, Dy. That's why I'm like this. That's why I'm so..." She paused for a breath. "Kooky."

"I'm gonna make chicken nuggets," Dyson said to me.

"Carrots, honey. Your humors are off." *Your humors are off* meant he was thicker than his father liked.

"The carrots are droopy," he said.

"Because you never eat them."

"Sasha wants chicken nuggets."

"Sasha is welcome to as many as she likes." She loaded the nuggets into the microwave. Dyson bit into a carrot as limp as a deflated balloon, eyeing the nuggets as they heated and spun, spun and heated.

"Dyson's never had a neighbor his age," said his mother. "Do you have siblings?"

I shook my head.

“Your parents made a wise decision. Two children, three. They’ll only fight. Worse. They’ll gang up on their parents. That’s how I was with my sister. A smear campaign against our parents. When Dyson’s daddy and I were deciding, I thought: It’s hard enough raising one child. Try raising *two* kids who conspire against you. I commend your parents.”

“They’re divorced,” I said. It seemed like it needed saying.

“*Ohhhh*. No. No. *No*,” she said. “That shatters my heart. There’s already too little love in the world. People say it’s so difficult, preserving a marriage. But what’s the alternative? Abandoning love? Accepting that love doesn’t deserve your effort? Dyson: Daddy and I could’ve gotten a divorce, couldn’t we have, sweetie? After the thing. But what would that have solved? Nothing. There were hard times, but we got through them because we—”

Dyson lunged an arm toward the microwave, trying to open the door before the timer went off. He was too late: a first chime, a second, a third, then an elongated chime louder than the others. He and his mother went silent; they angled their ears to the ceiling. Footsteps pummeled through the upstairs floor. Dyson’s head drooped in defeat.

“I’ll talk to him,” said his mother. But her voice tremored.

Footsteps descended the stairs and crossed the dining room. None of us let out a breath. I knew enough to fear whatever they feared.

Dyson’s father lurched into the kitchen. He was a short, dense man, built like a tombstone. He wore a loose Bugs Bunny T-shirt with holes under the arms and blue basketball shorts. His clean-shaven face was reflectively smooth. He peered through the microwave window. “You’re not eating this crap, are you?” he asked Dyson.

Dyson shook his head.

“We’ve talked about this. They’re softeners. What do softeners do?”

“They’re for my friend,” he said.

“This is Sasha,” said Dyson’s mother. “Our new neighbor.”

His father’s eyes grasped the cords in my throat. He was the type of man who felt most powerful when feared. So I feared him, out of courtesy—then actual fear.

“What do softeners do?” he asked Dyson again.

“Softeners make you stupid and fat.”

He slapped the back of Dyson’s head, then tossed the nuggets into the trash.

Dyson skated glances around the edges of his father, unable to look at him directly but unable to look anywhere else. I couldn’t look away, either. He was gravity incarnate in this house. His wife pawed his shoulder, asked if he wanted something to drink.

“What I want is two more hours of sleep. But looks like I’m working out early.” He stepped into the basement and slammed the door so hard a magnet fell off the fridge.

Dyson’s mother’s smile came out as a grimace. “You’ll need to make it up to him later.”

I said, “Can we watch that movie?”

“Not while Daddy’s exercising,” said his mother.

“The TV is downstairs,” said Dyson. “With the gym.”

“I might need to go home,” I said.

Dyson’s mother peered out the window. “Is your mother picking you up? Because you can’t possibly walk in this rain. Never. My god. It would be irresponsible of me as a parent—no, a community member—to let you out in this weather. You can’t underestimate rain. Even showers like this. Showers like this, you think it’s nothing and boom you’re facedown in the dirt. Is that what you want? That’s not what you want. I’ve seen people—men far stronger and older than you, athletes in their prime—taken down by rain much lighter than this.”

I asked her a question with my eyes: *Could you drive me?*

She shifted the compress to the other side of her forehead. “Oh, dear. I am not a driver. Not in my condition. In my condition, Dyson will tell you, I shouldn’t have access to a TV remote. But there’s plenty to do while you wait.”

We joined her in the living room to listen to some of her favorite chants. She stretched across the entire couch. Dyson and I made room on the floor amid an army of plastic Eastern God statues. His mother practiced a range of new-age healing methods, she told me, subscribing to a kind of *de gustibus* Eastern philosophy that combined but never committed to yoga, meditation, acupuncture, Reiki, chanting, and tea. In time, I would know people like her

well, scattered, good-faith people desperate for fixes, the people most often hurt by the people they loved.

Dyson's father was a small-time crook—shoplifting, passing bad checks, selling bootleg CDs and movies. He had broken a man's jaw in a bar fight when Dyson was five. He spent seventeen months in prison. The charges funneled him into a life of part-time employment and night work. He'd never been a warm person; time away made him remote. In the aftermath of his sentence, Dyson's mother treated her husband with caution verging on terror. She did all she could to ensure his family never disturbed him. This made it impossible to feel at home in their house—especially for Dyson, who ached for his father's love but could never ask for it, out of concern it might shatter the fragile stability of the home.

Dyson's father rumbled out of the basement. His gray shirt was oceanic with sweat, drip-drip-dripping on the linoleum floor. He filled an enormous stein with tap water and, gripping the glass instead of the handle, emptied it all in one terrible gulp before returning upstairs.

Dyson waited for me at the door to the basement. I was nervous to go in after his father, fearing what might be downstairs, but he tilted his head impatiently toward the door. His mother shooed me away. The basement stank of mildew and rust. Its concrete floor chilled me through my socks, though the air was warm from his father's exertion. Workout equipment cluttered the room: a bench press, barbells, round metal clips for tightening weights to the bar. Flimsy mirrors of various heights covered the walls, each one seemingly tilted at a unique angle. A torn futon hunched in front of a TV. Towers of VHS tapes stood on either side of the screen. They were marked with drags of masking tape. At my house, tapes had titles like *Sasha Preschool Grad* and *Sasha 6 b-day*. Here I saw titles only from popular movies.

We sat inches away from the screen. Dyson kept the sound a couple clicks above mute. I'd never watched a bootleg movie before and had trouble adjusting to the blurry picture and the heads of the viewers and their coughing and chewing. The basement door opened and his father barreled back down the steps. Dyson handed me a pair of headphones, then capped a second pair over his ears and plugged them in using a splitter. I couldn't concentrate on the movie

through the grunts of his father counting as he did crunches. At one hundred, he collapsed with a lionish growl, then stomped back up the steps. I removed my headphones and told Dyson I needed to leave. “See you tomorrow,” he said. He waved over his shoulder as I ascended the steps.

Shamanic drumming sounded from the living room. I tiptoed to the front door, gathered my things, and ran home through the woods that separated our houses. I didn’t expect to return.

But the next day, when Dyson asked if I wanted to finish the movie, I followed him off the bus, as if the decision had already been made for me. Soon I was obsessed with the illicit strangeness of his bootleg movies. Watching them meant watching two different performances. There was the movie—always at a remove no matter how deeply the cameraman zoomed to the screen. The camera never captured the entire screen, either, and these missing slivers held my attention more than the movie itself, corners of disappeared film where anything might have happened. The second performance included the heads of the audience members, the cameraman’s coughing, the sound of cellophane wrappers peeled off boxes of candy. During one movie, ushers escorted the cameraman out for recording, and every movie we watched after that was electric with tension.

My mother would never have approved of my watching movies at Dyson’s. So I never told her I went to his house. One afternoon, when she called home I wasn’t around to answer. Her punishment was severe. She confined me to our house for the summer, where I read the humidity-sticky fashion magazines she stacked under her bed. I assumed my friendship with Dyson had ended. Then one morning there was a knock on my door. By the time I opened it, Dyson was scampering toward the woods. On the doormat sat a small red box, a purple bow blossoming on its top. Inside: a movie that had opened that week.

# five

DYSON PARKED IN front of a bare brown barn in the center of a clearing. Yellow-crisp grass widened out to a crown of pine trees. Their tips knifed into a stony sky. In front of the barn were two stubby sheds so lacquered and bright they reflected the sun like shields. The front of a school bus nosed out from behind the barn. A gurgling generator unloaded a warped column of smoke that rose like a worm inching into the sky. Johnsonburg—the closest town, barely a blink on the side of the road—was twenty minutes away by car. Standing in the center of the clearing, I felt the grip of isolation. Like a mouse in a fist.

The property was some of the cheapest in the state: fifteen acres scraped across the northern rim of the Pine Barrens, a dense expanse of forest home to a mythical devil, cranberry bogs, and sulfurous, inhospitable soil. The Forest Service had recently set fire to miles of trees to prevent future fires, and the air had a charred, ashy thickness that sludged my throat and made my lips flaky. The clearing had an impatient quality, like it had been waiting too long for something to exist here. I could almost hear it tapping its feet.

“My dad’s parents wanted to start a summer camp here,” Dyson said. He dragged a tube of Chap Stick over his lips, then tossed it to me.

“Not a camp for children, I hope.”

“They could never make up their minds.” His father had built the barn over one humiliatingly hot summer, and the man had always resented his parents for never making use of the property. “He used to hide bootlegs out here. CDs and movies. Unload them at local flea markets far from home.” Dyson seemed very proud of this fact.

I drifted away from the car and took a few selfies with the pines at my back, intending to post them so Cassandra might see. *Nature retreat*, I would comment, and thank a large cosmetics company to make her think I'd landed a sponsorship. My face was greasy and pale, the lighting was dull, and after months avoiding myself, I had trouble finding a flattering angle.

"Good luck posting those photos," said Dyson.

"I'm not planning to post them," I said.

"The cell service is pitiful here. That's the best part of this place: complete isolation."

"I have one bar." It dropped to *No Signal* as soon as I spoke.

"When the men get here we're destroying their phones. To cut back on distractions. Might be a good idea for you to destroy yours," he said. "In the interest of fairness."

"What about safety?"

"Think of this as a detox."

"*My* safety. I don't want to be alone here without a phone."

He inhaled deeply, sucking up every molecule of air in the clearing. "The perfect cure for all those trolls and harassers."

I reminded him that *I* wasn't sick. I hadn't come here to detox—but to make Blake and Cassandra jealous. "Just because you're not sick," Dyson said, "doesn't mean you couldn't be healthier." He smirked like he'd said something profound, then went to the barn to unload supplies. I took photos of The Atmosphere: its rugged ugliness, the gaudy sheds, the paint-chipped barn, the grass thirsty for water, the generator, sparrows looping through the sky. My service flashed in and out, never long enough to post anything. But it gave me hope there was signal somewhere on the property.

Inside the barn, lightbulbs dangled from frayed cords attached to the ceiling. Paint scent fattened the air. Plywood boards and power tools huddled in a corner—supplies to build the next round of sheds. Close to the door was a plastic picnic table "big enough to fit thirty men!" Dyson shouted. He stood on the kitchen and pantry side of the barn—behind a freshly painted black metal fence that split the room down the center. I stepped through the door in the fence. Dyson was stocking the shelves with health foods: almonds, alternative milks,



seaweed sheets, gluten-free pastas, dried beans, bran flakes, and canned vegetables.

“Not much food for twelve men,” I said.

“That’s what sets us apart from all those other retreats for men, those corporate scams,” he said. “We start at the stomach. If we want to change men, we need to change how they eat. Teaching boys to eat ‘like men’ teaches them to find self-worth in consumption. They’re conditioned to consume excessively, to ignore boundaries, to pig out, to scarf down. To take without considering cost for themselves and for others. And what happens next?” He tapped his forehead. “Consumption of resources, of money, of time, and of land. Not anymore.”

“Starve the men woke,” I said, joking.

“You get it,” he said, with no hint of humor.

Across from the shelves was a full kitchen: sink and stovetop, oven and fridge. A holdover from the failed summer camp. Floral oven mitts hung off hooks nailed on the wall. My eyes followed the fence up to the ceiling. It resembled a giant fishing net from this angle: bound to collapse and trap us beneath it. “Pretty murderly barn,” I said, hoping for pushback.

“Any place can be murderly under the wrong conditions.” He had a bad habit of saying such things: the worst possible things. Often, these comments were made in jest—but hearing this now put me on edge.

I checked my phone again. No service, no sign of service returning. “These men you’re bringing here—”

“*We’re* bringing here.”

“What if they form a horde?”

“Do you think I’d bring men here who might horde?”

“Any man can horde.”

“You act like I’d put you in danger.”

“Am I in danger?” I asked. “Are the men dangerous?”

“Sasha: Name one thing in the *world* that isn’t in any way dangerous. You know I’d never hurt you—obviously—but for an ant under my foot I’m a threat. Does that make me dangerous? Your ex, he seemed to think you were dangerous for his career. Not to mention those men outside your apartment. But to me you’re the kindest soul in the world. I’ve never known anyone better than you.

In order to really help anyone, Sasha—in order to make the changes we need to make in the world, to really transform how people think—we need to toss this idea of danger. Danger is conditional. And until we accept that, we’re gonna keep condemning harmless and innocent people for arbitrary mistakes.”

This was his way of saying that the men were dangerous.

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We shared a cedar, green-shuttered cabin twenty minutes by foot from the clearing. Decades ago, Dyson’s grandfather had picked this cabin out of a catalogue, and it had aged like something never expected to last very long. Its wood had taken on a warped, graying quality that reminded me of beach sand in the winter. A curvy porch jutted out from the front like the bottom lip of an underbit mouth. Crouched before the door was a Creamsicle cat. It clutched what looked like an old woman’s wig in its mouth.

“Is that for me?” Dyson asked the cat in a deep, dumb voice. “Did Barney get me a present?” He stroked the cat’s back. A baby bunny escaped from its mouth and limp-sprinted into the forest. Dyson lifted the cat into his arms, rocked it like a baby, scratched behind its ears.

“So you’re a cat person now,” I said. I’d never known him to even talk about pets.

“I’m a Barney person,” he said sweetly. “Sasha, meet Barney. Barney, meet Sasha.”

I stretched to pet him. He clawed the back of my hand and broke skin. I cursed at the cat, flicking blood on my shirt as I shook the pain out.

“Bad! Bad!” Dyson said to Barney. To me: “He isn’t normally like this.”

At the kitchen sink, I soaped the wound so intensely I nearly depleted the entire bar.

“Somebody’s tummy must be crummy,” Dyson sang. He set a plastic cup of live grass—dirt and all—on the floor. The cat gnawed off a few stalks, then promptly gagged it all up. “He likes to settle his stomach after eating outside,” Dyson said. “That’s probably why he went after you. He wasn’t feeling right.”

“He went after me because he’s tired of grass.”

“Barney was living here before us,” Dyson said. “This is more his property than ours, Sasha, and we need to show him respect.” He wiped up the vomit using a dish sponge.

There were no interior walls in the cabin; a thin blue rug in the living room marked a divide from the kitchen. The kitchen table was latched upright against the wall. Its underside served as a chalkboard. Dyson had marked it with squiggles that looked like DNA strands. In the living room, a cream-colored love seat sat across from a wooden trunk—four mugs of dreggy coffee rested atop. Yellow legal pad sheets covered in looping script were push-pinned into the walls. I read what appeared to be names: *Randy Dent, Peter Minston, Gerry Simpatico*.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “It’s small. It’s barely a flick of dust. And this is where I expect two people to live? Yikes. I hear you.” I hadn’t been thinking this until he said it. “But we need to practice economy and restraint if we’re going to pass these ideas on to the men. We can’t prioritize our comforts over theirs. That’s how cults fall apart.”

“We’re not living in sheds,” I said.

“I’d feel terrible if I made you live in a shed. It wouldn’t be right—after all you’ve been through these last couple months.” He slipped into the bathroom and returned with a bandage, flattened it over the wound on my hand. “I’ve taken care of you, by the way. Don’t think I’d let you go wanting. Everything you need’s in the bathroom. Toothbrush, toothpaste, soaps, and all that.” He leaned close. “I even got you covered for when you get your, um...”

“What size did you get?”

He reddened. “We can always get more.”

“I’m joking,” I said.

“I know you’re joking,” he said. “But don’t think I’m one of those men who don’t know about that. I know there are different sizes. So if you need a different size you can just tell me. Like I said: I’m not one of those men.”

“You mean like the men coming here,” I teased.

“Let me show you the best part of the property.” He led me outside to an oblong pond tucked behind the cabin. The surrounding trees reflected in the

surface as if bowing down for a drink. “It’s almost too pretty to swim in,” he said. “It’s so pristine.”

I’d fractured my skull diving into a pool as a child, and the trauma made me wary of water. Nearly twenty years had passed since I’d last been swimming. This pond didn’t seem worth breaking the streak. I heaved a stone in the water, senselessly petulant.

Dyson undressed to his boxers. Ribs ringed out around his heart, though daily laps in the pond had thickened his shoulders. It was as if his body had been assembled from leftover parts: the muscular shoulders stacked over a sunken stomach, his cable-thin legs lashing down from inside his boxers. The blue tinge of his skin made me worry. He was unhealthy. And I knew he’d never admit it.

I told him I wasn’t in the mood to swim.

“Just a quick dip,” he said. “The water’s too perfect to stay on the shore.”

“Don’t be one of those men.”

“I’m trying to help you relax,” he said, in a tone of righteous confusion. He waved without looking, then entered the pond.

I dunked my feet in the cool sludge of the water. The birds sang. Wind rustled the branches. Cassandra would have loved this place—*I’m sitting inside of a painting*, I imagined her saying. Blake skated through my mind, too. I was reminded of a woodsy sexcation we’d taken shortly before we broke up, back when I assumed a future for us. I took a photo of the trees reflected in the pond, then a photo of the forest, then one of Dyson, one of me, though I deleted that one. For a second, I had service—two bars, enough to let in a flood of threatening messages—but it vanished before I could post the photos. Maybe Dyson was right: I ought to treat my time here like a detox. I ran my unbandaged hand through the water.

Dyson’s body sliced through the center of the pond like a scalpel splitting a stomach.

## SIX

DYSON AND I shared the only bed in the cabin—a plastic queen mattress jammed in a loft above the kitchen. He kicked in his sleep, grumbled through jagged arguments, repeatedly climbed downstairs to hose the toilet. Unenthusiastically, I swallowed a sleeping pill around two in the morning—I hated taking medicine—but my relief was pure and immediate and I woke to the sound of Dyson beating eggs with a fork in a bowl.

The morning was cool and smoky and sharpened by chattering birds. As he cooked, I sat on the porch flipping through a dog-eared book called *The Mask Behind the Mask*. His script danced up the margins. Mostly *Amazing!* and *So true!* but sometimes he crammed paragraph-length responses down the sides of a page. I held the book close to my face, angled sideways, upside-down, trying to decode his cramped, illegible notes.

Dyson stepped outside without me noticing. “McGinley’s a genius,” he said. I flinched, dropped the book.

“He says the problem isn’t that everyone is wearing a mask but that we’re wearing two masks. One for the world and one for ourselves. Imagine coming up with an idea like that?”

“It seems pretty obvious,” I said.

“Maybe to someone as brilliant as you.”

“I’m more interested in your notes.”

“I don’t want you seeing how stupid I am.” He swapped the book for a plate: a hulking omelet with avocado fanned overtop, cayenne-seasoned potatoes, a petite cup of blackberries. He stepped inside the cabin for a French press, two

mugs, and a pitcher of milk. “It’s almond milk,” he said as he poured it into my mug. “I know your program didn’t allow dairy.”

I thanked him for remembering.

There had always been something doting about Dyson, a motherly impulse toward self-sacrifice at once flattering and distressing. During our senior year of high school, he hosted what he called “Family Dinners” for me and his drama club friends on Friday nights. His father had died that summer. His mother was still stunted with grief. She spent her Fridays pacing in her bedroom as she listened to audiobooks about crystal reincarnation. Her footsteps slapped through the thin ceiling of the dining room. The drama club kids called her “Bertha,” after the madwoman in the attic in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which we’d recently read in AP English.

Dyson prepared the meals alone in the kitchen, listening to music through headphones as the drama club kids and I hung out in the dining room drinking cocktails. The others always arrived late, grinning at jokes they’d chiseled out in the car but wouldn’t repeat in the house. I suspect they found these dinners ridiculous and attended only for the chance to drink where it was condoned. Although Dyson hosted and cooked, the dinners could not have succeeded without my normalizing presence. During cocktail hour, I worked to convince the others this was a regular Friday night party, however eccentric, and not Dyson’s attempt to fill the crater his father’s death had left in his family.

Before eating, he liked to make a “toast to the family.” He would stand and tap his glass with a knife, then say something like, “Your mother and I love having you here,” his tone uncannily taut between jest and sincerity, before naming specific things he appreciated about us. We applauded his toasts out of respect for his grief and out of our own selfish desires to eat the food he prepared—food that Dyson never ate out of fear of putting on weight.

Though provincial by birth, we all considered ourselves the most cultured teenagers in our town, the ones refined enough to be embarrassed by our provincialism and desperate for more civilized lives. We listened to NPR in our cars and drove forty minutes for sushi—though we ate only California rolls. We memorized the dates of exhibits at the Tate Modern and Louvre and wistfully regretted missing them. We wished we had money to go see the new show in the

city, the one reviewed in the *Times*. We considered taking up smoking. We considered snorting cocaine. We watched films in translation and argued over what they meant and agreed they didn't mean anything: *that was the point!* We longed for ennui and weariness, but what we felt was a deep, gullible passion for anywhere else splashing inside us like a puppy in a pool.

Dyson's dinners offered outlets for these urges. Neglectful parenting had made him an adventurous cook. He ripped recipes from sophisticated international cookbooks, bought spices online to make dishes we couldn't pronounce. His beef filets were served luxuriously rare, flooded with blood and peppered to perfection; he caramelized cauliflower in the broiler, shaved pistachio dust overtop; on an icy Friday in November, he made a kimchi stew so spicy we glugged a whole gallon of milk to lessen the burn, though we found the burning sensation nourishing and traditional, so we returned our spoons to the bowl; he slathered rich, delicate cream sauces over linguine and pillows of chicken, parsley fanned at the edge. We paired the dishes with appropriate wines (purchased by Dyson's mother) and drank just enough to get tipsy, like sophisticated adults, discussing one-act plays the drama kids longed to perform. Joining Dyson's fantasy family was a worthwhile price to escape from the families we had.

The omelet he made for me, that first morning at The Atmosphere, was simple but delicately fluffy, the peppers, onions, and spinach not a smidge overcooked. I ate in a daze of hunger without realizing he didn't have an omelet of his own. I apologized for not waiting.

"I have mine," he said. Slim wafers were stacked on a napkin on his side of the table. "In the mornings, I try to stay light. It helps me think." He dunked a wafer in coffee and brought the dripping disk to his mouth.

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Later that morning, during Dyson's daily swim, I hunted for service deep in the woods. I told myself I was taking a forest bath to empty my mind—and I would tell Dyson this, too. I wanted to make my body permeable, to blend with the

branches and soil and birdsong and sun until I dissolved into my surroundings, past and present and future.

There was a small snuffed fire near the shore of the pond. We'd roasted marshmallows last night, and my hair still smelled maddeningly of woodsmoke. Dyson had downed an unusual number of marshmallows, nearly a full bag, often without even roasting them, stuffing his mouth like a science experiment—but, as I suspected, a mound of spit-out marshmallows was piled in the dirt. My chest tightened with guilt. I kicked leaves over the mound, covered it fully. *Marshmallows are pure sugar*, I assured myself. *Dyson's doing what's right for his body.*

At the edge of the woods, the tree line loosened, cars zippered past on the road. A carnival of notifications flashed on my phone: photos of American-flag-painted Uzis and half-erect cocks and fully erect cocks and my body teetering from the loop of a noose made from an American flag and my face painted like a clown and my face inside a large bowl of blood and messages reading *U suk* and *die* and *fuck yourself with a fire*. Plus an ocean of voicemails promising to kill everyone I had ever loved if I didn't kill myself first.

No familiar names interrupted the clutter of threats. Even after three months of silence, I remained fastened to the hope that *someone* would apologize to me: Cassandra or Blake, preferably, but I would've settled for a former subscriber. Yes, I had Dyson, the one person who *had* come looking for me, and though I was grateful for his support, it didn't compare to Cassandra's future remorse. I continued scanning the messages for familiar names despite how frightened the messages made me feel, because not reading meant resigning myself to the silence. *Resignation*, I told my clients, *is a terminal illness. It spares nothing once it invades.*

A man's voice called, "Hello!" He was too far away to see clearly.

I wore only running shorts and a loose gray sweatshirt. The closest thing to a weapon I had was my phone. I ducked behind a tree and clenched my phone like a rock, ready to fling it.

The man crunched out of a thicket of trees holding a rifle over his head. He wore corduroy pants and a red windbreaker. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm not looking for trouble. This is a peace-seeking mission." He had a pale, panicked



face, his hair tucked under a mucked white cap. He extended his hand for a shake; the rifle remained in his left. “Art Flemings, chief of the fire crew in Johnsonburg, town comptroller, and deputy treasurer.”

I did not take his hand.

“I’m a good guy, is what I’m saying.”

“You’re on my property,” I said.

“Aggression is nobody’s friend,” he said.

“You’re holding a gun.”

“Because I’m a good guy.” He set the gun in the dirt. “That better?”

I nodded.

“Someone reported a fire out here yesterday. When people smell fire we need to inspect it. That’s the job of the law.”

“Must’ve been someone else’s fire,” I said.

“If you’re in trouble, you can tell me.” He took a step closer.

“Why would I tell you?”

“Because I took an oath.” He put his hand over his heart. “Is anyone with you?”

“Me!” Dyson jogged up from behind, shirtless, with water dripping from his basketball shorts. He put an arm around my shoulder. I wrapped one across his bare waist, instinctively looking for comfort before I drew it away. “You’re Art, right? I’m Dyson Layne. We met at the community center a few months back.”

Art cautiously shook his hand. “I’m a little fuzzy,” he said.

“We didn’t say much—I’m not sure I even gave you my name.”

I assumed the two men had never actually met—Dyson was skilled at contriving stories like this—and I liked sitting front row at a show Art didn’t know he was in.

“Can I ask what you’re doing out here?”

“Art, I love that you asked. I’d like nothing better than to tell you. Transparency is my middle name. Capital T-R-A-N-S-P-A-R-E-N-C-Y.” He patted Art on the shoulder. Art stiffened. “We’re neighbors after all. Art: my friend and I are spending some quality time in a cabin to escape metropolitan living.”

“You’re from the *city*?” Art said *city* like it was a curse word.

“We grew up in a town a lot like Johnsonburg.” He named our hometown. Art claimed to know it. “But for the last ten years, I’ve been stuck in L.A. My friend is here out of Hoboken.” Dyson inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring like parachutes. “Now we’re leaving those cities behind. We’re doing a detox.”

“Johnsonburg’s the place to do it,” said Art.

“My grandparents left me this land a few years ago,” Dyson said. “And I’m kicking myself for waiting so long to get out here.”

Art wanted to know if it was just us camping.

“You might see a few more of us around in the coming weeks. I explained it all when we met. She and I run a business.”

“That’s right,” he said, nodding vigorously. “You’re making—”

“The world safer,” I said.

“We offer a place for men to come together safely, to communicate, to enhance job skills through community-oriented training sessions.”

“Sounds like you’re making man hordes,” said Art.

“Nobody *makes* man hordes,” I said, with a laugh of derision. “They’re a natural phenomenon. Inexplicable. Though some social biologists claim—”

Dyson gave me a shushing look. “Just the opposite, Art. We’re keeping men out of man hordes. We’re giving them alternatives. Safety.”

“So you’re some kind of philanthropists,” Art said, unimpressed.

Dyson leaned close to him. “It’s all very lucrative. Or so we’re hoping.”

Art’s laugh weaseled free from his mouth. “You aren’t hiring, are you? My nephew’s gifted. You can’t measure his kind of intelligence with papers or tests—it’s a very hands-on kind of brilliance. He’s great at breaking things down: bleachers, stages, bounce houses, picnic tables, tents, mailboxes, windows. He’s a savant. A perfect man for parades. But parades don’t come every day. And he lacks discipline—I admit it. That’s the frustrating part. So much talent, so little drive. He needs a kick in the pants.”

“He sounds like a real thinker,” said Dyson.

“Da Vinci,” I added.

“But we don’t have time to interview anyone. Our clients get here Sunday.”

Art scratched his head. “Five days isn’t much time.”

“You’re telling me,” said Dyson.

“I should leave you to it,” Art said. “Dyson and...”

“Dyson and Stacy,” said Dyson, to protect my privacy.

“Don’t forget your gun,” I said to Art.

When Art walked out of earshot, Dyson asked what I was doing out here on my own.

“Forest bathing,” I said. Though I should have asked why he had followed me here. “To relax, like you said. To lose myself among nature. Detox. To blend in with my surroundings.”

“You’re holding your phone.”

“It’s not even on,” I said. It chimed at that moment.

“I’ve put so much work into making sure you’re happy here, that you’re safe, you’re fed, entertained. If you don’t want to be here, you shouldn’t be here.” Tears slid from his eyes.

“You’re not *actually* crying, are you?” For as long as I’d known him, he could cry on command, and I had to caution myself against buying into his feelings too quickly. There was a lonely stone of emotion inside him. What emerged on the surface, however, were often exaggerations, pleas for sympathy and attention—and love. I knew he was manipulating me. But knowing this seemed to make me immune to the manipulations: if I fell for it, I was choosing to fall for it. And I always chose to fall for it. I had wounded Dyson deeply when we were teenagers—he nearly died because of me—and, against my wishes, I felt responsible for his grasping loneliness and manipulative habits. Yes, he might’ve made himself cry, but the tears truly were tears, his pain authentically painful. I regretted questioning him—and regretted regretting it.

“Are you asking if I’m hurt? If I genuinely feel bad that you’d rather slip out here to stare at your phone than go swimming with me?”

“What’s the big deal about swimming?”

“If that’s what you’re asking, yes: I’m *actually* crying.” He marched toward the cabin.

My stomach sunk in shame. I caught up with him, apologized. I held out my phone. “I don’t even need this,” I said, ready to toss it over my shoulder. It started ringing: *Cassandra Calling... Cassandra Calling...*

“Is Cassandra Cassandra Hanson?” he asked. He watched me watch the phone. *Make a choice*, his look said.

I made the only choice I could in that moment, even though it pained me to do it. I shut off the phone and threw it at the base of a tree toppled onto its side. “Good riddance. Better to detox. Better to be here with you.” But as we walked away, I peered over my shoulder to make a mental note of the tree, its warped, bare branches frizzing up from the trunk.

# seven

WHEN DYSON TOLD the story of his acting career, he referred to it as a time of exploitation and sabotaged promise. Hollywood's sociopathic elites refused to give him the attention and support necessary to foster his obvious talent. They chewed him and chewed him until they stole every lucrative nutrient from his body—only to spit his leftover husk in the toilet.

Dyson did have talent, just not the type suited for the starring roles he believed he deserved. He excelled in the background and at the edge of the screen—passing by, blending in, skimming past—free from the demands of expressiveness and memorized lines.

When he moved to L.A., after high school, his first acting gigs came in the backgrounds of commercials, roles like *Man waiting in line* for a sandwich shop ad, *Clapping soccer coach* in a spot for a laundry detergent. In auditions for speaking roles, he fell prey to what he called “Temporary Lyric Aphasia.” His lines fled his memory like birds shaken out of a tree. On the rare occasions he remembered his lines—and the rarer occasions he recited them accurately—he still had trouble landing roles. This was, in part, a problem of appearance. Acne scars splotched his cheeks. Years of dangerous dieting made him pale and disconcertingly built, slender but wide, a spatula's build. It wasn't unusual for him to apologize for his proportions.

He called me in tears after every bombed audition and, though I knew his issues ran deeper than luck, I would assure him he'd been unlucky, that he'd crush his next audition. During this stretch of disappointments, however, a production company's finance team uncovered his true talent during a quarterly audit: commercials in which he appeared outperformed those in which he

didn't. Measurements were taken, results charted and graphed. Focus groups shown nearly identical ads—the only difference was the inconspicuous presence of Dyson—preferred his commercials 97.4 percent of the time. In follow-up surveys, nearly 87 percent of participants reported purchasing the advertised products after the focus groups. No one at the production company could explain why his presence made consumers want to purchase the products, and though some employees theorized that his physical imperfections domesticated the ads, helped consumers see themselves using the products in their own lives, no true cause was ever determined. Profit motivated these companies. Dyson increased their profits. He was an answer freed of a question.

As news of his talent spread, Dyson received waves of offers for TV and film. Caked in grotesque makeup, he snarled and lurched against a fence the year *The Walking Dead* broke out. He passed Don Draper on the sidewalk in the pilot for *Mad Men*. He was lanced to death in the background of an early *Game of Thrones* battle. Or he lanced someone else. It didn't matter *what* he did, only that he appeared—rather didn't *appear* but existed discreetly onscreen. For three years in a row, the top-five-grossing films all featured Dyson in some capacity. He was Hollywood's greatest asset—until he wasn't.

His gift—the *curse*, he would say, when he spoke of that time—abandoned him as abruptly and inexplicably as it had arrived. He played a cashier in a laundry commercial shortly before the detergent was found to have mild flesh-eating properties. He landed the role of an intern carrying coffees on an acclaimed prestige TV show; a week later, its lead actor flashed his genitals at his costar. The director of a blockbuster film died of a heart attack on set the day Dyson showed up for filming. The film earned pennies on the dollar. The finance teams reviewed the numbers; they retested his commercials; they quit calling his agent. His agent quit answering his calls. And Dyson quit on the hope that he would ever be—had ever been—more than an extra.

He found work pouring stiff drinks for aging men at an Irish dive on the outskirts of L.A. These men complained to him about their bosses and children and wives (currents and exes and almoses) and the absolute lack of respect they received in their lives. They obsessed over respect—who respected them and who didn't and who ought to show more of it—creating obtuse networks of

propriety. Dyson catalogued their grievances like a librarian. The men were cranks, unlucky and embittered about it, but they shared an important trait: they were all of an age similar to his father. Dyson doted on them because he yearned to dote on his father. So he listened strenuously to his regulars. He complimented them. He nodded along to their monologues and their gripes. He even told them secrets about himself, shared his acting anxieties, anxieties about working so late—and alone—at the bar.

One evening, after he locked up, two men assaulted him as he walked to his car. They kicked him unconscious and broke into the bar using his keys. Dyson woke up in the hospital with three broken ribs. The assailants were regulars. After Dyson got out of the hospital, he was fired for being “so generous with his mouth.”

That afternoon—over lunch in the cabin, a few hours after meeting Art Flemings—was the first I’d heard of the attack. Dyson insisted he’d been too ashamed to tell me. Shame was far from a worthwhile excuse—shame had never silenced us before—and I felt snippy with him for hiding the attack from me. “So that must be why you’re doing this,” I said. “To get back at men like the men who jumped you.”

“Our men aren’t like that,” he said.

Sometimes the weight of Dyson’s naïveté threatened to crush me. All that separated our men from the men who had jumped Dyson was opportunity. His gullible trust made me pity him—and fear for myself.

“We’re not helping these men out of some sadistic hunt for revenge,” he said. “We’re doing this—at least, *I’m* doing this, and I can’t speak for you—for men like my father. For men so depleted by shit luck and terrible jobs and depression they can’t stay awake on the road. Do you know how many men are killing themselves every day?”

“Do you know how many are killing women each day?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” he said.

“It’s not what you said.”

“Don’t forget about man hordes. Thousands of new hordes each week. They’re a sign of something deeply wrong in the souls of men today. And it’s only gonna get worse if we don’t take care of it.”

Suicides, murders, and hordes. These problems seemed far greater than anything we could correct. “We’re only two people,” I said.

“Revolutions have started with fewer,” he said. “First we perfect a model of rehabilitative love and compassion for twelve men; then we broaden the scope and recruit. The more men we bring in, the fewer there are in the world harassing women and killing themselves.”

“So our recruits are suicidal harassers.”

“Our recruits are human,” he said, as stern as a sledgehammer.

Unemployed and adrift, with three tender ribs, a year away from showing up at my doorstep, Dyson applied to work as a certified *Listener* for a company called We Hear You. We Hear You—known as WHY—paired freelance Listeners with its pool of clients in need of affordable therapy. *Listener* certification required an online credit check, zero professional recommendations, a two-hour animated tutorial, and a multiple-choice quiz. He video-called his first client ten minutes after completing the quiz.

One-on-one sessions paid very little money—he needed to see at least eleven people a day, every day, to meet rent—though he soon advanced to group sessions, the real moneymakers.

“But it wasn’t about money,” he told me. “It was about helping people—on my schedule. I always admired you for giving back to your followers. This was my chance to give back, to reach tons of people at once.” His cohort consisted entirely of middle-aged white men—men like the men he’d known at the dive. He knew how to talk to these men, knew to be deferential and impressed, to repeat to them what they told him—to make them think *they* influenced him. The men were enrolled in the session to work through their emotional defenses and wounds.

“They *were* enrolled or they enrolled on their own?” I asked.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

I certainly didn’t.

According to Dyson, the men were pitiable cases, out of work and divorced, estranged from their children, emotionally stunted and incomprehensibly angry. They admired Dyson, according to Dyson, because he was the first man in their lives who treated them with kindness and care. He took their concerns seriously



—and it helped that he'd been on TV. They couldn't believe that a "movie star" found value in their lives. After years in L.A., he had built up a cache of acting truisms, which he tossed to the men like fish to seals:

*You only get the parts you try out for.*

*To inhabit someone else, you must be yourself first.*

*It's who you are when the camera's not rolling that counts.*

However, the men returned to their weekly sessions deflated. In those sessions they were gentle and tender, but away from Dyson they succumbed to frustration, bitterness, rage, alienating the people in their lives—those who remained. What they needed, according to Dyson, was structure and love. They could never receive proper structure and love, according to Dyson, outside of their sessions, not meaningfully at least, and after weeks of seeing their progress torpedoed by time apart it became clear that if they wanted to get better, truly get better, they needed to insulate themselves from everyday triggers and come together in a protected environment where they could be valued for being tender and gentle humans.

So Dyson invited them to his grandparents' property.

# twelve terrible men

DYSON POSITED TWELVE archetypes of terrible men. If we could prove ourselves capable of turning each type of terrible man into a good man then we could, reasonably, transform any man into a good man. Proof of concept would attract attention from investors looking to finance philanthropic causes.

“So this is about getting rich?” I asked. Dyson and I were sitting outside on the porch after dinner. Barney lay draped over his thigh, sleeping.

“Wealth helps,” he said, like it was a phrase everyone used. “Wealth helps.”

The twelve archetypes were:

*Stubborn Man*

*Righteous Man*

*Accommodating Man*

*Military Man*

*Workaholic Man*

*Sports Man*

*Negligent Dad*

*Yoga Man*

*College Man*

*Addict Man*

*Professor Man*

*Cheater Man*

Each of our men fell into one of these categories. It's how they were selected.

“But why did they select us?” I asked. I still couldn’t fathom anyone coming here. I may have bailed on my life to join Dyson, but he was my oldest friend. I felt beholden to him. My apartment was under threat; I had come here for safety. I doubt these men had ever truly felt threatened. Surely they hadn’t felt threatened at home. What could make twelve men—twelve *terrible* men—abandon their comforts to come live in the woods?

“Their lives are not comfortable,” Dyson told me. “They all live alone. They’re desperate for meaning in their lives. For connection. They need community and they can’t find it on their own. Most of these men are unemployed. They’re about to be thrown in the street. Their families—those who still talk to their families—gave up on them years ago.”

“They must want more than community.”

“All anyone wants is community. To be loved and respected by others.” An unspoken *and* stuck in his throat like a wad of gum. He was hiding something.

“What else do people want?” I asked.

“I may have promised them job training. Skills they can take back into the world.”

“I don’t know how to train people for jobs.”

“You know much more than you think you do.”

“What kind of jobs?”

“All that matters is that we stay confident.”

“Dyson.”

He brought a hand to his forehead. “Coding,” he muttered.

“Who here knows how to code?”

“You know how to build websites and make videos. I’m a pro at videoconferencing.”

“Videoconferencing isn’t coding.”

“For these men it is. They aren’t tech savvy—they aren’t even smart. We show them how to make a few videos, how to build a website, they’ll *think* they know how to code. And that’s just as good as teaching them code. We’re younger than all of them. We’ll be their hip millennial friends—they don’t know enough to not trust us.”

Dyson had no right to show such confidence. Hearing him talk clenched me in the same claustrophobia I'd felt when I arrived. "Tell me about the men," I said.

"I don't want to prematurely shape your opinions."

"Tell me about the men or I'm leaving."

"You don't have anywhere to go," he said. He made it sound as if he was concerned.

"Don't think I couldn't find someone to take me in. I could sucker some random man in the street—it's easy for me. I'll move in with my mother if I have to." I wouldn't. And Dyson knew that I wouldn't. But he also knew that voicing even the mere possibility of returning to her was proof of my seriousness.

He set Barney on the porch and stepped inside the cabin. Barney licked his front paw, sizing me up. "How much has he told you?" I asked the cat.

Dyson returned to the porch carrying a manila envelope. He handed it to me. "The dossier is inside."

### **STUBBORN MAN: Randy Dent**

*Past Employment: In-laws' furniture warehouse in metropolitan Oklahoma*

*Past Loves: Wife and daughter*

*Greatest Regret: Refusing to take his sick daughter to hospital*

*Greatest Grief: The end of his marriage*

*Desires: Forgiveness*

*Sign of Completion: Self-compassion*

### **RIGHTEOUS MAN: Gerry Simpatico**

*Past Employment: IT director at Bakersfield area elementary school*

*Past Loves: Sandra Tomlin (unrequited)*

*Greatest Regret: Letting down former students*

*Greatest Grief: The death of his brother*

*Desires: To find a friendship like the one he shared with his brother*

*Sign of Completion: Humility*

**ACCOMMODATING MAN: Peter Minston**

*Past Employment: Grocery store clerk*

*Past Loves: Darla Janice (requited, one kiss)*

*Greatest Regret: Overconsumption of avocados*

*Greatest Grief: Loss of mother*

*Desires: Respect*

*Sign of Completion: Assertive communication*

**MILITARY MAN: Leon Cranch**

*Past Employment: Marine*

*Past Loves: His brothers*

*Greatest Regret: Smuggling contraband booze for his brothers*

*Greatest Grief: Dishonorable discharge*

*Desires: Return to service*

*Sign of Completion: Acceptance*

**WORKAHOLIC MAN: Dr. Mapplethorpe Lang**

*Past Employment: Family physician*

*Past Loves: Elly Delano (divorced)*

*Greatest Regret: Demanding his employees work during hurricane*

*Greatest Grief: Death of his receptionist, Susan Lane*

*Desires: Absolution*

*Sign of Completion: Peace of mind*

**SPORTS MAN: Hughie Mintz**

*Past Employment: Gym teacher*

*Past Loves: Jane Kling (divorced)*

*Greatest Regret: Missing two free throws in State Championship semifinal*

*Greatest Grief: Fathering an uncoordinated son*

*Desires: Athletic recognition*

*Sign of Completion: Acceptance of past failures*

**NEGLIGENT DAD: Kevin Sweston**

*Past Employment: Deliveryman*

*Past Loves: N/A*

*Greatest Regret: Missing every major event of his daughters' lives*

*Greatest Grief: Lack of handsomeness*

*Desires: Attention*

*Sign of Completion: Remorse*

**YOGA MAN: William Gremb**

*Past Employment: "Freed Spirit"*

*Past Loves: Humanity*

*Greatest Regret: Ever regretting anything*

*Greatest Grief: What we do to our hearts*

*Desires: No desire*

*Sign of Completion: Practical goals*

**COLLEGE MAN: David Simplesun**

*Past Employment: Boat dealership owner*

*Past Loves: The Nebraska Cornhuskers*

*Greatest Regret: Leaving Lincoln*

*Greatest Grief: Losing the Chi Phi keg stand championship*

*Desires: To be twenty again*

*Sign of Completion: Change of wardrobe*

**ADDICT MAN: Mack March**

*Past Employment: Divorce attorney*

*Past Loves: Cocaine*

*Greatest Regret: The Hendershot Case*

*Greatest Grief: His children's refusal to forgive him*

*Desires: Stability*

*Sign of Completion: Patience*

**PROFESSOR MAN: Lawrence Footbridge**

*Past Employment: Tenured professor*

*Past Loves: Students, too many students*

*Greatest Regret: Getting caught*

*Greatest Grief: The imposition of bureaucracy on true love*

*Desires: Students, too many students*

*Sign of Completion: Professionalism*

**CHEATER MAN: Benjamin Tire**

*Past Employment: Finance manager*

*Past Loves: Ellen Jenkins (divorced)*

*Greatest Regret: Tamara Rincon (mistress)*

*Greatest Grief: Hurting Ellen*

*Desires: To get Ellen back*

*Sign of Completion: Accepting he never cared about Ellen*

Dyson's list hardly seemed comprehensive. What about Rich Men and Predator Men and Feeble Men and Undeterrable Men and Desiring Men and Ugly Men and Pitiful Men and Boring Men and Unemployable Men and Chivalrous Men and Bellicose Men and, the worst men of all, Well-Meaning Men? But the last thing I wanted was more men at the camp. So I flattered Dyson, told him I admired his list and his vision, that he was absolutely correct, should we reform these twelve types of men then we could reform anyone, that funding would roll in by the millions. He was pleased by my assessment, and I was pleased that I made him believe me.

# eight

THAT EVENING, I willed myself awake around one in the morning. Dyson snored gloriously, his body as still as a shadow. I snuck outside cautiously, cranking a flashlight. Moonlight carved through the trees and animals howled, daring me to return to the cabin, but I kept cranking the flashlight, aiming the light at my feet until I stood before the fallen tree where I'd thrown my phone. Learning about the men did not bring me the peace I desired, and I returned to the woods longing for the familiarity of Cassandra's voice—and for the old life contained within it.

Dirt crusted the corners of the screen. I hit the *power* button. The blue light of the screen set the forest aglow. Cassandra had not left a message. And I hesitated to return her call, fearing she'd called by accident, or as a joke. Nevertheless, I dialed her number. She owed me a conversation. She owed me hundreds of conversations. And apologies. And cash for the money she had made off her interviews about me. Cassandra's guided meditations had once been a critical part of my skin-care regimen—nearly 70 percent of her clients came via my referrals. I'd always had more followers than her, but she wielded more influence. She was a child of wealth who knew how to impress established influencers and the moneyed. I admired the ease she showed around power. She never expressed undue emotion in conversation. She said, *That's funny*, rather than laughing. She used phrases like *how horrid* and *what are they thinking* and *pardon*. She was moved, never impressed. Nothing on her ever itched. Instead of using perfume, she dabbed her wrists with fruit-infused water, and, in the summer, confused butterflies would alight on her palms, hunting for nectar. It would have been easy to resent her, but I didn't resent her. I resented my life for



not being hers. I resented myself for missing her, despite the pain she had caused me.

The rings piled like sand in my ears. I had gotten so used to her declining my calls that every subsequent ring seemed like a miracle.

"This is Cassandra Hanson," she said. "*Heeeelllloo?*"

I fumbled my phone but rushed it back to my ear. "Cassandra," I said. "It's Sasha."

"Sasha?"

"Sasha Marcus," I muttered, more defeated than I liked.

"I'm kidding," she said. "It's wonderful hearing your voice. But be honest with me: Are you okay? Have you been drinking? I no longer talk to people when they've been drinking."

"Do I sound like I've been drinking?"

"It's never a good look to call someone so late."

"Never too late for you. You're nocturnal. That's how you always described it."

"I'm surprised you remember," she said. "Things always seemed to... slip your mind."

"This isn't the first time I've called, you know. There must've been hundreds of calls these last few months. You must've been busy. Were you busy? You must've been too busy to talk to the woman who boosted your career."

"Sasha, I know you're going through something, but if you're feeling bitter right now maybe it's best you take some time for yourself. It's not good for anyone's cortisol levels to talk when we're not at our best."

"You're the one who called me," I reminded her. My voice lifted close to a shout, but I contained myself, worried she might hang up. "I'm not *going* through anything," I said through my teeth. "*I'm* returning your call."

"You really don't sound well. Try me some other time."

"Please don't go." I must've sounded as desperate as I was.

She sighed. "My publicist would throw a fit if she knew we were talking."

"Our little secret," I said.

"An opportunity presented itself and I think you'd be perfect. A good friend of mine, the CEO of a start-up, is looking for a spokeswoman. It's not right for

me, sadly, but I mentioned your name and they expressed immediate interest. They're called DAM. *D-A-M*. Defense Against—"

"Let me stop you." I felt a shock of pride. I didn't want her to save me; I didn't want her pity. I wanted her envy. "I'm calling to tell *you* I'm involved in something transformative."

"Transformative?" She sounded authentically curious.

"It's going to change everything. No hyperbole whatsoever. America. The world. The universe. Nothing will ever be the same."

"May I ask what it is?"

"We're still vetting investors. My lips are sealed. Tight as a tomb."

"That sounds promising."

"If it were up to me, I'd bring you on board." I could hear her squirming, desperate to know more. "Your skill set would be so valuable for us. But there's just no room on the boat."

"Oh, don't for an instant think you need to bring me on board. I'm just so happy for you! This is incredible news. I always knew you'd land on your feet."

She was, somehow, authentically happy for me. This seemed even crueler than mockery.

"And you," I said. "I'm being so rude. Congratulations are in order. Your own show."

"Online only—for now. But yes. I have a lot to be grateful for. My path has widened."

"Sometimes I wonder—how did it happen? How did Cassandra Hanson rise to such impossible heights? Did she get there on her own? Or did anyone help her?"

"I appreciate everything you did for me, Sasha. I truly do. You were a very important person for me. And it pains me to hear you talking like this. Because clearly good things are happening for you, but you still haven't put in the work to reckon with how you treated me."

"Reckon with my friends exploiting me?"

"You weren't cut out for this, Sasha. I know how conceited that sounds—as if I'm better than you. I only mean that we're different. I say this because I care so much about your well-being. You couldn't create a holistic self. It's a very

difficult task, and most people aren't capable of achieving holisticity. You shouldn't feel bad for failing. Falling short. Not a failure. You came up a teensy bit short. And you need to accept who you are—and who you are wasn't right for the career that you chose. Why feel ashamed? You didn't know this at the time."

"I was a different person in person. Everyone is different in person."

"I'm not," she said. "Because I've worked to ensure that I'm not."

"You mean you're always acting."

"It's not an act if it's consistent."

"It's not a mask if it's glued to your face."

"It's been lovely. A treat, really. Our friendship was always the tastiest fruit in my life. I'm going to give DAM your information—should changing the world fall through."

"Hold on," I said.

"What is it?"

"I love you," I said, though I wasn't sure why I said it. Perhaps I wanted her to feel bad for ignoring me. Perhaps I really did love her.

"I love you, too," she said. "I love everyone."

# nine

I OFFERED TO pick up the men's uniforms. "To save you the trouble," I told Dyson. In truth my call with Cassandra had left me feeling embarrassed and bitter—and I thought a drive might clear my head. Dyson was reluctant to hand over the keys. I fed him a line he'd told me back in the mall: "This won't work if we don't trust each other."

"I hate when you use me against me," he said. But he needed the extra time. He had to chat with the men to finalize their travel arrangements, and there was still work to do on *The Doctrine*: a set of guidelines for the men. "Make sure you check the design on the uniforms," he said. "These people weren't my first choice."

Cooped up in my apartment over the last few months, I'd become sheepish and brittle—I'd become a person I pitied—but the drive unlocked something ferocious in me. On the back roads, I sprayed waves of gravel and nearly vaulted the car into every ditch that I passed. What a dumb and dangerous thing: the car! What a joy to assume power over something so deadly, so heavy, so fun. Driving is an act of accepting you have no control. The car might skid on a splinter of ice and swivel you into a tree. The car might need a few stitches, a bumper, a buff of the hood. But that's the end of you. Blam! Splat! An *X* over each eye, tongue slumming out of your mouth. I'd forgotten the pure, powerless pleasure of sitting behind a steering wheel, turning and twisting and revving and braking as if it made any difference. I skimmed the edge of death a half-dozen times before reaching the highway.

Apparently California is the home of the highway, the kind of highway that frees the mind and the soul—but it could never unleash me like a New Jersey

highway. Route 80 and 287 and 1—the original!—were not merely roads in my life, but escape routes from the bramble of stop signs and tractor crossings and dirt paths gluing my hometown together. I zipped onto the highway liquored with giddiness, gunning Dyson’s hatchback until the steering wheel trembled. I passed everyone and blasted a pop radio station, sang along to a song I’d never heard in my life. The sky was a blank, blue sheet, the sun devoured by distance. I could’ve gone anywhere. Every exit offered a new life, lives that would surely be easier than whatever awaited me back at The Atmosphere, but I was angry: angry at Cassandra for her cheerful condescension. And I wanted to make The Atmosphere work, to prove to her I didn’t deserve her pity.

Dyson ordered uniforms from a mom-and-pop printing shop called Hertz Shirts. The store shared an aging strip mall containing a bodega, a Laundromat, an abandoned sub shop, and three CrossFit studios. Bulky men in tank tops were flipping tractor tires in the parking lot.

Hertz Shirts smelled of spearmint candies and ink. Enormous machines like titanium buffalos grazed behind the counter. A desktop computer grumbled next to the register. “Welcome,” said Mom and Pop, a pair of wizened white people who had aged into identical twins: they wore gray slacks and blue button-down shirts spotted with fingerprints.

“I’m picking up an order for Dyson Layne,” I said. The thrill of driving thundered inside me; my words shook with impatience. I wanted back on the road.

Pop retrieved a pair of plastic-wrapped bundles from the back.

“I need to check them,” I said.

“What’s to check?” asked Mom.

“Please open the package,” I said, then snapped my fingers when they stalled.

“We stand by our work,” she said.

Pop pulled a box cutter out of his back pocket and buried the blade into the wrapping. He cut cleanly through the center without speaking.

Inside the first bundle were tracksuits, T-shirts, and mesh shorts for the men. The tracksuits and T-shirts were stone colored, the mesh shorts as red as strawberries. *The Atmospherians* was stitched into the breasts of the shirts. The second bundle held T-shirts, zip hoodies, and shorts for Dyson and me. Our

color scheme inverted the men's: silver bottoms, red tops. Our names were stitched beneath *The Atmospherians*. Spelled correctly—but a bothersome flourish had been added to the final *a* in *Sasha*.

Mom asked if I was satisfied.

The flourish was a meaningless mistake. Any other day, I would have thanked Mom and politely left. But I was still angry about my call with Cassandra. My life seemed petty and small compared to hers, and I wanted to exert power over someone, to feel how I imagined Cassandra must've felt talking to me. "There's a problem with the *a* in *Sasha*."

"That's traditional script," said Mom. "It must look unfamiliar to someone your age."

"That tail is excessive. It's whimsical, unscrupulous. I can't accept it in this condition."

"Perfect condition," Mom snapped.

"I have a reputation to uphold," I said, though I certainly didn't.

"So you don't want the clothing?" Mom asked.

"No, I don't want it," I said. "But I need it today. You've backed me into a corner. I hope you're proud of yourselves." I handed over Dyson's credit card.

Mom examined the card. If I had been more polite I doubt she would have studied the card so exhaustively. But she controlled the room now, and gave the card to Pop for approval—disapproval. "Your name is Sasha?" she said.

"That's right."

Pop fanned his face with the card.

"This card isn't Sasha's," said Mom.

"Dyson gave me his card to pick up the order."

"Identity theft is on the rise," Mom said.

Pop spoke his first words: "I was telling Mom the other day about identity thieves who behead their victims and feed their bodies to carnivorous pigs and escape with their cash and their credit cards and their clothes and run to places like Cuba and Sudan before anyone's wiser."

"This is my partner's card."

"We used to say *husband*," Pop said, still fanning his face.

“Business partner. We run a small business. We use Dyson’s card for expenses.”

“How about you show some I.D.”

“It’s Dyson’s card. He made the order. You stitched his name onto a dozen shirts—correctly, I might add, without a whimsical flourish.” My best and worst selves always veered close to each other: obsessive, critical, stubborn. And their resistance only made me more reckless and stubborn.

“You’re sure protesting a lot.”

“If I were an identity thief, wouldn’t I buy a TV or fancy shoes?”

“I can’t pretend to imagine the logic of thieves,” Mom said.

“The problem with the identity thieves is police never know who to track.”

“Maybe Sasha is Dyson’s wife,” Mom said to Pop.

“Maybe Sasha and Dyson are stuffed in her trunk,” he replied.

“I’m Sasha!” I shouted.

“Then let us see your I.D.”

“All chopped and zipped into Baggies,” Pop said.

“You’ll run the card if I show you my license?”

They nodded in unison.

Reluctantly, I handed it over.

Pop spelled my name aloud: “*S-a-s-h-a M-a-r-c-u-s*.” Mom typed my name into Google and gasped at the results.

I spread both hands over the monitor. “That’s all lies,” I said.

“Get back,” said Pop. He clutched a small can of Mace but seemed ill-fit to use it, his arm trembling, barely aiming it in my direction.

I stepped back with my hands held high.

“It says you killed a man.” Mom leaned close to the screen. “A pastor. A father of three.”

“It’s an exaggeration,” I said. “Clickbait. Do you know what that is?”

“I sensed something evil about you,” said Pop.

“I’m calling the cops,” said Mom.

I slapped the phone out of her hands. Pop didn’t point the Mace at me but geysered it straight up into the air. Through coughing and tears, I swept Dyson’s credit card and the clothing into my arms, raced to the car. They followed as far

as the sidewalk. “Thief!” they shouted. Muscled cross-fitters in tank tops and formfitting sweatpants darted across the parking lot. I pulled onto the road before they could reach me, but they gave chase down the sidewalk and caught up at the first red light. They spread out along the driver’s side and squatted, gripped the frame of the car. “One,” said the men. “Two!”

The cross street’s light ascended to yellow, to red.

I gassed the engine at “Three.” Behind me, the men shook the hurt out of their hands.



# ten

THE NIGHT BEFORE Lucas Devry's death, Cassandra and I went out for dinner at a trendy Iberian restaurant in Dumbo. She knew every chef in the city by name—the ones who mattered, the ones who would matter—and had gotten us a table despite the restaurant's three-month wait. We sat beneath a blunted red lantern that added blush to Cassandra's natural pallor. She wore black high-waisted pants and a denim jacket and smelled faintly of berries.

We were there to celebrate the first major break in my—*our*, according to Cassandra—career. Earlier that day, I had booked an appearance on a network morning show to discuss ABANDON. The production assistant was shocked that her email had gone directly to me instead of a manager. *We're booking you as a favor to Kandace's daughter*, she told me. Kandace Heather cohosted the show. Her daughter was a client of mine, and she had demanded that her mother share my program with the world.

"We're going to be on *tee-vee*," Cassandra kept saying, dragging out the letters as if they were separate words. She lifted a flute of champagne to clink against mine.

Cassandra wasn't actually scheduled to appear alongside me. But she spoke with such joy and presumption that I couldn't bear to tell her as much. It would ruin the night. A half bottle of champagne made me swimmy, giggly, but Cassandra ordered another and topped off my glass. ABANDON demanded sobriety, so I rarely drank, in public. But tonight was a special occasion.

Cassandra lifted her flute. "A toast to the launch of our lives. Our real lives. To the futures we deserve. Next Tuesday we'll be on TV and by Wednesday we'll

be *everywhere*—not just in our bubbles online but bursting, spreading, expanding.”

“Infecting,” I joked.

“There’ll be profiles about us. Photo shoots. *Sasha*, they’ll say, *we need more fire in your eyes. Flip your hair up.... Cassandra, cradle this tiger.*”

“I want the tiger,” I said.

“Then I get the python.” She mimed draping it over her shoulders, made a biting gesture with her free hand. “We’ll march our animals through the High Line.”

“Times Square,” I said.

“Oh, it’s so tacky I love it.”

I blushed.

“There will be books,” she said.

“Self-help is for hacks.”

She gagged in disgust. “*Hack* is too generous. I’m talking memoirs, empowering stories of triumph, ghostwritten by middling out-of-work novelists. These ghostwriters, they talk to you, they listen, they expand, and the books just appear. It’s all your ideas and your thoughts, but you don’t do the typing—and you shouldn’t. *We* shouldn’t. Because the book is just the beginning. The book will evolve into a lifestyle, and that lifestyle will become a phenomenon. And what comes after a phenomenon?”

“World domination,” I said.

She cackled so hard her glass slipped out of her hand. It shattered. The servers’ heads swiveled, their eyes hunting for someone to blame. “It’s only glass!” she shouted. “It won’t cut you unless you take off your shoes.”

I leaned over the table in laughter. She didn’t usually act like this, so vocal, so dramatic: so drunk. “People are staring,” I said.

“Of course they’re staring. We’re *stars*.” It occurred to me, then, that Cassandra depended on fame to give her life meaning. Anything less would not have met the expectations imposed on her by family, by birth. She was the only child of a glossy magazine editor and a museum curator; her maternal grandparents had both been in the movies. It was assumed she would succeed, that people would not only see her but look to her as a model of how to exist.

No one in my family expected much from me. If I flamed out, anonymity would rock me to sleep in its arms. But Cassandra feared irrelevance the way tourists fear strangers in alleys. For the first time, I pitied her. I incubated this feeling; I longed for it to survive.

A waiter brushed the shards into a dustpan.

Cassandra said, “Close your eyes.” She asked me to imagine a future of plenty and ease: summers on Mediterranean islands, loose gowns billowing in the breeze, lounging on hulking white yachts, how our faces would draw glances on Manhattan sidewalks, the way our words would wind through the minds of strangers, steady them in times of crisis. Vacation homes in the Alps, photo shoots in Chilean vineyards, luncheons with diplomats, and consultations for Austrian monarchs. She stretched for my hands. “You’ll be everywhere,” she said. “Complete and total ubiquity.”

She made it sound like a good thing.

That night, I followed her through the city, weak-kneed with champagne and wonder. I had work the next day, but Cassandra demanded I fling away all responsibilities. “You’ll call in sick,” she assured me. “This is far more important than your little day job—your temporary job.”

It was impossible not to feel important around her. She was friends with every flowering tree, every fire hydrant, every lamppost, every grinning puppy, every brick wall worth taking a photo in front of. She knew the names of weeds sprouting through cracks in cement, the dreams of bodega cashiers. If she crossed streets without looking, cars swerved around her in deference. Dyson and I were always in awe of people like Cassandra. City Kids. We’d known a few in high school, transplants beset by restlessness and self-assurance, possessed of indifferent magnetism and the will to explore. They wanted in ways we never could. Desire came naturally to them. They were born in its belly. That night, Cassandra led me to underground bars and rooftop bars and garden bars and bars housed in abandoned apartments and whatever pity I felt for her in the restaurant hardened into handcuffing envy. We ended the night at a club that required a password—delivered forward, then backwards.

I regret not dancing more with Cassandra. I regret that, although I drank, I didn’t drink to excess and wake up on her living room couch—our night a

blackout blur of nothingness. In the club, I nursed a vodka-and-soda in a tucked-away booth, refusing Cassandra as she begged me back onto the dance floor. My perch granted me a sense of superiority, which I believed I deserved. From this vantage, the club played like a performance put on for my enjoyment. Blades of light swept through the room. Confidence welled inside of me. I was sure that everything Cassandra predicted would come true: The islands and the yachts and the photo shoots. The fame. She had given me a beautiful future. And I could do nothing for her. I couldn't even tell her she wouldn't appear on TV. The Cassandra on the dance floor was already lost to me, already embittered by my success, and I liked looking down on her, thinking more would come of my life than of hers.

She gave me a waist-cinching hug at the end of the night. Drinking always made her a little too grippy—normally, I resisted the intensity of her touch, but there was something gentle in it that night, an obvious sense of pride. “We’re doing this,” she said. “Me and you. We’re really doing this.” We split into separate cars.

I posted a photo of us posing in front of the Iberian restaurant earlier in the night. A crowd of walk-ins packed the glass lobby behind us. The caption was simple, meant to intrigue: *Big News Soon*. On the ride home, I scrolled through congratulatory comments, liking as many as I could—to show I cared—and bottling up an impulse to spill to everyone begging for me to tell them my news. I tingled with joy, impatient for my new life to begin.

Lucas Devry commented using his latest account—he made a new one whenever I reported him. DevLuke42937814666: *ur finally gonna put your mouth on my cock*.

It was standard for him. Unimaginative and vile. I normally deleted his comments and reported him, but these weren't permanent solutions. And that night I was drunk on my future—and champagne. Reporting Lucas Devry to the social media cops was now beneath me. I felt a responsibility to confront him. No: I wanted to confront him, to stomp him out, to flatten him, ruin him, to shame him so he never wrote to me ever again. He responded this way to every photo I posted. It wasn't enough to report him because he always found a

way back. There was always a new name to use, a new email to plug in. I wanted him gone. Forever.

I replied: *I'm trying to make a beautiful world. And the world would be so much more beautiful if you and everyone like you were dead.*

# eleven

IT WAS NEARLY night by the time I got home. Dyson waited for me outside the cabin as if he were about to ground me. He tilted back on the rear legs of a chair; his feet were crossed on the railing. Barney purred in his lap. “I saw you on TV,” he said.

I dropped the uniforms on the porch, too tired to answer.

“A story about you.” He made scare quotes: “‘Elderly Small-Business Owners Robbed by Disgraced Influencer.’ It’s all over the internet.”

“I thought we didn’t have internet,” I said.

“We have a hot spot for emergencies. Emergencies like local news reports about you robbing a print-making shop.” He trailed me inside.

“They held the uniforms hostage.”

“You’ve brought a lot of attention to us,” he said. “A lot of attention to yourself.”

“We needed these uniforms. To fix *your* men.”

“They’re everyone’s men. They’re society’s men. And we’re the ones taking responsibility.” He inhaled deliberately to settle himself—four enormous breaths.

“You’re being combative. I’ve been out all day dealing with an aggressive elderly couple as you swim and Skype with the men. *Your* men. Can I shower before you interrogate me?”

“Take all the time you need,” he said without meaning it.

I slammed the bathroom door and locked it behind me—the first time I’d locked it since I arrived. I unlocked and locked the door again, as loudly as I could, to ensure Dyson knew I was walling him off. Both of us could be

dramatic when angry. And I wanted to be more dramatic than him. I dunked my head under the running faucet. A whitehead appeared in the crease between my left nostril and cheek. I pinched two fingernails into the crease. Vertically, horizontally, angling my head like it might offer leverage—it didn't. How many times had I advised my clients to do nothing in this same situation? Ignore it! Have patience! Breathe! Meditate and relax! Everything painful will pass! I had never felt like more of a fraud than I did in this moment. Of course my clients had ditched me. I'd failed to see the great pleasure in doing *something*, the joy of making things worse. I continued digging and scraping, until the whitehead bled a slim string of red over my lips to my chin.

I left the bathroom without showering. Dyson paced from the kitchen to living room, rearranging objects, decluttering out of impatience.

"What happened to you?" he asked. Threads of dried blood were all over my face.

"Do you wanna watch it or not?" I flopped onto the couch.

Dyson started the clip.

Reporter: "In their thirty-one years of business, Louis and Beverly Hertz were lucky to never face their greatest fear: a robbery. But today their luck has run out."

Mom, with a microphone in her face: "We feared for our lives."

Pop, with the microphone in his face: "We really did."

"We feared for our grandbabies' lives," Mom said. "God knows what she's capable of."

Reporter: "Beverly and Louis—known as Mom and Pop around this neighborhood—are referring to the disgraced self-help guru Sasha Marcus, who stole over four hundred dollars of merchandise from Hertz Shirts earlier this afternoon."

"*Guru* is so dismissive," I said. "It's code for *scam artist*. It's racist, you know."

"Marcus is most well-known for bullying Lucas Devry—a father of three and small-town pastor from rural Michigan—into taking his own life last winter."

"Can we turn this off?" I asked.

“I knew there was something wrong with her,” Mom said. “I felt it in my chest. Her vindictiveness. Her evil. Some people, you just know they’re evil the second you see them.”

Reporter: “Many might be wondering why a disgraced self-help guru like Sasha Marcus would rob a shirt-printing shop in suburban New Jersey. Investigators think her purchase order may offer a clue. Marcus arrived at Hertz Shirts to pick up clothing emblazoned with the phrase”—the newscaster blundered over the name—“*The Atmost-per-her-uns*,” he said. “Investigators are still determining what The Atmost-per-her-uns are, but if you or someone you know has any information on Sasha Marcus and her connection to The Atmost-per-her-uns, contact our tip line directly.”

Barney hissed at me. Dyson grumbled like a fussy child. “They’re gonna think The Atmosphere’s yours,” he said.

“*That’s* what you care about?”

“That’s not all I care about. I care about—”

“I might get *arrested* and you’re only worried you won’t be the face of a cult.”

“You won’t get arrested,” he said.

“Jail. Prison. Drawn and quartered. My parts fed to runaway dogs. It’s yours, Dyson. All yours. Your doctrine, your sheds, your barn, your grass, and your pond. When they put me on trial, I’ll tell the jury it’s *your* brainchild. That better?” I trembled with spite and anxiety, but when he embraced me, I didn’t bat him away.

His touch was an apology. “It’s okay,” he repeated, rubbing circles on my back.

A new clip played automatically. Dyson stretched to shut the laptop, but I stopped him. Onscreen, a brown-haired woman with burgundy lipstick arranged sheaths of paper on her desk. “Now,” she said, “to the story that has captured the nation’s attention: man hordes.”

“You don’t want to watch this,” said Dyson.

I shushed him. I couldn’t want to watch anything more.

“Last week, a man horde in Bernice, Louisiana, heaved thirty-four bricks through the front window of Fine Finish Nail Salon. Seven customers were treated for injuries. The owner of Fine Finish Nail Salon, Susan Cho, an Asian



American resident of Bernice, has joined local activists in calling on the Bernice police to charge the assailants with hate crimes. But police are reluctant to charge the men—all of whom were white—without evidence of premeditation.”

The video cut to a cop at a podium: “These are good men. Men from our community. Men we’ve grown up with. They would never act like this under normal conditions. Something infiltrated their brains.”

The newscaster continued: “As episodes of man hordes increase across the country, researchers are racing to uncover their cause. For Susan Cho, however, cause doesn’t matter.”

Cho, on the sidewalk in front of her boarded-up store: “These men committed a crime. Assault. Destruction of property. Attempted murder. Drunk drivers don’t *intend* to kill anyone—but when they do? Manslaughter. These men need to be charged for the crimes they committed.”

The camera returned to the newscaster. Five men were sitting beside her at a gray table shaped like a bean. “Man hordes,” she said. “Are they a blessing, or a curse? Tonight we hold a debate.” She listed incidents from that day:

*A man horde in Columbus, Ohio, rescued a ten-year-old girl’s kitten from a very tall tree.*

*A man horde in rural North Carolina carried an elderly woman too old to drive to her doctor’s appointment.*

*A man horde in Milan, Ohio, toppled a statue of Thomas Edison.*

*A man horde mowed twenty-six lawns in Drain, Illinois.*

*A man horde in Plano, Texas, kicked a German shepherd to death.*

The debaters included a psychologist, a sociologist, a biologist, a zoologist, and a part-time plumber named Hank who’d been part of a horde. The -ologists speculated on causes and origins: man hordes were the consequences of our nation’s decimated mental health system; man hordes were a social phenomenon unique to a society rife with alienation; bacteria in groundwater aquifers have scrambled the nervous system of melanin-deficient middle-aged males, causing them to lose control of their cognitive agency and horde together for safety; hordes were a natural practice across the animal kingdom and men were returning to their base, animal instincts through hording; hordes were hard to remember.

Hank had little to say—he remembered nothing of his experience—and the others greedily spoke over him. But I kept my attention on him as the -ologists shouted and pointed and scoffed and dramatically laughed at their counterparts. He wore a purple button-down shirt and no jacket. His face was shaved and flaky, eyes squiggled with red, and he kept cracking his knuckles as the others suggested that Hank—who had been part of a horde that broke into cars in a Walmart to change their oil—ought to be imprisoned until the occurrences subsided. Hank dunked his face in his hands and wept. No one acknowledged his crying.

“I can’t watch this anymore,” Dyson said. He closed his browser. I didn’t ask him to clarify: He couldn’t watch such an inane debate, or he couldn’t watch a man weep on TV?

Dyson unzipped the disk case on the trunk. Inside were all the movies in which he appeared, dozens of them. He put on a biblical thriller called *Stranger in the Manger* and paused it during a scene at a crowded church service. “Do you see me?” he asked. He’d done this the previous night, too, midway through a horror movie called *Brain Drain*. I hadn’t seen him last night and I did not see him now, but he had been so hurt when I failed to spot him last night that I lied to him, said, “There you are,” hoping to settle back into the movie.

“Point to me,” he said.

“Let’s just keep watching.”

“If you see me, where am I?”

“Right there.” I rested my thumb over a pew on the top left corner of the screen.

Dyson chewed his inner cheek.

“Just show me,” I said, making my exasperation clear.

He curled forward, hit *play*. “You got it right.”

# twelve

THE NEXT MORNING, as Dyson prepared the sheds for the men's arrival, I strolled deeper into the woods with my phone. The light was milky and the air cool and I wanted away from the claustrophobia of the cabin. On the far side of the pond, inside a one-foot box of perfect signal—where I had spoken to Cassandra—my phone lit up with an unfamiliar chime. A California phone number had left me a voicemail overnight. The transcription preview appeared nonthreatening, even friendly. I risked listening:

*Hi, this message is for Sasha Marcus. I'm Roger Handswerth; I'm calling on behalf of DAM. D-A-M. Cassandra Hanson recommended we contact you for a marketing opportunity with our company, and we would be very interested in talking to you about our team. We'd love to bring you to campus for a visit. Please give me a call back when you can.*

I listened a second and third time and tried to shoo away the delight of being wanted. By the fifth listen, though, I felt drenched in Cassandra's pity and deleted the message.

---

I dreamed Lucas Devry and I sat across from each other at his kitchen table. I knew the surroundings from his video: striped blue wallpaper, family pictures hanging askew, a cross, the plastic tablecloth patterned with flowers. He wore the same dingy white button-down shirt he'd worn in his suicide video. His handgun lay on the table next to a paper plate draped in slices of ham. "You made me do this, Sasha," he said.

I clutched a mug of coffee in both hands but couldn't lift it to my lips. Thousands of people had crammed into his dining room. They held phones over their faces so their eyes and mouths didn't show. They snapped photos. They took videos. They snorted, chortled, gasped, stomped their feet on the floor as Lucas Devry delivered his speech.

"This is your fault," he said.

I tried to dissuade him—though my words came out as panicky grunts. The people surrounding us tightened around the table. They dragged my chair backwards. They leaned closer to Lucas Devry as I was swept to the back of the crowd.

"You want a beautiful world?" He lifted the handgun to his mouth. The dream veered into memory. "Here is your beautiful world." He thunked forward onto his plate. From the back of his head flowed a fountain of rose petals—red roses, white, pink, yellow, and purple. Everyone in the room—even me—grabbed at the rose petals as if they were currency. But every petal we touched transformed into a roach. We continued grabbing nonetheless, until the entire room was in motion, roaches crawling over the table and floor, climbing the walls, sneaking into our mouths and under the lids of our eyes.

---

I woke up alone to the sound of gagging rising out of the bathroom. *Dyson*, I could've said. *Are you okay?* I could've climbed down the ladder and laid a hand on his back, could've told him to stop, told him he did not need to do this. He was not, after all, sick, not sick in the conventional way, and knowing this made me sticky with guilt. It hurt to listen to him. I popped a melatonin and plugged my ears, told myself he was simply nervous about the men arriving tomorrow.

All day the next day we rehearsed the arrival. We practiced our lines and a range of facial expressions, tested out different tones to take when we spoke. After walking through our "blocking"—Dyson's word—we built a small, lopsided trough behind the barn that the men could use as a urinal. Dyson punched a hole into one end. We worked in relative silence, trading words only to give each other directions. I could have broken our silence to ask about the

gagging. Instead, I shoveled beneath the hole in the trough, creating a divot for the runoff to flow. When I finished, we rehearsed the arrival again, repeating every action, every word, every breath and gesture, until it was too dark to see.

**II.**

# the seasons of hunger

IMAGINE A FATHER. Imagine the father is firm-fleshed and grim, gripping a steering wheel as he drives to work at two in the morning. Imagine the father has been called in on a weekend—to the pharmaceutical plant where he sweeps floors and changes lightbulbs five nights a week—to fix a steam-leaking pipe, a leak that could wait until Monday. Imagine the father has made this hour-long drive thousands of times. Imagine he is accustomed to working nights, accustomed to being called in, and really shouldn't be any more tired than the normal person. Imagine the father is not tired in the heavy-lidded physical way but tired in ways that don't have names. Imagine tiredness as a characteristic. Imagine tiredness as an outfit the father cannot unzip. Imagine a father so angry for having to wear this outfit every day of his life. He spends his rare hours at home taking out his anger by lifting weights in a basement. Imagine a father so unaccustomed to love that he considers mocking his son's belly fat an expression of paternal care. Imagine a father incapable of loving his son how he is. Imagine a father who pressures his son to lift weights and eat fewer *softening* foods, who pulls the boy's plate away at the table and grumbles, *That's enough of that*. Imagine this father, still at the wheel, now nearly three in the morning. Imagine this father driving to work on a weekend to fix a leak that doesn't need fixing—it's not a dangerous leak. Imagine the highway's free of debris—a dry night in the first week of June—and imagine this father, angry and exhausted, unintentionally loses control of the wheel around a familiar turn, imagine his truck pummels through a guardrail, imagine his head webs the windshield on impact, killing him if not instantly then quickly. Imagine this is an accident.

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Dyson's body at age seventeen: Cola-colored hair hangs to his eyes. He stands a sliver under six feet, just tall enough to peer over a fence. His fingers are slender but short. A stove burn shaped like a sickle marks the back of his left wrist. His skin is the color of apricot flesh. Freckles bloom lily-pad-like under his eyes. His cheeks are as round and pitted as the rind of a cantaloupe. Acne marches across his shoulders like ants. Pimples prick his collarbone. There're some on his thighs, the small of his back, in the places he sweats where the sun doesn't dare shine. In the center of his body is a stomach—cushy and round—which he doesn't consider his own: it belongs to whoever's itching to see it. For laughs, he lifts his shirt on command. Other kids bury pencils and keys and half-eaten muffins into the flab. The red mark of a hand fades on his skin. For a long time, Dyson doesn't object.

---

A week after his father died, on a hot, slurping Sunday morning in June, Dyson waited outside my front door wearing blue mesh shorts a smidgeon too short—his boxers peeked out the bottom—and a long-sleeved T-shirt with the name of our high school printed across the front. A white headband flattened his hair to his forehead. I blew into my hands, swung my legs to warm up. *I want you to show me how to do it*, he said.

*You know how to run*, I said.

*To show me how to have a body like yours.*

---

My body wasn't much of a body. I was flat chested and tall, I felt all angles and elbows, a body inherited from my mother. My eyes rested unevenly on my face. My ears flapped out through drags of paint-straight hair that stretched past my shoulders. I hated my forearms, for reasons I cannot explain. I hated my fingers for reasons I can explain: they were long and elegant and men loved using this as an excuse to take hold of my fingers, to ask if I played piano. I didn't. My mouth was packed with bright, prominent teeth. I had a faun-like, porcelain beauty, the type that made older men eager and nervous. I never polished my nails. I wore



makeup only for the most funereal or joyous occasions. Though my skin wasn't perfect, compared to Dyson—and compared to the rest of our school, a parade of misfiring hormones—it glowed as if it had never been touched. I'd lucked into my mother's skin, olive colored and flawless, no need to apply or avoid or rinse the way other people applied and avoided and rinsed.

My mother modeled before I was born. Not in the types of magazines people imagine when they hear the word *model*; she posed for Sears and J. C. Penney catalogues wearing matronly smocks patterned with cartoon irons and kittens and babies. She was forced out of the job after becoming pregnant with me. Her stunted career soured her on “The Beauty Industrial Complex,” as she called it. She distrusted beauty the way people distrust politicians or exes. Whenever shampoo or makeup commercials came on TV, she would change the channel and scoff, *Someday we'll look back on these poisons the way we do cigarettes and DDT*. She considered herself one of those women who didn't care about looks; she intended to let herself age organically, and gracefully, to become whatever nature decided. However, she couldn't abstain from using beauty products. *You buy the product to become the product*, she would mutter, as she led me through cosmetics aisles loading her basket with lipsticks and eyeliners and serums. She worked as a receptionist at a day spa, a job she hated but took, I suspect, to punish herself for never having made it as a model. The spa kept a shallow wicker bowl full of sample shampoos and cleansers and masks on her desk. At the start of each shift, she emptied the bowl into her purse—to *protect our clients from poisons*—only to later transfer the samples to a bowl on our kitchen counter. *Someday I'll grow a spine*, she would tell me, as she plucked out packets of pricy bronzer, *and throw this trash in the trash*. She was among those rare people who were just as tragic as they believed themselves to be.

Despite her best intentions and bitterness, she couldn't withstand the expectations imposed on her appearance. And in doing so she taught me a valuable lesson in the inevitability of concession. The world encouraged me to see myself as an object of men's desires. And for years I conceded. I shaped myself to the demands made on my body—kept it slender and pretty and fit—because I feared what would happen to me if I didn't. I'd heard stories about the women who didn't. When Dyson said, *Show me how to have a body like yours*,

what I heard was: *Show me how to internalize the expectations of magazines and commercials and lip-licking men in the street. Show me how to obsess over myself. To hate myself. To see my body as something both valuable and worthless, something constantly under construction.* That was, I believed, what he wanted from me, and, regrettably, that's what I taught him.

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*Breakfast is simple, I said. One cup of blueberries. One cup of frozen spinach. Three seconds of skim milk. A banana. Blend until everything's liquid, drink half, then pour the rest down the sink. It is undignified to finish a meal.*

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*Lunch shouldn't exceed five hundred calories. An apple is nearly a hundred. Half a granola bar is another hundred. Add to that half a sandwich—one slice of turkey, no mayo, no cheese—and one Hershey Kiss and you're safe.*

---

*Never drink your calories: Water is fine. Soda water is fine. Coke if it's Diet.*  
*Doesn't Diet Coke give people cancer?* he asked.  
*How much are you planning to drink?*

---

*Avoid restaurants. If you must eat out, order a salad. Dressing on the side. Dip your fork in the dressing before spearing the lettuce. Dressing never goes over the top. Not even vinaigrettes.*

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*If there are no salads, order the chicken. Grilled. Hold all sauces and cheeses. Substitute veggies for fries. Never finish the meal. To-go boxes are your friend. They shout, I'm gonna finish this later! Nobody checks.*

---

Years ago, Dyson promised himself never to comply with his father's cruelty. He refused to lose weight while the man was alive. His father would take it as proof he'd been right to mock and pressure his son all those years, and he didn't deserve such vindication.

*You don't think of what we're doing now as a way of honoring him?* I asked on a run.

*He wanted me to be muscular, tough But I hope to become nothing. Slim as a pin.*

---

Perhaps I should have been more concerned.

---

*Lift your legs even higher, and slower. It's not supposed to not hurt. It's supposed to sculpt.*

---

*This is for toning. This is for shaping. When it feels like you can't do any more do five more and imagine how much better you'll look when it's over.*

[Link: 5 EXERCISES TO BEAT BELLY JIGGLE IN FIVE MINUTES!](#)

[Link: 3 SEXY DANCE MOVES YOU NEED TO BE DOING TODAY!](#)

[Link: 7 WAYS TO FIRM YOUR THIGHS BEFORE BREAKFAST!](#)

Dyson called this summer the Summer of Hunger. *It's a new day in the Summer of Hunger*, he'd say every morning as we started a run.

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*Gum. Crushed ice. The cap of a pen. Keep your mouth occupied. Keep it calorie-free.*

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*At a party, vodka is your friend. Diet cranberry cocktail is your friend. Gin is your friend so long as you drink it with club soda—or if the tonic is diet.*

---

*Beer is nobody's friend.*

---

Part of me took a wicked pleasure in subjecting Dyson to what seemed, at the time, like fairly innocuous mantras of everyday feminine life. I invited him into a world of self-doubt and surveillance. I was surviving this life, as was half the globe's population. He had no reason to stay here. For him, this was a vacation. Once he shed the weight, he would return home to the safe shores of masculinity, abandoning me.

*What comes after the Summer of Hunger?* I asked him one day.

*What do you think?* he said. *The Autumn of Hunger.*

---

After years of hiding his frame beneath baggy sweatshirts and parachute khakis, Dyson had no idea how to dress his thinning, unfamiliar body. I dreamed of designing clothes at that age (an unconscious drive to get back at my mother) and guided Dyson through clothing stores at the mall. He made me the executor of his fashion decisions. I advised him on distressed T-shirts and jeans, advised him against khakis, insisted on sweaters that would flatter his figure, suggested he splurge on a watch. *Think of these clothes as investments in your future*, I told him.

*What does that mean?* he asked.

*It means you should buy them two sizes too small.*

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*And then there's celery: negative calories. The effort of chewing a stalk burns more calories than there are in a stalk. Amazing!*

---

It was Dyson who told me. Though of course I already knew.

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Dyson's body at the end of the Summer of Hunger: Thirty-one pounds lighter, no taller, his old clothes flapping on his figure, bags under his eyes. His cheeks deflate. His jawline hardens—no, it arrives. He buzzes his hair to the scalp. He hates his calves for being too *stumpy and thick*. His thighs jiggle less often—though still more than he would like—and from his biceps hang maddening bat flaps. At certain angles, under rigid lighting conditions obtainable only in his downstairs bathroom, a pair of abdominal muscles can be seen bubbling out at the crown of his stomach. He spends hours in this bathroom. When he thinks no one is looking, he drags two fingers over his belly button, checking for flab. There is always too much.

---

Dyson showed up at school expecting waves of approving nods and congratulations: a makeover show kind of reception, streamers and classmates applauding, boys and girls pawing his shoulders, telling him how handsome he looked, how fucking hot. Very few people noticed or cared. *What happened to you?* those very few people asked. *What did you do with your stomach?*

---

At home, Dyson grazed the acne pitting his cheeks and the acne dotting his shoulders and chest, all of which had worsened due to the sweaty intensity of the Summer of Hunger.

---

The Family Dinners began that autumn. After delivering the toast, Dyson would pour himself a half glass of red wine, fill the rest with club soda, then crunch through a raw cucumber as the rest of us ate. Afterward, once everyone left, I encouraged him to snack on the leftovers.

*I don't like eating in front of people,* he said. *I'll finish it after you leave.*

---

Nobody checks.

---

It was my turn to drive to the mall. When he didn't think I was looking, Dyson slipped a hand under his collar and squeezed a pimple on his collarbone.

*Picking will just make it worse,* I told him, channeling my mother's advice.

He took his hand out, embarrassed. A tiny spot of blood colored his white T-shirt. He said nothing for the rest of the drive.

---

At the start of the Winter of Hunger, Dyson showed me his latest attribute: visible veins. Veins forking up his abdomen; veins crossing the undersides of his forearms; a single vein arcing over each bicep muscle when he flexed. Even his calves were beginning to vein—*though of course they could be thinner,* he told me.

---

I presented Dyson with a selection of samples: cleansers and face masks and creams. Plus a two-dose packet of green tea fat-burning pills. The products my mother and I never needed.

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The Spring of Hunger was supplement season. To combat the fat on his body, Dyson invested in green tea fat-burning pills and all-natural fat-burning pills and acai fat-burning pills and synthetic caffeine pills and caffeine powder and nitrous

powder and oxide powder and whey powder and powdered peanut butter and vitamin C and vitamin B and tummy tea and laxative tea and tea tree oil and coconut oil and olive oil on everything—though never too much—and garcinia cambogia extract and Hydroxycut and Alli and raspberry ketones and glucomannan and Meratrim and radiocut and deoxidized formaldehyde root and CLA and TTY and seaglass fruit and bitter orange and birch and chipped rose petal and water and water and water. To combat his acne, he invested in topical creams, drying lotions, Proactiv, unguents, Accutane, blood pressure pills, snail slime, slug slime, clam intestines, face masks, spironolactone, black light clinics, charcoal, cryotherapy, colloidal sulfur, licorice powder, Icelandic antibacterial sulfur, primal screaming, acupuncture, fish oil, oregano oil, arachnid milk, salicylic acid, peroxide, cortisone shots, epidermal asphyxiation, and dozens of hundreds of rubs.

The acne solutions would work for a week before his face would break out even worse than before. The fat-burning supplements worked too well. They bunked the beat of his heart, made it irregular, heavy. *Sometimes I feel my heart leaping out of my chest*, he admitted. *Even when I'm sitting. Not doing anything!* He sounded as if he were bragging.

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One afternoon that spring, Dyson came to my house after school to smoke weed. He brought three plastic bags full with snacks: diet ice cream and chips and iced animal crackers and oatmeal sandwich cookies and reduced-sodium crackers and a barrel of party mix. We smoked out of a soda can in the kitchen, exhaling into the exhaust fan over the sink.

I nodded at the food. *So you're eating in front of people again.*

*It's easier when I'm high*, he said. He passed me the soda can, then performed a few cursory crunches on the kitchen floor. Ten minutes later, red-eyed and giggly, Dyson opened a box of Little Debbie oatmeal cookies. He fit a whole cookie in his mouth. I fit two in my mouth. He tried for three but couldn't fit the second inside. He spit cookie shards in my face and curled over in laughter. I catapulted a full spoon of ice cream at his chest. He sucked the ice cream off his

shirt, then scooped a full hand of party mix. I shrunk like he might fling the food at me. Instead, he brought the hand to his mouth.

I would have preferred to share a nice meal with Dyson, something with forks and napkins—rather than mountains of junk consumed standing up in my kitchen—but I was pleased to see him eating. I hadn't seen him this reckless with food in months. This put me at ease. And I allowed myself ice cream and chips and cookies. Not nearly as much as Dyson, though, who ate as if angry at the food, like he couldn't rest until it was not merely gone but obliterated.

*Slow down*, I said.

*There's not much time*, he said.

*My mom won't be home until six*.

He tossed an empty box of crackers behind him. Something feral flashed to his face. He dragged his arm across his lips. *I need to go to the bathroom*, he said.

He kept the fan running, but it was impossible not to hear him. I could have knocked on the door—I considered it; I even walked right up to the door, hovered my knuckle inches away—but I felt responsible, and embarrassed, and told myself if he did it again I would stop him.

---

We did it again the next week and the next and the next until it became a routine. Most of the girls I knew had thrown up at some point in their lives—it hadn't killed them. They survived. Surely it wouldn't hurt Dyson. On rare occasions, when I felt uncomfortably full after bingeing with him, I would slip into the upstairs bathroom as he threw up downstairs. It demanded too much of me, though. It seemed something people outgrew. I outgrew it by the end of the school year, and I assumed Dyson would, too.

---

That spring, I accepted a scholarship to attend the Fashion Institute in Manhattan. My mother and I fought about my decision. She wanted me closer to home—and at a very different kind of school—and we drifted apart once I left. She was right to accuse me of abandoning her. I wanted out of that house,



away from her grievances and paranoia and rules. At college, however, I committed to the life she never could. I swore off makeup and lotions and rinses, half to honor my mother, half to compete with her. This made me interesting (annoying) among the other women at college. I treated my mother's theories like doctrine—Chap Stick chapped your lips; anti-wrinkle creams thickened wrinkles; astringents pitted your skin—grumbled her grumblings to my suitemates as they tended their faces at night.

---

Dyson enrolled in a state school close to home. He visited me in the city every few weeks, thinner every time he returned, his head ballooning above his spectral, twiggy frame. We smoked weed in my suite and binged on delivery. My suitemates were all women like me, thin and pretty and nervous. Around us, Dyson freely worried over his body out loud. He gasped at the hefty portions of food we received—*How could anyone eat this much?*—and refused the most dangerous foods—mozzarella sticks, fried chicken wings—with brusque *I really shouldn't's*. My suitemates loved having him there. They loved the humiliating childhood stories he told about me; they loved his enthusiastic celebrity impressions. He never crept on anyone, never extended a hand where it wasn't invited.

---

*I think your friend passed out over the stall*, said one of my suitemates. Chunks of pizza floated in the bowl of the toilet. His fingers were slimy. I slapped his cheeks, but he wouldn't wake up. Shallow breaths slipped through his lips. His chest was rising and falling, rising and falling, as paramedics lifted him onto a stretcher. A new pill he took to lose weight clashed with a new pill he took to clear up his acne. His heart was too weak to purge.

---

I lost my scholarship for sneaking a boy onto the women's floor without permission and transferred to a state school in New Jersey—close to the city, too far away to repair my relationship with my mother. Around this time, I began working at Gravee. Dyson spent two weeks in a facility, bankrupting his mother. He exhausted me with apologies—though I was the one who felt responsible. I never told him this. I was too ashamed to admit my culpability.

After college, he moved to L.A. I stayed in Jersey, close to the city. He and I spoke on the phone every night after I got off my shifts. Our conversations served as a kind of therapy—he talked me through shitty relationships; I encouraged him to keep going out for roles. His living so far away put me on edge. I felt responsible for his well-being, and though he assured me he was healthier and eating consistently, I feared some bombed audition in the future might cause him to relapse. He did not do well on his own. He flourished best beneath the burning eye of guidance. After all, he'd thrived under my direction in high school, when he needed to take off the weight. And in an effort to keep him healthier, safe, I outlined for him the lifestyle regimen that would later grow into ABANDON. Dyson followed it out of deference and guilt. He still regretted costing me my scholarship, though I'd long ago forgiven him. The loss was an appropriate punishment for failing to confront him when I had the chance.

---

Often, my coworkers at Gravee asked what products I used on my face. *Nothing*, I told them.

*There has to be something*, they'd tell me.

*My system is nothing*, I'd say. Then I told them what my mother told me.

*Is that from a program?* they'd ask. *Because I'm looking for a new program.*

---

I needed the money. Who didn't need money? And plenty of people far duller than me were cashing in on beauty tutorials. Starting a regimen was one of the last remaining ways to make good money, to be your own boss—to help people,

to share what I knew with the world. And I knew far more than most skin-care influencers—though *influencer* was not yet a word anyone used. It was merely an idea buried in ice, waiting for its prison to melt.

---

My first dozen videos averaged around twenty-five views. They struggled to find the right viewers. They made me no money, attracted no sponsors. There was no money in debunking products—no matter how much I knew. The money, I realized, was in stories. Successful influencers all had origin stories. They had been summoned to beauty, to skin care, to exercise regimens and enema teas, by the hand of divine coincidence or heartbreak or trauma.

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My thirteenth video was the first to catch on.

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*I've never told you this, I said to my camera, because, admittedly, I thought you might think less of me if ABANDON wasn't all about me. But I need to tell you the truth: I didn't start this regimen for me. I started it because of a friend. My best friend. He nearly died using products I pushed him to use—the same products so many other “experts” on here are promoting—products I foolishly thought would help him lose weight and clear up his skin. And after he recovered—thank god—I swore to myself I would make it up to him. I promised to create a program that would allow him to enhance his self-esteem and appearance safely. And that is how I came up with ABANDON. That is why this regimen means so much to me. And that's why I'm sharing ABANDON with you. Because I care about you. I want you to give up on everything hurting you. I want you to thrive. I want you to be happy and beautiful and, most of all, I want you to be safe.*

**III.**

# thirteen

I KNOW WHAT'S been said about us. I've watched the documentaries and read the exposés claiming to know what happened the day the men arrived at the camp. However, very little of what was reported—and it would not be a stretch to say *none* of what appeared in print or film or public debates—offers an accurate portrait of the arrival. This doesn't surprise me. I understand the deep human need to identify villains, but there were no villains that day. Only accidents made by good people doing their best. That type of story doesn't make anyone click, though, so Dyson and I were made into villains.

The problem was simple: The barn's generator ran out of gas overnight. Dyson was late to pick up the men at the airport and, rather than check the generator, as he did most mornings, he hurried the bus onto the road. By the time I made it to the clearing, later that morning, I had no way of knowing how long the power had been out. Fifteen minutes? Ten? Dyson planned to cook the men a celebratory lunch of pork tenderloin, and it seemed needlessly cautious—and risky—to discard the meat he'd marinated overnight. We needed to feed the men something when they arrived. After all, their savings were funding the meals—theirs and ours. Dyson collected "Enrollment Fees" from them weeks earlier to purchase building supplies and months' worth of groceries. I gave the raw meat and the sides a prolonged, dutiful sniff. Nothing smelled rancid or bold. So: I refueled the gas tank. The power returned. I hoped for the best.

I was dressed in my standard uniform: light wash jeans and a black *Atmospherians* T-shirt—the one with *Sasha* ending in a flourish—no makeup, lips thickly Chap Sticked, hair in a schoolteacher bun. I stood in front of the barn gripping a clipboard against my chest. The midday sun was pinned to a

pool-water sky. Across the clearing, pines leaned dreamily in the breeze. The generator burped and gurgled; its smoke seasoned the air.

My stomach was in knots over the men. Part of me wished Dyson had kept me in the dark about their pasts. I felt no more prepared for their arrival, only a slick of dread spilling through me. I tried to slow my breathing, tried practicing lines, tried to soak up and appreciate my last few precious minutes of solitude for some time—but the men charged through my mind like rhinoceroses, goring every hope in my head. Our men were unhinged and resentful, with fingers inexplicably missing, men with grudges and prior convictions and restraining orders and big, bellyish laughs. Their families and friends had discarded these men like fat trimmings cut from a steak. They were unwanted. They couldn't stand to be with themselves. They feared their own thoughts the way flies fear rolled-up magazines.

Last night, Dyson again reassured me that the men would follow our orders so long as we remained confident, firm, and friendly—as if we were training hounds. I didn't trust this to be true. But at this point, I had no other choice but to put faith in him.

Dyson was scheduled to arrive at 12:00 exactly—but 12:00 became 12:01 became 12:02 became 12:03 became 12:27. 12:43. 1:09. Sweat collected beneath the band of my watch and under my bra. I imagined scenarios in which he never returned, fantasizing about surviving here on my own. There was enough food to last me for months. I could create a new life for myself. I could remake myself into an online homesteader—claim the cabin and barn as my own constructions, claim Barney as my loyal best friend. This life appealed to me more than the life set to arrive at any moment. I drifted into a reverie of isolation.

The sound of the bus rustling gravel deflated this fantasy. Dirt clouded the trees. A blurry yellow pill appeared at the edge of the clearing, then expanded into a school bus as it drew near. I stepped forward ten paces from the barn—just as we'd planned—but Dyson braked too late and nearly flattened me under the hood. The engine exhaled on my face. If I'd stuck out my tongue, the tip would've sizzled against the grill.

I circled the bus twice. This added gravity, purpose, and we wanted to make the arrival ritualistic. The men fixed their faces on the seats in front of them.

Their nostrils quietly flared. Lips were licked, ears picked; furry fingers knuckled the sleep from their eyes. I made meaningless marks on the clipboard to make the men feel judged and studied. Near the end of my second pass, at a window close to the door, I sensed one of them watching me.

He was ghoulish, gaunt, with slicked blond locks—the only one who had styled his hair—and a nose curled like the claw of a hawk. I paused beneath his window; his eyes returned to the seat back in front of him. He held this pose, as rigid as a road, until his tongue budged through his teeth like a diving board. He rushed it back, winked at me—as if flirting—and I slapped my clipboard against his window.

Dyson opened the door. Out came a gust of eggy air so foul I had to cover my mouth. The first man slugged off the bus clutching the railing. He nearly face-planted when his feet hit the grass.

“Name,” I said to him.

“Gerry Simpatico.” He was a milky, heavyset man wearing sweatpants and a Big Dogs T-shirt. His hair was thick and dark, shiny with grease, and the pupils of his blue eyes were like two tires adrift on the sea. Our Righteous Man. He’d been fired from his job for running a smear campaign against his boss. Standing before me, however, his mouth nervously quaking, he seemed to have been stripped of whatever animosity and resentment had led him here.

“Your phone,” I said. I relished this power.

He dropped it beside my foot and formed a line behind me.

“Name,” I said to the next man, then the next. *What a vulnerable act*, I thought, as the names and men piled up. Each man may as well have presented his head on a platter. Beneath every name was a whisper: *Know me. Remember me. See me as a person.*

The fifth man stepped off the bus: the one with the tongue. “Randy Dent,” he said before I asked. He pounded his fist on the bus as if denting it might prove his identity. His jaw was boxy and scabbed, his teeth shockingly white. He wore a black short-sleeved T-shirt and cargo pants. A splotch scarred both sides of his left forearm, just under the elbow. It was pale pink with a gangrenous tint at its edges, a cherry-sized bump in the center. He tapped it. “Firework accident as a runt. I’m lucky I still have this side of my body,” he said with a laugh. He

wasn't handsome but carried himself like a handsome man would. Someone, I gathered, had once called him handsome, and the praise had clung to him like too-strong cologne.

I knew the scar hadn't come from a firework accident. And his shame over its origin opened a window of pity inside me. That changed, however, as he continued to talk.

"You must have a lotta birds here," he said. He added his phone to the pile. "Plenty of birds to pick off." He mimed shooting a rifle, recoiled with the kickback.

The men in line loosened up, chattered and laughed. Randy fired again.

"I see you're planning on being a problem," I told him. All the pity I felt fled from me, replaced by genuine fear. It occurred to me that I had no idea what he was capable of—what any of them were capable of—and the weight of this realization coiled inside me.

"Just taking in the view I was promised." He holstered his imaginary gun, patted my shoulder as he passed me, then took his place with the others. I flinched in disgust. Randy had some of Dyson's father in him. They both wanted people to fear them. Dyson's father achieved this through silence and dismissal. This instinct in Randy, however, seemed slapstick and fragile, an impulsive performance made all the more threatening because it might fall apart.

The man after him couldn't have been any more different. Gently squinting, he stepped off the bus in a blue button-down shirt tucked in his chinos. His face was equal parts kindness and sulk. His cheeks were covered in freckles, like Blake's face. I fought an urge to lovingly slap my hands on his cheeks—and fought even harder against the deeper, vengeful urge to clench my hands around his neck. He had the sugary prettiness of a youth pastor or high school teacher, the kind of beauty intensified by relative scarcity and surrender. I knew then I would love him—that I *could* love him. I always knew from the start.

"Peter Minston," he said, at the foot of the steps, then apologized. Peter was the Momma's Boy. The outlier, according to Dyson, the man who wouldn't benefit from our teaching. Dyson described him as "already a very good man." There were no redder flags.

"Sorry for what?" I asked him.



“Thank you, I meant.” He shuffled to join the others.

Soon all the men stood slumped shoulder to shoulder. Their faces were paunchy and meatish, harboring wispy beards. They resembled a row of plucked chickens left to rot in the sun. A few men let out meek, childish burps; farts escaped irregularly.

Even after reading the dossier, I spent the last few days assuming their presence would clear up my remaining questions, would make their decisions appear obvious, but in person, they baffled me even more. *People without hope require direction*, according to Dyson. But this wasn’t what hopelessness looked like. I had seen hopelessness before, in messages from my clients: the women put into panics by ads, the women desperate to look completely unlike themselves, the women who sought admiration and love by amending their faces with hundreds of toxic creams and solutions: *The Nuclear Options*, I’d called them. These men didn’t know desperation. They knew inconvenience, annoyance, frustration. They were not hopeless, and perhaps they didn’t need to be. Even more than direction, hopelessness required convincing.

Dyson descended the steps. He wore light blue jeans with a black turtleneck, plus a pair of round wire-rimmed reading glasses. The outfit—the costume—was my idea. No cult leader led in a vacuum. You needed to meet the needs of the culture, and the era of Jim Jones and L. Ron had ended. We were living in the aftermath of Jobs and Wozniak, of Zuckerberg, Jack. Now our leaders were innovators, disruptors, and self-styled geniuses. The part had to be played.

“Welcome,” said Dyson. “To the life you’ve always desired and needed. Welcome to your future. Welcome to hope. Welcome to unconditional love. Welcome to The Atmosphere.”

When no one reacted, I wildly clapped until the men followed my lead.

Dyson told the men to hold their applause. He paced along the side of the bus, hands clasped at his back. “The world, as we have discussed, is ill. It is terminal. On its deathbed. Very few people acknowledge this sickness. They’d rather pretend their lives are peachy and bright than accept that something is wrong. Even fewer people do something about it.” He pointed at the men. “But not you. You twelve men refuse to sit back and watch as the world devolves. In a world of alienation and pain *you* men have chosen to build a community no one

wants you to build. I admire the effort you put in by coming here. You're all brave motherfuckers."

Eleven of the men pumped their fists, hollered, stomped their feet in the dirt. Peter clapped politely.

"You've all already completed the most difficult part—committing to a change. You have committed, but now you must act. You must work with us and work with yourselves if you want to find your place in the world. Because things aren't gonna get better from dreaming and wanting. Things will stay exactly the same if you don't put in the work. I bet some of you are thinking, *That sounds easy, Dyson. We know this, Dyson.* After all, you *came* here to work."

"Hell, yeah!" Randy shouted.

I gave him a throat-cut gesture.

"Let me warn you now, though: Some of you will want to quit as soon as we start. You'll want to run back to your draining, familiar lives because, compared to The Atmosphere, those lives will seem freer and easier. And it's true. Those lives *are* easier—albeit empty of meaning and purpose. So know this: if you want an easier, empty life you're welcome to leave whenever you like." He pointed to the driveway. "There's the way out. Use it at your convenience. Because there's only one person keeping you here. It's not me and it's not Sasha." He cracked a premeditated smile, then pulled a switchblade out of his pocket and buried it into one of the bus's back tires. The air wheezed free. The men gasped fishily. "It's you. You're the only one keeping you here. No one leaves until everyone's better. If you don't like it here, work on yourself, help the others work on themselves. And if resenting me makes you work harder I invite your resentment. Sasha welcomes your resentment."

I didn't.

"We're not making you work because we're sadistic or cruel. We're doing it because we care about you. No one has ever cared about you the way we will. More than a program, The Atmosphere is a family. We are your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your daughter, your son, your cat, your parrot, your fish. There is no alternative to The Atmosphere. You have *lived* the alternative. And what has it gotten you? Depression. Doubt. Fear. Unemployment. Poverty. Debt. You've been overlooked. Abandoned. Why?

Because you've lived difficult lives. Made some mistakes. Who in the world hasn't made some mistakes?

"But you're *people*, dammit. You deserve a home where your skills are respected, where your skills are enhanced. Where you can be free to love yourselves for once in your lives. And that place is here: at The Atmosphere. You're necessary here. You're needed. You're loved. It's a crime the world tells you you're useless. *You suck; you're worthless; you never amounted to anything; you're an imbecile; you're a stain on society; you've never earned anything in your life; the only thing you deserve is a kick in the dick; go jump out of a plane, swallow a mug of thumbtacks; you're timid and weak; you're fragile; you're shit—please go die and quit being a problem.* That. Ends. Today."

I substituted myself for the men when hearing these words. I was necessary, important. For too long I had suffered under the weight of groundless harassment. I slipped into a trance of enthusiastic bitterness, flinging snowballs of blame at Cassandra and Blake and Lucas Devry.

Dyson repeated my name—"Sasha! Sasha!"—to haul me back to the moment. It was time to destroy the phones. Each man received a phone that didn't belong to him. "On my signal," said Dyson, "throw the phone against the broad side of the bus. Be careful you don't hit the windows." They were so amped from the speech, they threw as soon as we stepped out of the way. They retrieved the phones, threw them again and retrieved them and threw them again. Dyson kicked the phones into a pile. I hauled over the hose and laid the end on top of the phones, letting the water soak through the cracked screens.

Dyson inhaled dramatically, nostrils piping. "Now we can really get started." He led them into the barn. The men seated themselves around the picnic table.

Dyson and I commanded from the head. "Why are you here?" he asked.

Peter raised his hand.

Dyson said, "I know why you're here. You're here because nothing has worked. You've spent your lives chasing specters and fantasies. You've ruined your bodies, broken your backs, repressed every emotion. For what? To become *real* men? What did it get you? Your friends resent you. Your wives left you. Your kids never answer your calls. Your kids never text you. Your kids never remember your birthdays.

“But don’t misunderstand me. Don’t think I’m any better. I’m the sickest man in this camp. I spent my *entire* career trying to be other people. Imagine. Dyson Layne? Not good enough. Never. Always suppressing myself to be someone else. Like all of you, I would’ve happily traded my life for *anyone* else’s. Then one day it hit me: I don’t know what I want in this life. I don’t know what I love. I don’t even know what I *fear*. I had no clue who I was.

“Every day men like you are expected to be people you aren’t. You try to be men who might impress your fathers, men from comic books, action movies, professional athletes, the men who bring home new women every night. But we aren’t those men. You know why? Those men. Have never. Existed. We need to accept that. Because we’re making ourselves sick, depressed, lonely, obese, violent. How many of you have hurt people—emotionally, physically—because you couldn’t handle your feelings?”

A few men raised their hands.

“If you want to lie to yourselves find someplace else to live. You won’t be doing it here.”

Most of the remaining men lifted their arms. I raised mine in a show of solidarity—to make them think we were equally culpable, though our situations hardly compared.

“I see we have a saint among us,” said Dyson. “Saint Dent. Care to tell us how you did it, how you managed to hurt no one in your life?”

“I don’t find the exercise useful,” Randy said.

“We all want to believe we’re good people, that we’ve done nothing wrong. But if things were all pretty and bright, you wouldn’t be here, would you?”

The men chuckled anxiously.

“I am not a bad man,” Randy said.

“Well, you’re certainly not a good man,” said Dyson.

“What makes a good man?” Randy asked.

“Maybe someone who respects and protects his family.”

“That’s the type of thing people say when they want me to hit ‘em.”

“I assure you I don’t,” Dyson said.

“Just because I’m flawed doesn’t mean I’m not good.”

“You have the potential to become good, Randy. All of you do. But your flaws are holding you back. Your flaws are why you’re searching for work and for love and respect. And this—what you’re doing right now. This stubbornness, Randy, it shows me you’re not ready to change. You’re clinging to some false image of yourself. Maybe you’re proud of who you were. Me? I admit that I hate who I was before we all met. And I *should* hate who I was. I was irascible, selfish, cruel, and empty. I am *disgusted* by that person. And soon you’ll be disgusted by the men you were before coming here. Those men were toxic. They infected you.”

It was, I think, his attention to words like *toxic* and *sick* and *infection* that led to accusations of premeditation—not to mention Dyson’s issues with food. But he used the words metaphorically to mark the transition between their past and future selves. There was no better way to convince someone to change than to make them believe they were sick.

Dyson said, “We’ve planned a meal for you all. The first of many to come. While I’m cooking I want you to reflect on something you’ll work on while you’re here. Something born out of a past mistake. Do so in silence. You’ll be expected to share before eating.”

The men chattered and grumbled.

“*In silence* means silence,” I said.

Dyson retreated into the kitchen. I stood at the fence, watching the men, too busy to warn him about the generator, the food—no need to warn him, I assured myself. The men whispered and sighed. “*In silence* means silence,” I reminded the men. “*In silence* means silence.”

Their faces flickered with shame.

“*In silence* means silence.”

And remorse.

“*In silence* means silence.”

*Maybe resentment*, I worried.

“Who’s hungry?” asked Dyson. He carried a wide ceramic serving tray loaded with medallions of pork. I set a Styrofoam plate and utensils in front of each man. Dyson followed with an enormous bowl of potato salad. He wanted to feed them something familiar, food you might find at a family reunion. “This

recipe was my father's favorite," he said, as he set down the bowl. "Normally Family Dinners will be served later on Sundays, at seven, but we want to make sure you're fed after such a long day." I'd been against calling the meals Family Dinners. These men weren't our family. Best-case scenario, they were our students—more accurately: our crosses to bear. But he insisted on the language of family to ensure the men felt welcomed and loved. I didn't like it. I didn't argue, however. There was no use. Beneath his pursuit to reform these men and make society safer, beneath everything Dyson pursued, was a deeper, ongoing, and largely unconscious pursuit to replace—rather, perfect—his actual family.

He forked a slice of pork onto each man's plate. I scooped potato salad beside it. We returned to the head of the table. "Gerry," said Dyson. "In one word tell us what you plan to work on during your time at The Atmosphere?"

"One word?" Gerry asked.

"One word," I said.

He bit his lip, eyeing the table. "Experience," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Excellent," Dyson said. "Leon. One word describing what you plan to work on during your time here."

Leon thought for a while. "Experience?" he said, unsure if it counted.

"Perhaps pick a new one," I said. "Something more personal."

"Very good," said Dyson. "Dr. Mapplethorpe: How about you?"

"Experience."

*Experience of what?!* I wanted to shout. Experience didn't *mean* anything. And I resented Dyson for letting the men get away with repeating their nonsense responses.

"And you, Randy?"

"Experience."

"Peter?"

"Experience."

"William?"

"Experience."

"Lawrence?"

"Experience."

“Mack?”

“Experience.”

“David?”

“Experience.”

“Hughie?”

“Experience.”

“Benjamin?”

“Experience.”

“Kevin?”

“Experience.”

Dyson gave the men permission to eat and to speak and they ate and spoke like it had been months since they'd done either one. They cracked jokes and patted shoulders, released warm, bellowing laughs as they scooped seconds and thirds of pork and potato salad onto their crusted plates. Dyson circled the table carrying a two-liter jug of cheap red wine. He sat with the men and lifted the jug to their lips for a sip. He praised their heroic thirst. I leaned against the fence with my hands clenched. I seethed over their responses. *Experience! Experience what?! Of what?!* If it felt like a family, then it was not like any family I would ever be permitted to join. The meal was supposed to last forty-five minutes—we planned the day to the second—but at the half-hour mark I cleared my throat: “Family Dinner has ended! You must all return to the cabins for scheduled afternoon naps.”

“What are we, babies?” asked Randy.

Dyson shushed him. “I must’ve lost track of time with all the excitement—too much excitement. We need to conserve energy for tonight’s lecture.”

The men complained about the size of the sheds and the size of their cots and how many cots there were in their sheds. “There’s no room to move in here,” Gerry said at the door.

“It’s not a living room,” I said. “It’s a room for sleeping. And leaving. Use it to sleep and to leave and you’ll be okay.”

“There will be opportunities to expand your living conditions,” said Dyson. “Put in the work and you won’t be cramped very long.”

The men split up six to a shed.

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Back in the barn, Dyson suggested we celebrate our success.

“What success?” I asked.

“The men are here. They’ve accepted the rules. Family Dinner couldn’t have gone any better.” This impulse to celebrate the most trivial accomplishments had sabotaged his acting career. He might have earned a gig in a spot for a chain restaurant, then gone out drinking, thinking he’d made it, thinking that speaking roles were right around the corner. Then he would sleep through a call from his agent the next morning and miss an audition.

“For all we know they’re plotting our murders right now,” I said.

He retrieved a bottle of bourbon and two glasses from the pantry and poured a fat finger into each glass. “Better to die drunk than sober,” he said.

I laughed and accepted my glass.

“To The Atmosphere!” he said.

“To experience,” I muttered.

“Go easy on ’em,” he said. “We have to be kind.”

“I didn’t become a cult leader to be kind,” I said.

“There are so many things they still don’t know. About how to behave, how to treat women, how to treat other men. They’re like children.”

“Except they’re adults.”

“You understand.”

We clinked, emptied our glasses. The drink freed a storm of coughs from my chest. It was stupid to drink under so much pressure, with so much responsibility and so many men outside, but it was no less stupid than being here in the first place. The stupidity of drinking, at least, distracted me from the danger outside. We nodded at each other. He poured again.

I was the first one to hear the men screaming for help from inside the sheds. Outside, men sat slumped on the ground shouting about being sick, or getting sick, threatening to throw up on the cots. Two men tumbled down their shed’s steps, spewing food as they fell. Men zigged across the lawn with their hands capping their mouths.

“Everyone’s sick!” Randy screamed. His neck was drenched in red liquid.



“Where do we go?” another one shouted.

Dyson moseyed out of the barn as if the clearing were empty.

I ran to him. “The men are dying,” I told him.

“No one’s dying,” he told me. I don’t think I had ever seen such clarity and confidence in his face. Nothing of what was happening behind me surprised him. “It’s probably food poisoning. The generator must’ve shut off overnight.” He lifted his right arm and snapped until all the men were looking at him. “Atmospherians,” he said. “If you want relief, follow me behind the barn.”

They trailed us to the trough, their cheeks expanded to melon-sized swells. A few men were bent perpendicular. One threw up into his elbow. Red liquid wormed through another man’s lips—neon in color, *too bright for blood*, I thought—the cheap wine marking its return.

“Kneel in front of the trough,” Dyson told them. “Let everything out.”

Chewed pork and potato salad plopped into the trough. They gagged. They sprayed. They wailed. Every few heaves, the men turned to me, desperate for comforting hands on their backs. I was their mother, their grandmother, wife, sister, daughter: every woman they’d ever passed in the street. *Please*, they would’ve said, had they been able to fit in a word. But they were stained red at the mouth and neck, as if they’d plunged their faces into the gut of a deer.

This scene is a favorite of movies and exposés. We’re often accused of slipping ipecac into the wine—which, yes, we did later on—but this was an unforeseeable accident. Dyson was right. The generator shut off. The men had food poisoning.

Dyson lectured them from the end of the trough: “Nausea is the first step of reflective enlightenment. What you’re feeling is decades of repressed emotions buried inside you. Everything you refused to let out is escaping. You’re vomiting up the buried emotions and feelings you’ve spent your lives running away from. You never confronted yourselves and the mistakes you made. You’ve never *not* been sick. Health? It terrifies you. Of course it terrifies you: because this is what it means to be healthy. It hurts to be healthy. And you can’t get well until you get worse. I encourage you to get worse. Embrace illness. Don’t hold anything back.

“When you think you’re finished, keep going,” he said. “There’s always more to get out. Use your fingers if you must. One finger. Two. Even three! Don’t be afraid. There is nothing to fear. You must empty everything out.”

Randy let out pained, undignified heaves from his spot at the end of the trough. He lifted his face to look at me. His forehead was speckled red and food stuck to the gel in his hair. He caught my eyes, begging me over.

I felt generous. "What is it?" I asked him.

"Heh," he started to say. "Heh." And finally: "Help... me." The words shot out like an arm knifing through the closing doors of an elevator.

I palmed his head, directed it to the trough, and whispered, "We are."

# fourteen

IT IS NOT impossible that Dyson put ipecac in the wine. But that doesn't make it likely.

# fifteen

AFTER MY RESPONSE to Lucas Devry, a small cadre of my followers piled on in the comments, called him creepy and sexist, an incorrigible coward, a toad; nothing too terrible—surely not for the internet. They insisted I was right: the world should rid itself of monsters like him. I reported his account; the comment disappeared. And, for a few days, so did he, shamed out of my life after a single confrontation. *What a pitiful chicken*, I thought, happy to be done with him.

I was set to appear on *Wake Up! America* that week to promote ABANDON with Kandace Heather. In the lead-up to the discussion, I watched every clip I could find of her talking to guests—influencers and makeup artists and dermatologists and the children of forgotten celebrities—guests ranging in confidence from startled kitten to mercenary. The influencers promoted proprietary juices; the makeup artists hocked sponsored eyeliners and foundations; one dermatologist promoted a book that included “over one hundred references.”

I had nothing to sell, I complained to Cassandra, though to her I said, “We have nothing to sell,” because I still hadn’t told her she wouldn’t appear alongside me.

“Nonsense,” she said. “We have ourselves. And a self is worth far more than a product.”

The skin-care influencers who normally appeared on *Wake Up! America* told stories of personal triumph over unpleasant appearance. The problem, however, was that *I* never triumphed over my appearance. My skin never cratered or scarred—I’d had a few blemishes in high school, some eczema on my neck during a stressful semester at college—but no “uglier” self hidden in the pit of

my past, no before pictures to shudder over or glance away from in horror. Instead, I had Dyson, brought to the edge of death by fat burners and topical creams: the nuclear options.

“What a beautiful, heartwarming story,” said Cassandra. We were stretched out on her couch—a green velvet mod—rehearsing my story for *Wake Up! America*. “Your best friend was in trouble so you created ABANDON.”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “I introduced him to the pills and creams.”

“Don’t insult him by blaming yourself.” She gave my knee a *don’t overthink it* tap. “Your story is a beautiful journey of friendship and compassion. I feel honored to know someone as compassionate as you.” She stepped to the center of the room and cleared her throat so politely I barely heard her. The afternoon sun ignited the windows. Her hair glowed fierily.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It’s my turn,” she said.

“Your turn for what?” I was genuinely curious.

“To rehearse for my segment with Kandace,” she said. “It’s not always about you.”

“That’s not what I heard,” I said, in a voice like a smirk. I should’ve broken the news to her then, but I placed a hand on her shoulder, imitating Kandace: “Tell us, Cassandra. How can meditation keep you looking healthy and young?”

Cassandra lived in a Midtown two-bedroom overlooking the sculpture garden at MoMA. Every day that week, I showed up at her building after my lunch shift intent on telling her she wouldn’t appear in the segment, that if it were my decision she would get a full ten minutes, but every day she greeted me brimming with fresh suggestions for how we might make our stories more compelling, how we ought to enunciate, what to do with our hands when we weren’t speaking, and, of course, what to wear. She put so much energy into the segment it seemed possible, even likely, she might rocket herself onscreen through sheer will.

On the morning of the *Wake Up! America* segment, in the car to the studio, Cassandra’s confidence blunted my nerves. I assumed total faith in her charisma—they could never turn Cassandra Hanson away—pretending that I wasn’t leading her into a grand humiliation.

A brown-haired sparrow of a production assistant holding a clipboard met Cassandra and me in the lobby. “Which one of you is Sasha?” she asked.

I raised my hand like a child in class. There was a crumbling sensation at the back of my throat. The assistant led us inside. She addressed Cassandra at the studio doors. “Friends and family must wait in the green room.”

“I’m Cassandra Hanson,” she said.

“And you’re welcome to wait in the green room.”

“I’m neither friend *nor* family,” she said. “I’m Cassandra Hanson, a meditation guide, partners with Sasha, and I’m supposed to appear on the show.”

The woman looked at the clipboard. “Today’s show?”

“Sasha, say something.”

“She’s Cassandra Hanson,” I mumbled through the dust in my throat.

“Thank you for clearing that up,” said the woman ironically. “We should get going.”

Cassandra barely made herself up that morning, assuming they’d touch her up before taping. Her feelings had nowhere to hide. The self-assurance that normally brightened her features drained off her face as if someone were spraying her with a hose. I waited for her to lash out at me. I wanted her to shout at me—but that wasn’t her way.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought you might get to come on with me.”

“You didn’t,” she said. “You never did and it’s fine: I forgive you.”

“It could’ve happened. There could’ve been time at the end and maybe they —”

“This is a wonderful opportunity for you. I want this for you.” She clasped my hands and leaned close, whispered the cruelest thing she could: “Your future is riding on this. You owe it to both of us. Don’t you dare mess up.” She kissed my cheeks and gave me a hug before leaving.

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Two hours later, I stood in the center of a forest of cameras and an audience of women and attachable husbands. On a blue cocktail table beside me were cue

cards featuring tips from my regimen. My face felt frosted after sitting in makeup. I wore an outfit Kandace had selected: a knee-length wrap the color of pine and heels one size too big. “You don’t have to wear them for long,” I was told by the stylist when I asked to switch shoes. It hurt me to be here without Cassandra. The image of her drifting out of the lobby kept crashing into me as I practiced my story for Kandace.

“I’m Kandace Heather,” said Kandace Heather. She placed her hands in my palm like a gift. She was, in that moment, the tallest woman alive, sun-blindingly blond, with skin softer than the underside of a kitten. “Your program has done wonders for my daughter—I wish you could see how she used to look, the improvements she’s made.”

“I don’t like to think in before and afters,” I said. “I help people become who they are.”

“It doesn’t make any sense to me—I’m told you don’t have anything to promote.”

“I care too much about my clients to promote misleading and dangerous products.”

“How do you eat?”

“There’s a subscription service. Still growing. And I host at a restaurant downtown.”

“Not after today.” She stepped away to talk with the audience.

The production assistant pinned a mic to my collar. “Have you done live TV before?”

“I hold live sessions online every week.”

“That’s an answer,” she said, shaking her head. “Just know that sometimes callers get emotional on Q and A. We’ll cut the line if you’re in trouble. There’s nothing to worry about.” She raised her hand and shouted, “Ten seconds!” Ten fingers became five became one.

Kandace and I stood on either side of the cocktail table. “Welcome back,” she said to the camera. “Well, move over, Korean Skincare and Goop. Today I’m here with Sasha Marcus, founder of The ABANDON Regimen, this spring’s hottest skin-care routine. And Sasha’s here today to tell us how to ABANDON yourself.” Kandace looked at me. “You have some tips for our viewers today.”

“That’s right,” I said, stilled by guilt over Cassandra.

“Would you like to go through them?”

If you watch the video of our conversation—a video that, very soon, would become the highest-watched clip on the *Wake Up! America* website, before they took it down—you can see the nerves burn out of my system as I awaken to the gravity of the moment. “Your entire career is riding on this,” I can be seen mumbling. “Don’t you dare mess up.”

“We’ll absolutely get to the advice, Kandace.” I led her to the cue cards as if it were my show. “But first I want to talk to your viewers about what called me to this work. I want to talk about a friend of mine, Dyson, my oldest friend, and the reason I started ABANDON.” I shared my story of friendship and sacrifice, a story in which I devoted myself to designing a program to help my best friend feel more confident in his appearance. At the end, I tried to plug the added benefits of Cassandra’s meditation program, as a kind of apology, but Kandace flipped over a cue card before I could name her.

“Step number one,” she said. “Discard the nuclear options: all ointments and astringents and medications meant to improve your skin. Sounds like a drastic step.”

“It sounds drastic, but trust—”

“Step two: commit to a life of healthy eating. And you have some guidelines for healthy eating, don’t you? You have a peculiar view of what *healthy* means.”

“It’s backed by more than two hundred—”

“Step three: relaxation.”

“I highly recommend listening to the guided meditations of—”

“We have Anna Mackenzie on the line from Arthur, Nebraska. What’s on your mind today, Anna?”

Anna Mackenzie wanted to know the safest BB cream to use daily.

“None,” I told her. “BB creams eliminate the natural oils on your skin. This causes your body to overproduce oils—as a way to compensate for the loss. So as soon as you stop using the cream, you’ll notice your face becomes extra greasy. That is not what we want.”

“Not at all,” said Kandace Heather.



The audience clapped respectfully. Anna Mackenzie thanked me. Kandace and I wished her a good day. The next caller wanted to know what foods to avoid.

“I don’t recommend *avoiding* foods. The trick is to *abandon* them.” I listed the seven foods to cut out of her diet: “Alcohol. Bread. Apples. Nuts. Dairy. Onions. Nitrates. It’s so easy to remember.” *Thank you. Have a nice day. Good-bye.*

After two more callers Kandace said, “We’re just about out of time.”

“There must be time for one more,” I said. I wasn’t ready to lose the audience’s attention and love. They applauded everything I said, laughed at my jokes, wept over the story of Dyson. Kandace wanted to end the segment out of envy. I was their savior, now. This must be how Cassandra felt in a crowd, doted upon and respected. This was how Claire Lance felt. How I deserved to feel. “I don’t want anyone on hold to miss out.”

The audience cheered in support. The production assistant shrugged, then made a rolling motion with her hand. Kandace tapped a finger to her ear. “It looks like we can do one more. How fun, we have a male caller. Do you have many male clients?”

“Not as many as I would like—because skin care isn’t a woman’s concern. It’s a human concern. My best friend is proof of this. I love all my male clients.”

“Well, we have Lucas Devry from Vicksburg, Michigan, on the line. Good morning, Lucas! What’s your question for Sasha?”

My face must have gone the color of bleach.

“Do you want me to die?” he asked. “You said it would be beautiful if I weren’t in the world so does that mean you want me to—”

“I’m afraid that’s all the time we have for today,” Kandace said. “I want to thank Sasha Marcus for sharing your skin-care routine with our viewers. Sasha, remind us again: Where can our viewers subscribe to The ABANDON Regimen?”

I stared at the camera.

“It’s been wonderful having you here, Sasha. After this break, we’ll be speaking with the star of the new movie *Baby Man*. You won’t want to miss it.”

The production assistant whisked me off set. Their callers were supposed to be screened, she told me. She had no idea how he had gotten through. They should have cut him off as soon as he started speaking—he was obviously deranged. I nodded along to her words.

Back at my apartment, I called out of work. My boss wouldn't hear it. "We're booked through the end of the month because of that segment. You're an inspiration."

"I'm a disgrace."

"A TV star working at Gravee. *My Gravee*. I'm gonna print out a picture of you from the segment to hang in the window. We're so lucky to have you!"

"You're just trying to make me feel better."

"Check your accounts," she said.

Over the course of the morning, my followers had surged from the low twenty thousands to the edge of a million. Blake tagged me in a photo of us on a picnic upstate. It was a lovely photo, a favorite of mine, a photo I loved too much to share (I always protected my favorites). Blake wrote: *So proud of my baby for all the good she brings to the world. Muah! Love you, Sash!* He'd never called me baby, before. I drank up his public affection. *Love you, too*, I texted him. He responded: *I've had like 5k follows since I posted. Unreal!* I was authentically happy to help him.

Publicists and managers sent cascades of emails. The future Cassandra described, with its vistas and leisure, materialized before me. I poured myself a glass of white wine—a deserved celebration, I thought, no matter how early in the day it was—and waded into that future, letting it cleanse me of my anxiety. My new followers found me sympathetic and dignified and worthy of admiration because of how I had responded to Lucas Devry on the show. That is, until 2:17 that afternoon, when I received a notification telling me that LucryDevas88375 had tagged me in a live video.

He sits at his kitchen table aiming his phone at his face. His skin has a margarine glow beneath irresponsibly bright lighting. He holds a pistol in his free hand. I still don't know what kind. I hope to never find out. "You said you wanted a beautiful world, Sasha. You said that my death would make the world more beautiful. Well, I want a beautiful world, too. I couldn't want anything

more.” His eyes never land on the camera directly, just above it, or to the side, though it’s unclear whether this is on purpose—he can’t stand to see himself—or if he didn’t know where to look. “This is your fault, Sasha. You made me do this. I’m doing this for you. For the beautiful world. Here it is, Sasha. Here is your beautiful world.”

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An hour later, my boss suggested I take a week off. Blake deleted his post and every other photo of us together. He broke up with me over text. The next morning, Cassandra appeared on *Wake Up! America*. She was “blindsided” by the cruelty I had shown Lucas Devry in my comment (which appeared on the chyron beneath her). She wondered whether she had ever truly known me. She told the hosts I routinely cheated on my regimen, drank regularly when I went out, used charcoal masks at least three times a week. Gross exaggerations. She relayed her version of the *Wake Up! America* segment. “Sasha assured me I would speak alongside her. When I arrived, she acted like I didn’t *exist*. She claims to care deeply about her friends—but true friendship demands honesty. I’m not sure she’s capable of that.” Even more than demonizing me, the interview turned Cassandra into a spurned, relatable friend. At the end, she promoted her six-week meditation session focused on finding one’s authentic self on the path to honest relationships. “Space is limited,” she added. “If you’re interested, please enroll immediately.”

Her session sold out before her interview ended. All day, I hemorrhaged followers. The police questioned me but didn’t press charges—my comment hardly constituted bullying compared to the rest of the sludge on the internet. Exoneration only made things worse. Internet trolls deemed it a miscarriage of justice. They made Devry into a martyr for free speech. *Killed for expressing himself*, they claimed—without irony, it appeared.

Soon death threats infested my inbox. Soon no one would answer my calls—not even my mother, who received dozens of threats every day and was furious at me for acting with such terrible judgment. Soon the men protested outside my apartment. Soon I was fired. Soon I wanted only to sleep. Soon I was living off

takeout and dread. Soon there was a knock on my door, and behind it was Dyson and inside his mouth was a promise to make everything right.

# what the men needed to know

I started a list of all the things men needed to know to become better men. I had no intention of showing the men the list. The list was a source of solace for me. It was a psychological security blanket. In my alone time, I added to it in response to whatever had happened that day, then read it out loud to myself, as if casting a spell.

*All women have names, I wrote to kick off the list. And rarely are their names Sugar or Honey or Sweetie.*

*Clearing your phlegm is inappropriate in professional settings.*

*Flatulence is inappropriate in professional settings.*

*The Atmosphere is a professional setting.*

*You're not really very experienced.*

*Women know when you're staring.*

*Shirtsleeves are not napkins.*

*Don't make other women your mother. Only your mother's your mother.*

*There is nothing brave about killing an animal that cannot shoot a gun.*

*There are no reasons for guns to exist.*

*Keep your hands to yourself.*

*What you consider pain is likely mere inconvenience.*

*You have never truly been scared.*

*Your jokes have never been funny.*

# sixteen

THE MORNING SUN smeared pink light over the tips of the trees. The sheds were boxes of noise: snoring and coughing and grunts loud enough to compete with the birds. Dyson and I had given the trough a thorough bleaching and hosing the night before. But as we stepped out of the woods, vomit was all I could smell.

We had drunk through the night to settle our nerves and now a hangover thickened my thoughts. In the barn, as Dyson outlined plans for the morning, his words wafted away like breaths in the winter. “Uh-huh,” I kept saying. He was kind enough not to ask if I was paying attention.

We set up for breakfast: bowls and spoons on the picnic table, a plastic bin of bran flakes and a carton of tepid rice milk on a table pressed against the fence. Outside, I unlocked the shed doors and blew into a tin whistle. Men lumbered outside. “You have three minutes to dress and convene at the barn,” I said.

No one moved. I blew the whistle again. They scrambled inside.

Dyson and I waited at the head of the table, close to the fence. “Try to stop shaking,” he said. I hadn’t realized I was.

The men entered wearing their tracksuits. They were personalized—names on the tags—and one size smaller than what the men normally wore. They tugged the material out of discomfort, trying to accommodate their stomachs and thighs. The sizes were meant to remind them of the stranglehold of masculinity. It would encourage them to work out harder, to eat less than they wanted. Peter, however, was unbothered by the fit. He wore the smallest available size—a Medium—and the tracksuit made his slender frame appear athletic and muscular.

The men retrieved their bowls and formed a line at the front. They showed signs of the previous day's exertions: pasty faces, eyes bobbing like boats in their skulls—though I didn't know them well enough to decide if these were markers of illness or how they naturally looked in the morning.

Dyson poured a cup of bran flakes into each bowl. They shuffled to me for the milk. "This can't be all we're getting," Gerry Simpatico said.

"The bran flakes are enriched with calcium and protein and every vitamin your body requires," I said. "With none of the excessive sugars or fats you find in processed cereals."

"Your animal products, your bacon, your steak, and your eggs—they're all loads on the body," Dyson said. "You've been sold these crazy ideas about what you're *supposed* to eat. The food pyramid is a propaganda campaign engineered by agricultural monopolies in service to Big Pharmacy. The more you follow the pyramid, the sicker you get. The sicker you get the more pills you need. We have known this for decades, but the machine keeps chugging along."

It was all the convincing they needed. The men trusted Dyson. They looked at him with the pride of aging fathers, their trust condescending and fearful. They lifted their bowls for the rice milk with converts' enthusiasm. Randy was last in line. "Thanks a million, honey," he said when I poured. He winked. I nearly dug out his eye.

Dyson passed around copies of the daily schedule:

7:00 AM–8:00 AM	Physical Training
8:00 AM–9:00 AM	Breakfast
9:00 AM–12:00 PM	Morning Construction Session
12:00 PM–1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00 PM–2:00 PM	Power In Emotions (PIEs)
2:00 PM–2:15 PM	Job Training
2:15 PM–6:00 PM	Afternoon Construction Session
6:00 PM–7:00 PM	Dinner
7:00 PM–9:00 PM	Lecture Series
9:00 PM	Sleep

“We skipped Physical Training today, but don’t get complacent,” he said. “We’ll be up early tomorrow working your hearts. That’s a promise.”

The men groaned lovingly.

“Remember,” he said, “you men are here to transform your minds and your bodies.”

“How long before we’re in peak physical shape?” Gerry asked.

“You’ll be fit when you are,” Dyson said. “We’re not gonna rush you. Impatience is the seed of sabotage. Like I always tell you, if you want a garden, you need to buy soil, and if you want to buy soil...?” He paused, inviting the men to finish his sentence as one.

Together, they said, “You need to know where to park,” as if reciting scripture.

The aphorism didn’t make any sense. But meaning never mattered to Dyson. In his speeches and lectures, he aimed for the cadence of wisdom, wasted no time striving for content. Cadence was far more important than content. Cadence dug a trench in the mind. Establish cadence and any word you whispered would flow, convincing and clear.

Dyson introduced the ground rules. Each man would receive a personal residence and three meals every day. Each man would have to contribute to the community in exchange for food, education, and housing. Contributions included building ten additional sheds—one for each man—but no one could live alone until all the sheds were completed.

A spoon clanged a bowl. “Back in the bowl,” I said.

“I see you’re hungry,” Dyson said. “But you must delay gratification. It is the gifts we give to ourselves that cause the most pain over time.”

Gerry lowered his spoon.

Dyson outlined the Family Dinners. On Sunday evenings, we would gather for a ceremonial meal prepared by Dyson and me. The men had two responsibilities: to eat and enjoy.

Leon asked, “Will the Family Dinners be like yesterday’s?”

“Similar,” Dyson said. Then, with a laugh: “But maybe a little less messy.”

“Because I feel amazing today,” Gerry said.

“All that stuff about toxins was right on the money,” Leon said.



“Square in the numbers,” said Hughie.

“Sure, I’m a little dazed, but I don’t think I’ve felt so light in a while.”

“Whatever you put in the food,” Gerry said, “we needed it. I had so many toxins infecting my system—”

“So many toxins in my mind,” Leon added.

“My mind’s part of my system, Leon,” said Gerry. “There was so much in my *system* that needed to get the hell out.”

“I didn’t know they were weighing me down until they were gone,” Peter said.

“I’m light as lingerie now,” Randy said.

Dyson half-shrugged in my direction. I nodded my approval.

“Absolutely,” he told them. “We plan to maintain the same procedures from yesterday.”

“Emptying Out,” I said. This was what we’d called it as teenagers.

“Emptying Out,” Dyson confirmed. “Keeps your immune systems pure. No matter how healthy we eat and how hard we work, toxins will continue to slip into the body. Some people might find the practice disgusting. Some might say it’s dangerous and unnatural.” He spoke with an enthusiasm that disturbed me, that almost seemed directed *toward* me, as if he were trying to convince me, even more than the men, of the validity of his words. “Emptying Out is not some arbitrary task. It is the only proven defense against toxicity: both physical and mental.”

“I’m living proof,” Gerry said.

A chorus of *Me, toos* followed.

Dyson gave the men permission to eat. They rushed the gluey cereal to their mouths.

“Slower,” I said, with my eyes trained on Dyson.

“Learn to savor this time,” he said. “These three meals are yours to reflect on why you are here. Ask yourselves: What do I hope to achieve? Who will I become?”

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After breakfast, the men cleared the barn of the tools and building materials to begin work on the sheds. They asked for blueprints. Dyson advised them to study the shape, integrity, and character of the sheds for at least three hours before starting construction. “Understand before you create,” he told them. He did not tell them he had lost the blueprints for the original sheds. “What you see will guide your construction. Every shed should resemble its father.”

He spoke to them from the door of the barn. I sat at the table watching for signs of discord, for cracks deepening between him and the men, but his body blocked my view of the others. I was angry at him for hiding the job training, and the way he spread his arms across the entrance—to prevent me from seeing the men and their reactions—frustrated me even more. He pulled the door close to his shoulder until he filled the opening fully. I could see only his back, only his thighs, only the white sky in which his head seemed to hover.

# seventeen

A TENUOUS PEACE permeated the barn after Dyson left, the sort of calm that follows a storm, or precedes it. My head pulsed to the beat of men slamming hammers. I tried sketching notes for Power In Emotions—or PIEs, the therapy session I would lead that afternoon—but my hangover blotted out every thought. I stretched over the table and crossed my arms into a pillow, then plummeted into sleep. I dreamed of knuckles and fists pounding front doors, thousands of clenched hands drumming down on a plank of wood toothpicked over a hole in the earth.

“Grub time!” someone shouted from outside the barn. “Building sheds all morning. Looking for the grub we deserve.”

I rolled off the table, brushed the sleep out of my eyes. My arms tingled from having been slept on. Saliva caulked my mouth. My stomach was like a vise. I lurched to the door where the men crowded the entrance, sweating and red. Their tracksuits, unzipped to the stomach, exposed forests of curly, graying hair.

Gerry rushed past me. “Where’s he at?” he said. He circled the table twice, ducked down to peer underneath it. Leon hooked his fingers into the fencing and peered inside the pantry.

“Dyson is preparing the evening lecture,” I said.

“I swore I saw him outside,” said someone else. “Coming this way.”

“Not even a minute ago,” Gerry added.

The men scrambled outside but returned disappointed.

“So Dyson’s really not coming?”

“Not even just to say hi?”

“You don’t need Dyson to eat,” I said.

“What’s for lunch?” Randy asked.

I couldn’t remember what we planned to feed them. But the bran flakes and the rice milk remained on the table. “Your stomachs are still very sensitive,” I said. “Please grab a bowl and form a line at the front.”

“You’re kidding me,” said Gerry. He waved in disgust.

“Dyson went over this, Gerry,” said Peter. “The bran flakes are fortified with every nutrient we need to thrive and survive.” Of all the men, only he appeared untouched by the work, hair combed, no dirt on his face, track jacket zipped to the neck. I wanted to thank him but couldn’t. I’d decided to have an adversarial relationship with the men, and although I appreciated Peter’s kindness—though a small, embarrassed part of me found his protectiveness endearing—I didn’t want to complicate the roles we played for each other.

Before I could give the men permission to eat they were already finished, bowls tipped to their mouths as they slurped chunky puddles of milk. They fled the barn without cleaning up. Peter remained at the table. He patiently lifted the spoon to his mouth. “Eat faster,” I told him.

He pointed to his full bowl. “Isn’t this our time to reflect?”

“Please get out,” I said.

“Happy to,” he said.

Alone, I let my resentments tangle and strengthen. I resented the men for ignoring me, for rushing through lunch, I resented Dyson for bringing me here, and, most of all, I resented Lucas Devry for igniting the fuse on my life. PIEs started in twenty minutes. But I didn’t want to lead the session. I had no plan and little headspace to sketch out a plan. Yet canceling would only embolden the men. I couldn’t surrender anything to them.

Dyson kept a box of golf pencils and a legal pad full of recipe notes in a kitchen drawer. I would make them write out their feelings, a simple, introductory task that should prevent them from speaking. I tore out twelve clean sheets of paper, then carried them and the pencils with me to the clearing. The men clustered around the sheds as if they were teenagers smoking. Two men stood on opposite sides of a plywood board tossing a hammer back and forth. Randy awarded points based on the difficulty of the catch. William Gremb—the Yoga Man—squatted and flattened his tongue against the shed’s door. He kept it

pressed to the wood as he rose to a stand. Upright, he bowed with his hands in prayer.

After some coaxing, the men formed a circle on a patch of grass. The barn draped its shadow over us. I passed around supplies. “Power In Emotions sessions will parallel your physical and intellectual training, helping uncover unconscious emotional barriers. The body cannot improve without the growth of the heart and the mind.”

Gerry lifted his hand.

“Dyson is working on the evening lecture,” I told him. My eye started twitching.

“Why wasn’t Dyson at lunch?” someone asked without raising his hand.

“We’ve been over this.”

“I’m still hungry.”

“Dinner is five hours away.”

“What does Dyson think of these sessions?”

“We should begin,” I said.

“How long will this last?”

“We were in the middle of Hammers.”

“But Dyson will be here for dinner, right?”

I had no intention of hurting the men. But they had refused my civility. Kindness made them hostile. My passivity only fueled their aggression. “Does everyone have a pencil?” I asked. “Does everyone have a slip of paper?” I could’ve made them write. I could’ve told them to ask themselves why they felt compelled to challenge whatever I said. I tried to feel sympathy for them. *These men are depressed, jobless, and broke, possibly suicidal*, I thought. *They deserve a supportive environment*. Looking at them, I didn’t see twelve downtrodden men in need of my help but twelve tormentors trolling me. They were no different from the protestors outside my apartment. Before the men had arrived, during one of our walks in the woods, Dyson told me that all men were raised to believe that pain is necessary for growth. *They recognize change only through pain*, he said. *It’s a pervasive problem for men*. A problem, sure, but one we ought to have used to our advantage—we needed every advantage—not all the time, of course, but only during extreme circumstances, such as this one. I was angry at them. And I

wanted to hurt them. I believed seeing them hurting might free me of my anger, as if justice were some kind of cosmic seesaw in which bringing them down might lift my spirits. This is not justice, however. This is revenge. And there is no end to revenge. That's the point of it.

"First," I said, "bunch up your paper and toss it over your shoulder.... I'll wait."

They did as I asked, perhaps thinking I would cancel the session.

"Now hold your pencil in your dominant hand... okay? Everyone ready? Peter, I see—okay good. Now—and this is very important—are you listening? Now: take that pencil and jam the point into your nondominant palm."

The men didn't move.

"Until it breaks," I said. "Begin."

Randy Dent raised his hand.

"Begin," I said.

Randy said, "You want us to—"

"Begin."

Randy lowered his hand. One man cautiously tapped the point into his palm. The Cheater Man slipped the pencil through fingers, faked a yelp. A twitch of a hurt crossed a third man's face when the point hit skin.

Nothing they did satisfied me. They weren't hurting themselves—they were faking it, trying to protect themselves. "I told you to jam the point until it breaks."

Hughie, the Sports Man, was the first to do as I asked—perhaps out of some residual impulse to please coaches. He rocketed his pencil into his palm and shouted, "Touchdown!" Leon followed Hughie's lead, though he shouted, "Hoo-rah!" as the point entered his skin. Dr. Mapplethorpe ground his pencil in, yowling and shuddering.

The pain he brought on himself was more intense than I anticipated. Unconsciously, I winced at the sight of blood in his palm. The men noticed this and seemed pleased by my reaction. My tenderness excited them—here was proof that I could be rattled, proof they could disturb me by hurting themselves. Soon all of them were digging their pencils into their palms, twisting the points deeper and shrieking.

“Softer!” I shouted. It was hard to hear me through their screams.

Blood ran over their wrists. They grunted with serious hurt, trying to prove—I couldn’t tell what. That they could handle more pain than I had anticipated? That they would happily sacrifice themselves if it meant hurting me?

“Snap your pencils in half if you haven’t yet broken the point.”

They poked themselves with the jagged wooden heads. They grinned feverishly, prepared to continue for hours, days. I was disgusted with them, but even more so I was angry at myself, gummy with guilt for proposing this plan. I had already watched too much of this. I fled into the woods. The men cheered my retreat.

I couldn’t return to the cabin—not without an explanation. *This is exactly what we’re trying to prevent*, Dyson would say. *We didn’t bring these men here to hurt them*. For a short while, I hid behind a tree watching Dyson swim, taking comfort in the choppy rhythm his arms made in the water. Deeper into the forest, I crossed brooks, heaved heavy stones, petted lichen, punted a mushroom, stared into the eyes of a fawn. When dusk shrouded the forest I returned to the cabin, knowing Dyson would be giving the lecture by then.

The cabin was a cage. I paced from toilet to couch, glancing out the porthole window over the sink every time I passed. I rinsed my hands. Dried them. Rinsed them again. I wiped the kitchen table. I flipped through Dyson’s movies, but nothing appealed to me. Each task distracted me from thinking about the enraged lecture I feared he was giving the men: the gasoline poured over their burning sense of injustice. Barney trailed me through the cabin yowling for attention. I lifted him into my lap and scratched behind his ears, under his chin, and eventually the consistency of his purring settled my nerves.

The alone time freed me to drain the hot spot and check my email. There were fewer threats than normal—only two emails after a few days offline—and I was excited to find a message from Roger Handwerth. *Cassandra told me you’re an independent thinker*, he wrote. *I thought you might want to research DAM on your own*. He linked to a bright web page where *DAM* appeared in black block letters. Beneath it: *Defense Against Mistakes*. Beneath that: *A Roger Handwerth*

*Project.* The Investors page described DAM as a “Revolutionary Web Browser Extension That Guarantees Users *Preventative Atonement*.”

DAM planned to launch in three months.

I searched for photos of Roger online, hoping to attach a body to the emails. The person I found was a tall, enthusiastic-looking Black man who wore clear glasses and tailored suits. The more I searched, however, the fewer results appeared, even when I restarted the search. Soon the only photos remaining were too hazy to discern his features, zoomed to a pixelated porridge, but those, too, began disappearing—*poof*—and I couldn’t be sure I hadn’t hallucinated them.

Dyson’s footsteps crunched through the forest. I slapped my laptop shut and turned off the lights, scrambled upstairs, and slipped beneath the covers. I breathed deeply and loudly as if I were sleeping. He unlaced his shoes at the door. “Sasha,” he said, his tone unnerving and patient. I’d never had any reason to fear Dyson, not once in my life, but as he repeated my name, louder each time, I imagined shrinking my body small enough to hide among the skin flakes and mites in our sheets.

“I saw the lights shut off from outside,” he said. “I know you’re awake.” The rope ladder groaned under his weight. He crouched at the foot of the bed, shaking my leg. “Sasha, we need to talk about this. Whatever you did. Because—Jesus. I would never force them to... it sounds so... the way they described it... Sasha... you showed them how foolish it is to chase pain, how abundantly absurd to think pain brings you anything other than pain. They spent their lives indoctrinated by that mind-set. No pain no gain. When the truth is: no pain no pain. I’ve been stressing that to them for months and you made it so obvious to them in one afternoon. Sasha—your mind. Your techniques. You’re—How else can I say it? You’re brilliant.”

I opened my eyes.



# eighteen

JOB TRAINING CONSISTED of Dyson reading from PDF summaries of *For Dummies* books on subjects of the men's choosing, including but not limited to Video Editing and Web Design and Graphic Design and Carpeting and Embalming and Air Conditioner Installation and Air Conditioner Removal and Professional Blogging and Entrepreneurial Elocution and Chinese and Spanish and French and Husbandry (Bovine) and Husbandry (Poultry) and the most popular subject: Acquiring Wealth in the Digital Age.

# nineteen

MY RELATIONSHIP HISTORY was littered with jelly-brained lunks: men who quoted Joe Rogan at dinner, who blew their savings on collectible knives, men who brewed IPAs in their best friends' basements, who proposed marriage at basketball games and would fight anyone who didn't think the first *Lethal Weapon* was a classic. I fucked them because I liked predictable men, the guarded and repressed. Sensitive men couldn't be trusted; they assumed their sensitivity made them special, deserving of praise. Most sensitive men were, at their cores, narcissists who constructed elaborate expectations for how relationships were meant to evolve. When those expectations weren't met, the façade of sensitivity deteriorated into a petulant rage.

What I knew about sensitive men I learned from Blake Dayes. I met him after a fundraiser for K.L.I.C.K., an organization that paired underprivileged children with digital cameras. Cassandra brought me along as her plus one. This was six months before my appearance on *Wake Up! America*, six months before Lucas Devry's death. Cassandra's meditation practice wasn't any more popular than ABANDON—she had three thousand fewer followers, actually—but she knew powerful people in powerful places who threw powerful parties to honor their power. She reveled in wielding her influence for me. "It's absolutely *crucial*," she said, "that people with privilege use it to advance the careers of people like you."

She drifted away from me as soon as we entered the party. I was approached by Sy Cunningham, an acclaimed podcaster who had recently completed a month-long silent retreat in a derelict boathouse. "I developed a profound admiration for my pulse," he told me. I got the sense he isolated himself only to later tell people about it. We stood amid a crowd of bright, beautiful people with

cocktails cooling our hands. Sy wore a tuxedo the color of matcha. Product weighed down his curly black hair. A mole poked out of his lip and it took everything in me not to touch it.

“Have you listened to *Sylence*?” he asked.

“You’re *that* Sy?” I said, like I didn’t already know. People like Sy preferred to reveal their identities, like superheroes peeling off masks for the public.

*Sylence* consisted of sixty minutes of silence—plus two segments from sponsors—and on rare occasions, it was rumored, Sy could be heard breathing into the mic. His most committed listeners argued for the authenticity of these moments with the enthusiastic paranoia of alien abductees. Syphers, they called themselves.

Sy placed his empty glass on a passing tray. “These parties are such an illusion,” he said. I couldn’t tell whether he was trying to sleep with me or I was trying to sleep with him. “They don’t mean anything. Never have. I don’t know what keeps bringing me back.” His words dripped with the cultivated weariness of familiarity. He’d been born on the Upper East Side, the only son of a hedge fund manager and a hedge fund manager’s wife. He’d been raised in parties thrown by people who hated parties. His indifference was a brand on his back, proof he belonged among those who spoke the language of strategic confessions and origin stories.

Where I grew up, weariness and indifference arrived in the form of soul-bruising lethargy, in phrases like *What can ya do?* Indifference resulted from being treated indifferently. At events like this, talking to people like Sy, I felt as if I were crossing a rickety wooden bridge, clutching the frayed rope handles, stepping over rotted slats in the bridge, and waiting to plummet into the canyon beneath. But the topic of weariness bored me, and, when our conversation lulled, I asked a question I loved asking strangers: “What’s your least favorite city?”

“Party questions,” he scoffed, then excused himself. The bridge cracked under my feet.

On a white steel stage at the front of the room, an acoustic guitarist tapped the mic. He was tall and conventionally pretty, like an old church, with long maple hair pulled back in a ponytail. His posture was as stiff as a telephone pole.

“I’m Blake Dayes,” he said. “And I have one question for everyone here: What have you done for love today?”

Instead of listening to him sing, I wondered what I had done for love that day, wondered what Blake had done, always returning to him, the center of gravity in the room. After three songs, he disappeared into an unmarked door in the corner. The crowd gave him a bewildered ovation.

Claire Lance, the founder of K.L.I.C.K., stepped onstage. She was as trim and sharp as her name and wore her platinum hair in a bob cut with a saber. Her appearance had the permanence of a mountain. She lived outside of time, outside of judgment. In addition to K.L.I.C.K., she’d founded dozens of orphanages in sub-Saharan Africa so stylish and modern—the orphans dressed immaculately—that no one criticized her for having a white savior complex.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” she said. “Your generous donations this evening will help put cameras into the hands of over five hundred malnourished children.” As everyone clapped, I surveyed the crowd for Blake, convinced he was the only interesting person at the party. “When I started K.L.I.C.K., I never dreamed of a day like today. We have done so much for these children. But the fight must continue until all underprivileged children have access to documentation.” More clapping. “This evening, it is my profound honor to unveil the First Annual K.L.I.C.K. Silent Auction, sponsored by *Sylence: The Podcast*. Soon, you will have an opportunity to bid on photos taken by actual K.L.I.C.K. children.” Purple drapes were drawn back from the wall behind her to reveal a grid of framed photos.

The photographs were familiar to me, with their dim living room lighting, the cabinets full of bulk off-brand junk food, the tables cluttered with colorful bills, the harried mothers on couches clutching their feet, the fathers dunking their heads in their gnarled hands, the dismantled automobiles on cinder blocks in overgrown yards, the carved-open Sheetrock in half-remodeled bedrooms, empty change jars in kitchens, inflatable mattresses deflated on living room floors. The photos reminded me of the apartments I’d shared with my parents before they split up; I saw in these houses the houses of aunts and uncles who lived in the impoverished wake of shuttered factories in Pennsylvania, aunts and uncles and cousins I hated to visit out of an unspoken fear their misfortune

might infect me. Though I knew enough to feel embarrassed of my upbringing—at least, compared to the other guests here—I never considered myself poor. My parents were just well-off enough to fear the shame that poverty carried. If they couldn't afford something, they bought it on credit, and every few months they opened new credit cards to pay off the old ones, constructing an elaborate ouroboros out of their debts. All that effort landed them on the wall: alien enough to be bought, studied, commented on. More than anything: pitied. Farther down the wall were starker depictions of woe, photographs taken by children who lived on the streets, refugee children, the children of addicts. Bidding on those started at twice the amount of the photos familiar to me.

"All proceeds support the continued efforts of K.L.I.C.K. to ensure our mission will thrive far beyond our lives." She smiled. Flashbulbs erupted. The crowd applauded volcanically.

The photographs beamed on me like a spotlight from a guard tower. I split the crowd for the exit and didn't look back, fearing my expression might betray shame rather than pity.

Cassandra gripped my wrist. "It's devastating," she said, hand on her heart. "The lives of these children make me want to weep for a week."

I told her I didn't feel well.

"Oh, I get it," she said. "How could anyone feel well around photos like this?"

"It's not the photos."

"I'm lucky I haven't fainted. I want to take every one of these children into my home. Oh, dear, I wish there was more to do for them than bid."

"Bidding won't do anything for them."

"Pessimism is poison, Sasha. I'll loan you some money. Pay me back whenever you—No. I'll *give* you the money."

If she didn't know why the photos unsettled me—after all, I'd called off work to join her here—then I didn't want to tell her. Instead, I accused K.L.I.C.K. of fraud, knowing she would be swayed by righteousness. "We don't even know where the money is going," I said. "Does it all go to the children or back to Claire Lance's hair-dying fund?"

"I pulled a lot of favors to get you on the guest list."

"I can't participate in this," I said.

She reluctantly agreed to leave on ethical grounds. Outside, she said, "Word of advice: open up to tolerance and forgiveness. You're so quick to refuse things, to find reasons not to participate. You hold so many grudges. But you need to accept the world with all of its flaws."

"Why leave if that's what you think?"

"If the fundraiser made you uncomfortable then I want to show my support." She draped her hands over my shoulders, leaned close, clouding me in the scent of mint and lavender. "I say this because I love you, Sasha. Your intensity can be very off-putting. People just feel it. Sy Cunningham told me about you."

"He mentioned my name?"

"You're always wanting something. You're always *trying*."

"I don't think I even told him my name."

"You didn't. He described an antsy woman, or nervous woman. And my heart sunk when it dawned on me that it was you. People don't like people who want something from them."

"But I do want something from them. I want the same things you want from them: their attention, their support, their money. I *need* their money. Unlike you."

"Whoops. Rewind," she said, then contorted her mouth. She held up her palm as if carrying something and flicked away that invisible something: my comment. All was forgotten, for now. "Only by wanting nothing do we receive anything," she said, posing, chin up. A red sedan pulled up. The passenger window buzzed down. "Cassandra Hanson?" said the driver. Cassandra slipped into the back seat. Traffic swallowed her car.

I paced in front of the venue entrance, agonizing over her comments about my intensity. The same red car paused at the curb. Cassandra stepped out.

"Did you forget something?" I asked.

"The rest of my evening." She waved over her shoulder as she entered the building.

"Can I bum a cigarette?" someone behind me asked.

"Do I look like I smoke!" I shouted, before I saw who'd spoken.

Blake Dayes stood at my back, guitar slung on his shoulder. "That's a relief," he said. "My grandmother, she died of lung cancer."

"Mine, too," I lied. "I shouldn't have shouted."

"Smoking is so disrespectful," he said. "Everyone gets so mad about manspreading, but smoking is magnitudes worse. It's airspreading. Spreading your air into other people's air without permission. Give me a manspreader over an airspreader any day."

"Absolutely," I said. Something about him made me want to agree with whatever he said.

"You know I saw you from the stage, while I was performing. You have such an arresting presence. I could barely concentrate."

I apologized.

"Never apologize. If this is going to work, you have to promise me to never apologize."

"If what is going to work?"

He paused. "Do you promise?"

I promised.

"Good. Now let's get off the street. I know a great place nearby."

"I don't normally drink."

"You don't drink or you don't drink in public?"

I smiled.

"This place is always empty," he said. "No one will ever know."

Normally, I resisted pickup attempts like Blake's, with their mix of presumption and force, but the K.L.I.C.K. photos and Cassandra's "advice" had made me pliable. Blake brought me to an underground dive full of torn black booths that smelled like acetone.

"Blake Bear!" the bartender growled when we entered.

"Get a beer," Blake told me. "Henry's the worst bartender in the city. He can barely scoop ice into a glass."

"Quit hauling around that stupid guitar," Henry told Blake. To me: "I'm guessing he hasn't sung to you yet if you're here. He's no musician. His voice sounds like a car on fire."

"I heard him perform earlier," I said. "It was wonderful."

Blake pointed his thumb at me. "See?"

"That's the problem with Blake," the bartender said. "He's lovable—worst part about him. It conceals all his glaring and dangerous flaws."

*Oh, Henry! How I should have listened to you.*

Blake flipped him off, then leaned over the bar for a back-slapping hug. The bartender's warning only endeared me to Blake. After a night among grifters at K.L.I.C.K., I was happy to observe their intimate derision.

"Something tells me you're both awful," I said.

"Right on the money," said Henry, laughing. "This one's very perceptive."

Over stiff whiskey sodas, parked at the bar's darkest and stiffest booth, Blake unloaded his life on me like dirt into a grave: he told me about his unwed hippy parents and his twin older sisters and the freight train that passed behind his childhood home in rural Wisconsin—he used to sit on his roof watching the train pass, imagining himself riding it into a larger, exciting world "where I could be who I wanted to be." It was the cheesiest thing I ever fell for.

It was my turn to spill. I told him about feeling mortified by the photos at K.L.I.C.K.

"I'm never working for K.L.I.C.K. again," he said. "In solidarity with you."

"You barely know me," I said. It occurred to me he hadn't even asked for my name yet.

"That's because names are chains to the people we aren't," he said. "I wish I could throw *Blake Dayes* in the river. Every time I say *Blake* you think of every Blake you've known before me. I'm not those Blakes, but those Blakes shoulder in alongside me. I say we abolish permanent names. Everyone we meet should assign us a name of their choosing."

I was charmed by his enthusiasm. With a laugh, I asked, "What would you call me?"

He leaned over the table and took my hands in his, circled his thumbs in my palms. "This is tough because, as you said, I hardly know you. I don't even know where you're from. But based on our evening so far—and what an amazing evening—I think I'd call you... Sasha."

"Shut up." I yanked my hands free. "You had to have known."



He swore he didn't—and he maintained this through the end of the relationship, committed to fabricating a profound sense of insight and mystery. In time, I would find his stubbornness obstructive; like a skyscraper blocking the sun. But that evening, I felt the first splash of attraction. I wanted him; I wanted him to want me back.

Later that night, on the steps of my building, he gave me a syrupy kiss at once passionate and reserved. He seemed above the kiss, as if I weren't worth a fully committed make out. I invited him inside, planning to sleep with him and move on.

"Not yet," he said.

"You're assuming a lot," I said, feeling stung. I hadn't been refused like this in years.

"It's not an assumption." He spun on his heels and skipped into the lamplit night.

The next morning, he sent me a link to his first album, *Dayes and Days*, a plaintive four-track EP about former lovers and sunsets. My fascination with Blake lunged toward love with every repeated listen. Love came easily to me. Normally, I tried lovers on like dresses. But Blake was different. Something about him clawed into me—he didn't want me. And I found myself frustrated by every text that wasn't from him, angry at every hour apart.

He became my boyfriend. I, his girlfriend. And as his girlfriend I discovered that, more than a girlfriend, he wanted an audience. He not only absorbed me into that role; he made me feel special for filling it. He praised himself constantly, quoted his lyrics in conversation, often in support of something I had said, and after meals we would amble through the streets as he tested out lyrics, singing softly enough so only I heard. These walks gave me the feeling of slipping inside the world's most fragile glass box, a box, I believed, he had created solely for me.

Around him, I tended to blend. It's like this with men who imagine futures for themselves. They arrive driving a car. *Get in*, they say. I wanted to see where it took me. Not because I wasn't ambitious. ABANDON thrived over the course of our relationship, becoming more popular than I had ever predicted, and I wanted it to grow even bigger—yet the future we envisioned was his. It left little room for what I wanted, and I loved him enough to pretend this wasn't a

problem. At his shows, I stood near the bar—as if I were Dyson in an ad for Blake’s life—excited that the man at the center of everyone’s attention would come home with me. I let this dynamic continue because I believed I knew the person no one else knew: the vulnerable person hidden inside the musician perched on tipping stools.

What I loved about loving a performer was believing they never truly performed in front of me. I believed in two intertwined but separate Blakes: Blake Dayes the musician conflicted with the authentic Blake I loved. The Blake I loved offstage was goofy and weepy, prone to puns, sensitive to fluorescent lighting, a fan of obstacle-based game shows, an eager and talentless cook, an unglum lover. A human. And around him, I freed my true self: giggly and gullible, a lounge, insecure, a late sleeper who woke to bedsheets wet by sweat, ticklish, cold-toed, an unintentional killer of plants, pessimistic, exhausted, alone. What a pleasure to know someone so secretly. I assumed he felt the same way about me.

In the final month of our relationship—though I didn’t know it was the final month then—Blake surprised me by booking us a posh cabin on the outskirts of my hometown. “I want to see where you’re from,” he told me. I assured him there was nothing to see. “Then show me nothing.” He wanted to spend the weekend with me alone—not with “my fans”—so we left our phones in the city.

Ditching my phone and the people inside it meant confronting the feelings I normally buried through work. Driving along the winding country roads to my hometown felt like riding a tongue into a mouth: This trip would end with both of us swallowed, dissolved in the belly of my childhood. Blake crooned cartoonishly to mock the top 40 hits on the radio. He considered these musicians beneath him, sellouts, but his envy was so obvious to me, and I felt closer to him—and distracted from my dread—by seeing into the feelings he’d never admit to.

By the time we made it to town, though, my eyes were dewy and red. I had no family around, no lovers to fear running into. My mother had moved to Virginia to live with an ex; she had promptly dumped him but remained in the South. But the last time I’d returned home, during my first year of college, Dyson was at his sickest—I feared I might dissolve into guilt on our trip.

“There’s still time to go back,” I said as we rolled into a gas station.

“I’ve come all this way to see the famous nothing,” Blake said, playing the part of a tourist. He kissed my ear, playing the part of my boyfriend. “I’m here to see what made you.”

“I made me,” I said.

“Then you’re the first landmark.” He pulled a disposable camera from his coat pocket and snapped a photo of me in profile, my mouth curled in amusement.

It was late autumn, cold enough for parkas and hats. The leaves had already fallen and what remained of the trees were the broken fingers of branches. The air smelled of hot tires and pennies. We went for a walk down Main Street—once the center of town, home to a hair salon and a toy shop and a used army surplus store—now home to a former hair salon and a former toy shop and a former used army surplus store and piles of wet wood scraps on the sidewalk. The front window of the salon had been shattered. No one cared enough to cardboard over the hole. “This isn’t a place to return to,” I said. “It’s a place to escape.”

“Deep,” he said with a smile. He loved to tease my self-importance.

A dollar store had replaced the old firehouse. The library had burned down. Bees had taken over the Dairy Queen. The post office had packed its suitcase and left in the night. All the pizza places remained pizza places but were empty, their open signs impatiently flickering. The cemetery had doubled in size (Lesterton prided itself on having the cheapest plots in the state). My mother’s day spa was now a kennel for exotic pets. The supermarket where Dyson stocked up for purges had become a retirement home. The elderly roamed the lot, clicking their canes.

I brought Blake to the only remaining landmark in town: the river behind the high school where everyone hooked up after class. We used to spread out behind the trees on the banks of the river, becoming adults, the sound of the rushing water muffling the awkward silence of teenagers fucking. Sometimes Dyson slipped out here to throw up after lunch. But runoff from a nearby M&M plant had been tainting the water for decades, the town had recently learned, and the

river had been diverted away from the school. Make Out Creek was reduced to a flaky-mudded riverbed.

“This town is so embarrassing,” I said. My fear of returning home had flattened into shame. “Everything here used to be something else.”

And then Blake unleashed the wisest and kindest thing anyone had ever said to me, the wisest and kindest thing that anyone had said to anyone, ever: “Everything in this town used to hurt you, you mean.”

My love for him leaped through the ceiling. “That’s exactly what I mean,” I said, and stretched up for a kiss.

We drove straight to the cabin—a luxurious cherrywood A-frame outfitted with flat-screen TVs and bay windows and a fireplace and Jacuzzi and a pair of espresso machines in the kitchen—and fucked without shutting the door. Over the weekend, Blake drafted new songs while I hiked or scripted future live streams for my followers. I spent entire mornings in a recliner at the window, sipping coffee, as Blake strummed his guitar. We shared sprawling dinners and laughed and fucked until the morning sun was glossing the windows. For the first time in years, I drank and smoked and relaxed in complete disregard of ABANDON. That was the public Sasha’s responsibility. The authentic Sasha, the Sasha having a romantic weekend with her lover—the authentic Blake—deserved to enjoy herself, and that meant living as decadently as she pleased.

Sunday afternoon, before leaving, I lounged on a moose-skin rug in front of the fireplace as Blake performed the song he’d been writing all weekend. “The True You” was about our weekend together: from Main Street to our talk at the riverbed to the smoking and fucking and drinking and eating. Blake had never written a song about me before, and though I loved the attention he paid me and the care that had gone into the song, I made him promise to never release it. I worried my followers would ditch me if they knew I’d been cheating on ABANDON.

“I love that you want to keep this for us,” Blake said. The fire crackled behind him. He kissed my forehead, my eyebrows, the bridge of my nose, my chin, my neck, each cheek, each ear, and finally my mouth. “This will be ours for as long as I love you,” he said. A contract masquerading as devotion.

This wasn't the last time we kissed, but it's the kiss I return to when I want to think fondly of our relationship. A month after the trip, Lucas Devry took his life. Blake dumped me. He accused me of sabotaging his career. I was a fraud, he insisted, a starfucker who had never deserved him. Our ending was not a breakup but a heave. He considered himself a plane taking flight; I was the weight he needed to cut to lift off.

Two weeks into my exile, Blake released "The You I Knew," a vindictive rewrite of "The True You" about a woman who hides her authentic self from her sensitive boyfriend. In describing our weekend together, he exposed the Sasha I showed only to him: who didn't adhere to the demands she made on her clients. My few remaining followers bailed.

*The you I knew*, he sang, *Was never the true you*. A song for idiots. A song for anyone who'd ever been hurt. A song I played on repeat to torture myself. I never lied to Blake once throughout our relationship—and I normally lied to my boyfriends, often out of boredom. But Blake never bored me. He may've been the first boyfriend I actually loved. I'd shown him parts of myself I'd never shown anyone. But he was too conceited to notice.

# what the men needed to know

*Your pain won't impress anyone.*

*The people your pain does impress aren't worth impressing.*

*Crying is worth it.*

*Talking is worth it.*

*Walls are not for punching.*

*Windows are not for punching.*

*Women and children and most other men are not for punching.*

*Top Gun is a terrible movie.*

*The Godfather is boring.*

*Be more like Peter.*

*No, you could not have gone pro if your knee didn't give out in high school.*

*Doors are not for slamming.*

*Mugs are not for throwing.*

*You're only trying to make people fear you because you're scared of yourself.*

# the difficulties of manhood: a questionnaire

## 1. Do you find it difficult being a man in this world?

- ☐ I find it impossible.
- ☐ Way harder than being a woman.
- ☐ It's just gettin' harder.
- ☐ There used to be a time when it was okay to be manly.

## 2. Choose one of the following that best describes you:

- ☐ Patriotic
- ☐ Virtuous
- ☐ Committed
- ☐ Athletic
- ☐ Ambitious
- ☐ Selective
- ☐ Passionate
- ☐ Enlightened
- ☐ Collegiate
- ☐ Youthful
- ☐ Helpful
- ☐ Driven
- ☐ Intellectual

**3. Choose one of the following that best describes you:**

- ☐ Unemployed.
- ☐ Underemployed.
- ☐ Jobless.
- ☐ Seething with rage over the difficulty of being a man.

**4. Men's problems are not discussed often enough in the media.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree.
- ☐ Agree.
- ☐ Somewhat Agree.
- ☐ Don't Disagree.
- ☐ Strongly Don't Disagree.

**5. Many communities (churches, men's groups, poker clubs, Proud Boys) promise to help men with their issues but fail to deliver.**

- ☐ Absolutely.
- ☐ Makes sense.
- ☐ No doubt.
- ☐ I've been saying this for years.

**6. What type of support do you most expect from a community?**

- ☐ Job training.
- ☐ Housing.
- ☐ Meals of an appropriate size.
- ☐ Physical and emotional detoxification.

**7. Core issues for men include (select all that apply):**

- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for how much food should be eaten.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for financial status.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for physical fitness.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for emotional intelligence.



- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for romantic relationships.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for parental duties.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for intellectual intelligence.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations for employment.
- ☐ Unreasonable expectations.

**8. I'm still so mad at my father.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree.
- ☐ Agree.
- ☐ Somewhat Agree.
- ☐ Don't Disagree.
- ☐ Strongly Don't Disagree.

**9. If I go missing people will look for me**

- ☐ True.
- ☐ False.

**10. If you answered "True" for the previous question, please discontinue completing this form.**

**11. Despite the failures of past communities, there is a community out there for me.**

- ☐ True.
- ☐ Very True.

**12. Communities foster the following positive outcomes:**

- ☐ Self-Confidence.
- ☐ Emotional Growth.
- ☐ Networking.
- ☐ Wealth.

**13. Communities are sometimes referred to as cults. This is \_\_\_\_\_**  
**(select one answer):**

- ☐ Unfair.
- ☐ Unconscionable.
- ☐ Shortsighted.
- ☐ Prejudiced.

**14. What credentials do you expect from the leader of a community?**

- ☐ Honorable discharge from the armed forces.
- ☐ Certificate of Excellence bestowed by the Sussex County Community College School of Performative Drama.
- ☐ Four-year degree.
- ☐ Trial by fire.

**15. My father never said “sorry.” It’s why I am how I am.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree.
- ☐ Agree.
- ☐ Somewhat Agree.
- ☐ Don’t Disagree.
- ☐ Strongly Don’t Disagree.

**16. The following phrase best describes me:**

- ☐ I am at risk of joining a man horde.
- ☐ I am not not at risk of joining a man horde.
- ☐ It is likely I will join a man horde if I continue on my current path.
- ☐ It is unlikely I am unlikely to join a man horde if I continue on my current path.

**17. The problem with being a man is that you’re always expected to stand in the spotlight.**

- ☐ Absolutely.

- ☐ Undoubtedly.
- ☐ Absolutely.
- ☐ I'm learning so much.

**18. Everything you've ever been told about being a man is a lie.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree.
- ☐ Agree.
- ☐ Somewhat Agree.
- ☐ Don't Disagree.
- ☐ Strongly Don't Disagree.

**19. How important is food in your life?**

- ☐ I'm sick of picking meat from my molars.
- ☐ I only eat microwave meals.
- ☐ Food just gets you in trouble.
- ☐ I've considered giving it up.

**20. Please list your favorite foods**

\_\_\_\_\_

**21. It's *so* hard for men in this world.**

- ☐ True.
- ☐ Very True.

**22. If a friendly, encouraging leader named Dyson possessing a Certificate of Excellence from the Sussex County Community College School of Performative Drama started a group called The Atmosphere at an abandoned summer camp in New Jersey for men to receive job training, coping skills, emotional support, housing, appropriately sized meals, and strategies for living safely out of the spotlight, if this was a place where you were free to be your truest self, where your earnings**

**could support a community that values and admires you, what would you say?**

- ☐ Sign me up.
- ☐ How do I join?
- ☐ That's what I need.
- ☐ Can I start today?

**23. The Atmosphere is your family now.**

- ☐ The Atmosphere is my family now.
- ☐ The Atmosphere is my family now.
- ☐ The Atmosphere is my family now.
- ☐ The Atmosphere is my family now.

# twenty

FOUR WEEKS AFTER the men arrived, Dyson mailed a letter to the news station that covered the Hertz Shirts incident. Inside was a single document: a questionnaire titled “The Difficulties of Manhood.” Dyson created the document in secret and mailed it in secret; he knew I wouldn’t approve of bringing unneeded attention to us. But he was adamant about correcting the false narrative that I was running The Atmosphere.

“I want to keep your name out of the press,” he said as he set up the cabin’s hot spot following the lecture. The station planned to run a story about us on the ten o’clock news.

“Are you trying to save my reputation or establish yours?”

“You always think the worst of me,” he said.

“Not always,” I said, but apologized nonetheless. It was true that I was losing confidence in him. The pressure of running a cult was eroding our friendship. We sniped. We griped. We willfully disengaged from the sort of conversations we had once considered essential to the success of The Atmosphere. At night, I no longer asked him how the lecture had gone; he no longer asked what the men and I discussed during PIEs. Most nights, when he returned after the lecture, we tuned each other out over movies, pretending the day hadn’t happened. Rather than try to regain the openness he and I once shared, I began to imagine opening up to Peter instead, assuming it would be easier to create something new than recover what I was losing with Dyson.

“The questionnaire isn’t perfect and it isn’t meant to be,” he said. “But it should bring us attention—and that’s what we need more than anything else.

Even bad attention. The worst thing you can be is boring when you're starting out."

"Bad attention won't get us investors," I told him.

"Not right away. But the most important thing is to get people interested, to join us on the journey, for better or worse. Because it's not success that makes money, Sasha; it's attention. All we need is attention. Then we get the investors. Then we begin the real work of reforming more and more men." He appeared to have no understanding of how investment worked. I had seen enough brands flourish and flounder to know that attention was not the only thing driving success, but I had no interest in proving my point to him so late in the night.

He started the news stream.

"Tonight," said a wooden-looking anchor on the ten o'clock news, "we bring you an update to our ongoing coverage of The Atmospherians: Who are they? What do they want? Today, Channel Eight News intercepted a secret document composed by disgraced self-help guru and current cult leader Sasha Marcus—or *Dyson*, as she now calls herself. The document, which appears to be some kind of questionnaire, outlines Marcus's recruiting practices and larger intentions, which include the castration of all unemployed males. Called The Atmosphere, Marcus's cult is intent on the eradication of men from society. To expand on this developing story, we will hold a roundtable discussion on the threat of The Atmosphere to men across America. Please be warned: excerpts from Marcus's document will be read on the air."

I stared at Dyson, who was staring at the screen, his mouth pried open in dismay.

"Good job clearing my name," I said.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," he muttered, face still trained on the screen.

"Men are naturally vulnerable," said a man on the screen. "Especially to the charms of womanly wiles. That's not sexist. That's just the truth."

"Amen," said another speaker.

"Mm-hmm," grunted a third.

"Our oldest human stories warn us about women like Sasha," said the first.

"She goes by *Dyson* now," said the host.

“Why would you write that I’m castrating men?” I asked. I was less angry than confused. It did us no good to lie to such an extreme. “Is this the attention you wanted?”

“I didn’t even mention you,” he said. “I didn’t mention you once. The document made it abundantly clear that you had nothing to do with The Atmosphere.”

“So you’re cutting me out of the story?”

“I’m taking what’s rightfully mine,” he said. He covered his mouth and screamed into his hands for what felt like a full minute. He cautiously removed his hands. “This is a good thing,” he said pleasantly. He was trying to convince himself. “This is what I wanted.”

“It’s not what I wanted.”

“It didn’t work out perfectly. But now they’re talking about us again.”

“Men already deal with enough,” said one of the speakers. “Now they have to be on the lookout for a cult leader luring them into a castration camp? With all the things men have to put up with already? This is too much. This is going too far.”

“This is exactly what we needed,” said Dyson. He gritted his teeth—though he seemed to think he was smiling.

I look back at this moment—at his envy, repressed rage—as the seed of the recklessness that would undermine The Atmosphere. Dyson was incapable of controlling himself but trying nonetheless. I wish I would have recognized what was brewing inside him at the time, because I might have been able to deter his thinking, to show him the value in being forgotten.

# what the men needed to know

*Women can tell when you're staring.*

*No one cares about your beer opinions.*

*Drink water.*

*Your father's generation did not do it correctly.*

*Your father's generation was not great.*

*Even more than war and muggers and illness and death, your father was scared of words. Simple little words, scared of speaking them, hearing them, writing them down on paper—and because of that you're scared of words.*

*Your mother cheated on your father.*

*Your mother wasn't a saint.*

*Your mother left you in the tub for too long, far too long.*

*That celebrity you met didn't wish you two could hang out alone.*

*If there is a secret to grilling, you do not know it.*

*Over 98 percent of those arrested for forcible rape are men.*

*Men make up nearly 60 percent of those arrested for fraud.*

*Your new jokes are even less funny.*



## twenty-one

THE MEN LEANED deeply over their crossed arms, sighing and rapping their fingertips on the table in impatient rhythms. Their stomachs grumbled lionishly. They were, we feared, bored of the Family Dinners. Six weeks of feasting and Emptying Out had hardened their excitement into workmanlike tolerance. Few men seemed to have come any closer to reaching their completion point in the program, and I was losing hope in any of them ever moving on. They continued building the sheds—six were now finished—but their effort was beginning to slow. The mix of purging, low-calorie meals, and the exercise sessions had taken a toll on their bodies. Collectively, the men lost 198 pounds, an average of 16.5 pounds for every man. Their faces had begun to disintegrate into their skulls, their cheekbones prominent. Bags darkened their eyes. Their skin became flaked and waxy, due to—or maybe despite—all the time they spent in the sun. The exercises stressed their joints; bruises pooled at their ankles, elbows, and knees. Their bones made sounds like splintering wood when they sat down or stood, loud enough to disturb me, though they never registered the noises. Their uniforms fluttered in the wind as they worked. A handful of men lost a handful of teeth. Everyone lost at least one—including Dyson, who was purging most nights, loudly enough to shock me out of my melatonin sleep-stupors. I never went downstairs to stop him. Instead, I let my guilt fester and swell; I muffled my ears with a pillow.

Peter, however, appeared to benefit from the intensity of the workout regimen. Running shaved the baby fat from his face and revealed a stark, marble-hard jaw. In the afternoons, as the men built sheds, he tended to a small vegetable garden on the east side of the barn. The work of hoeing and troweling

packed muscle on his shoulders and arms. His softness continued to appeal to me, especially compared to the other men's brutish simplicity. I took to bothering him as he weeded and watered. "What's that?" I would ask while strolling past, pointing at zucchini or carrots.

Peter always answered me kindly, even though I asked the same questions every day. "Zucchini," he would answer, or, "Carrots," and never make me feel foolish for asking—a habit of Blake's. I couldn't ask Blake anything without upsetting him. Peter's acquiescence was not sexy in its own right, though I found it an attractive corrective to Blake's selfish exasperation. I felt validated when I spoke to Peter. He listened to me; he answered me. Perhaps what I felt around him was powerful. Important. The same way I once did to my subscribers.

Dyson placed a roasted ham in the center of the picnic table. The men applauded, as was their custom, but it was feeble applause, the way someone might clap when an enemy wins an award. Despite their lack of enthusiasm, Dyson refused to cut Family Dinners from The Atmosphere. The questionnaire fiasco deepened his commitment to his vision. He needed to ensure his ideas continued to shape the culture. Outside The Atmosphere, word of "Sasha's Castration Cult" spread across newspapers and podcasts. Online petitions encouraged shutting us down; however, no one ever acted on the demands the petitions made. It was as if our detractors liked protesting us more than they liked putting an end to us.

Dyson wanted to protect *every* aspect of Family Dinners, in particular Emptying Out. These meals were the reward for the work the men put in through the week. Emptying Out might not have seemed like a reward, he assured them, but it taught them the fragile nature of progress and to never take their gains for granted, because at any moment what they considered they believed they deserved might be taken away from them. He feared the men might treat Family Dinners like regular meals—the canned veggies and rice they received Sunday through Friday—dismissing the planning (and emotional baggage) undergirding those dinners. Over the past weeks, he introduced new initiatives aimed at pleasing the men. Junk food was added to the menu—chips and cheese crackers and tiny bagel pizzas and sandwich cookies and salted

peanuts—so the Family Dinners came to resemble the binges we once shared at my house. The men slobbered down the junk even as their commitment to Emptying Out continued to wane, even with the aid of ipecac wine. Last week, Dyson had knelt with them at the trough, against my wishes, to inspire them through solidarity. Instead, his participation disturbed them. He was supposed to be *above* them, not of them, and all week they treated him with tepid civility verging on indifference.

So I proposed we try something different.

As Dyson sliced cuts of ham off the bone, I hammered a sheet of construction paper to the door. On it were this week's rankings.

"The last six weeks," Dyson said, "Sasha and I have ranked you based on undisclosed criteria. Now that the sample is large enough, we will share our findings."

I took a spot beside Dyson. "G.E.M.," I said, "or the Gustatory Enthusiasm Marker, measures your commitment to Family Dinners and Emptying Out. The interest you show in both activities is recorded, multiplied, and averaged to decide each Atmospherian's G.E.M. score. Over the past five weeks, only one of you consistently earned a perfect score." I paused.

Each man leaned back on the bench, prematurely proud of himself.

"The only perfect score," Dyson said, "belongs to Peter Minston."

Dyson and I were the only ones clapping now.

Peter raised his arm, bashfully accepting the praise.

"Peter, as a reward for your efforts, you are exempt from tonight's Family Dinner."

The news cratered the men.

"I can't possibly accept that," said Peter.

"You're not accepting anything, Peter," I said. "The honor is being bestowed upon you."

"This is a kick in the dick to the rest of us," Randy said.

"You all had every chance to improve your rankings," said Dyson.

"I'm not sure this is fair," Peter said.

"My G.E.M. was really that low?" asked Gerry.

“This type of rigged bullshit would never fly in the corps,” said Leon. “Hoo-rah.”

“Peter: Sasha will accompany you on a walk as the others partake in tonight’s activities.”

“But what will I eat?” he asked.

“You’ll eat with Sasha and I later tonight,” said Dyson. “You earned it, champ.”

The others stared hotly at Peter and me.

Outside, he asked me if the others would be mad at him.

“They probably already are,” I said.

The grisly sound of the binge bled through the barn. Hearing them eat sickened me. Peter felt the same way I did, or he said he did because he wanted to be alone with me—more alone than he already was—and we agreed to hike through the forest.

Past the bony frame of the sixth shed was the newest addition to camp: The Crucible. It was the latest addition to Dyson’s ongoing attempt to transform The Atmosphere into a funhouse replica of his childhood. He had collapsed his basement into the size of an outhouse. Mirrors covered the interior walls, including the ceiling. Every day, before dinner, each man spent ten minutes alone in The Crucible, naked, reflecting on what had led him here.

The men assured Dyson they had never known themselves so intimately.

Peter, however, found his daily ten minutes excruciating. “It makes me paranoid,” he said. “I don’t *reflect* on anything, and I leave feeling worse about myself and my body and with no desire to eat. Is that the point of it? To make us hate ourselves? To make us eat less?”

It wasn’t not the point. “Is that what you think the point is?”

“I shouldn’t complain,” he said. “I’m lucky I’m here. I’m a new person thanks to you.” Peter was precise with his words. By *you* he meant me, only me, and his confessed preference pleased and surprised me.

“You mean thanks to Dyson and me,” I said, toying with him.

“You’ve done way more than he has. For me, at least.” He blushed. Beneath the hesitant flirting huddled the boy Peter had been. I imagined that child, wearing outfits picked by his mother, eating the eggs she prepared, her licked

thumb wiping muck from his cheek. These helpless qualities intrigued me. It was helplessness without calculation. Again, I saw in Peter what Blake wasn't, though I wish I looked deeper than the superficial differences between them, because I never saw Peter, only the inverse of Blake—or what I believed was the inverse of Blake. My interest in Peter, I've come to realize, was not about Peter but about what he might grant me: the chance to empower myself in ways I hadn't with Blake. Blake reduced me. And perhaps the most accurate way to describe my attraction to Peter is that he made me feel the way Blake felt around me. Here was a chance to be more than the person I was with.

"Peter," I said. "Why are you here? The other men, they're vulgar and bitter. But you're so prudent. You planted a garden—it's charming. No one here is charming."

"You're charming," he said. It was the most brazen I'd ever seen him.

"You shouldn't flirt with me," I said.

He apologized.

"I didn't tell you to stop." I liked teasing him. And I felt a charge inside me, the same charge I often felt at my restaurant, or out at bars, that tingling thrill of someone wanting me.

We crossed into the forest. He stopped. "You can't judge me if I tell you why I'm here."

"I'm not a judgmental person," I said, and continued to walk.

Peter didn't move. "You have to promise or I'm turning around."

I chuckled at his seriousness. "Okay," I said. I lifted my right hand. "I promise."

He said nothing for some time but shifted his lips as we walked, tallying thoughts and working up the courage to speak.

"Just say it," I said.

"Man horde," he mumbled.

"What about them?"

"I was in one."

I said nothing for a long time. If he were anyone else, I would've thought he was joking. But Peter was too sincere of a person to joke. "Oh," I eventually said.

He cupped his hands over his face and muttered into his palms: “I knew you’d judge me. I knew it. I knew it. I knew it.”

“I’m surprised,” I said. “Dyson told me your greatest regret was something about avocados—eating too many?”

“I didn’t want them to think I was evil,” he said. “And I really did give up avocados, because I don’t know how anyone eats them—the waste that goes into producing just one. Twenty-five gallons of water. For what? Some guac?”

“Stick to the man horde,” I said.

He let out a trembling sigh and began.

After his mother died, he had no one to share his grief. His father had left decades earlier. He and his brother didn’t talk. He lived alone in the house where he’d watched his mother die over the course of six months, increasingly isolated, embracing the isolation—eating delivery every night, wearing headphones in public—until one day, while shopping for double-A batteries, Peter blacked out. He woke on his couch to the sound of police pounding on his front door. He and five other men had trespassed on an elderly woman’s property and weeded her vegetable garden, added fertilizer to the soil, picked a basketful of lettuce—all as the woman shouted in terror, demanding they leave. Peter was found guilty of criminal trespassing and sentenced to community service. It was recommended that he enroll in therapy. WHY was the cheapest available option. “I know how horders are talked about. You end up in a horde, it’s because you’re a freak, you’re evil. The others needed a story about me, so I gave them a story.”

Peter had always seemed so unintentionally forthcoming; like a sieve, things poured out of him through design. His duplicity shocked me even more than the horde.

“Dyson asked everybody, point-blank before we got here, whether we’d been in a horde,” he said. “I lied to him, Sasha. I had to lie to them all.”

Even more than I liked the idea of keeping a secret for Peter, I liked keeping one from Dyson. It was time I had something he didn’t. “It’ll stay between us,” I assured Peter.

He wrapped me in a hug but sprung back, apologized.

“Don’t apologize, Peter.” I laced my fingers with his, clutched and released.

On the walk, Peter nervously crunched through a bag of cough drops. He stayed ahead of me out of an impulse to protect. He pulled aside low-hanging branches, warned me against divots where I might turn an ankle. “Look out for rocks,” he said, dozens of times. At any other point in my life, I would’ve found this treatment condescending and obedient. But the deference he showed reminded me of hiking with Blake during our stay at the cabin, back when he pretended to care about me. Peter was Blake stripped of the vanity and middling music career. Peter was the Blake who never performed. He was a gift from the universe: a chance to correct all that went wrong.

During my exile, every spark of public hostility seemed directed toward me, until the man hordes offered the world new people to hate, other news to dissect. They gave me hope for a future of anonymity. They helped me lose track of myself. And knowing Peter had been in a horde filled me with a peculiar gratitude that veered close to attraction. I liked, too, that he had lied to Dyson and the other men about being in a horde. This complicated Peter, made him less ordinary—we both had secrets to hide. Sturdier intimacies have been founded on less.

The men were hosing the trough when we reached the tree line. Peter stopped me. “I know you don’t like it here, but we’re all grateful you’re here. You listen to us.”

“Dyson listens to you,” I said.

“He doesn’t hear us. Not like you do. You’re the reason this works.” He looked at his feet. “What I mean is you’re loved.”

“Are you flirting with me?” I asked. Though it was obvious.

“Only if that’s okay.”

Such frustrating caution. I leaned in to Peter; he did not lean away. His lips were soft and inviting and tasted of raspberry cough drops. It was a brief kiss but a thrilling one. I was starved for romance, for touch. When I backed away, Peter shuddered.

“Wowza,” he said, without any irony.

“Meet me tonight at The Crucible,” I said through a smile. I hooked my index finger around his. “Once everyone’s sleeping.”

He squeezed my hand in response.

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That night, Peter and I made out on a tree stump in the woods—he was too nervous to do anything else. The next night he went down on me in the barn, and the night after that we fucked in The Crucible, where the mirrored walls suctioned the bare skin of our buttocks and backs. I was on my period, but this didn't faze him, as it did most of the men I'd been with, nor did it shock him into pity as we cleaned up. He was an attentive, confident lover who rarely came. The pressure made him tense up. The few times he came, I had to cover his mouth, with both hands or my mouth, because he let out bullish grunts that would've awoken everything in the forest.

What was Peter to me? A lover? A distraction from my surroundings? A way to react against Dyson's increasing secrecy? He was all of these things to me, which is to say he was nothing to me, because he was never merely and entirely Peter. I wasn't interested in Peter but in how I made myself feel when we were together: powerful, sexy, admired, independent. I could say more about Peter—I want to say more about Peter—but I can't. It hurts too much to talk about him.



## twenty-two

SOMETIMES, AS PETER and I fucked, my mind flashed to him on his knees weeding the old woman's garden, bundling lettuce and kale as she shouted in terror. The line between his actions and those of the horders who heaved bricks was thinner than I liked to admit. What made him capable of the former made him capable of the latter, and capable of violence I didn't intend to imagine. The same thing that had driven him into the horde—his loneliness, his upbringing, his gender—would summon him back (men were three times as likely to horde if they'd been in a horde, according to the CDC).

I feared the existence of a threatening Peter lurking within him. Even he couldn't detect that part of himself. Someday, that Peter would wrap an arm around my Peter's neck and drag his obedient body into a horde. During sex, I tried to distract myself with his body. I tugged his waxy hair, I bit his neck, I dug my nails into his shoulders, his ass, pulled him closer to me, deeper inside me, an act of spellcasting that might silence that Peter inside, the one who wished to relapse.

## twenty-three

DURING THE EVENING lectures, I paced along the northern shore of the pond inside the sliver of cell service where Cassandra and I had spoken. She hadn't called since our fight. But every night I returned to the shore hoping to find a message from her. Every night she didn't reach out carved a fresh mark on my heart. After an hour of pacing, my hope would harden to anger. I'd grip my phone in both hands, shaking it like I might squeeze out a call if I clenched hard enough.

Normally, this resulted in emails from Roger Handwerth. *Your talent and experience would be crucial in making DAM one of the world's greatest technological achievements*, he might write (without explaining what he meant by *talent and experience*). *We know you'll fall in love with the lifestyle and the professional opportunities that only DAM can provide*. The idea of accepting a position—even just visiting—based on Cassandra's pitying recommendation curdled my stomach. But ignoring his pitches became harder and harder as Cassandra's and Blake's popularity continued to rise. Her online talk show received an afternoon slot on NBC, and Blake's album *The You I Knew* hit number four on the charts. The Atmosphere, meanwhile, was losing its hold on the public's imagination. Rumors were spreading that Martha Stewart had started her own castration camp, either inspired by mine or the inspiration for mine, and as she was a larger celebrity figure, all the attention once devoted to us had tilted over to her. This hurt Dyson more than he liked to admit. "I'm just glad your name's out of the news," he'd tell me when I asked him how he felt about these developments. "We could use this time to regroup and reassert ourselves, to remind ourselves of our core mission: helping the men." The men

were hardly any better than when they had arrived, and we were both paranoid over their waning interest in daily activities. The Atmosphere teetered on the brink of imploding. Despite Dyson's faith in attention, no one had stepped up to invest in our cause. According to Roger, DAM gained an average of two dozen investors a day.

One evening, during my pacing time at the pond, Roger's number showed on my screen. I let the call drift into voicemail and listened immediately to the message: *Sasha: Roger Handswerth again. It's June fourteenth, nearly a month since my last call. How's this weekend for a campus visit? We'll send a car to you—we know where you are. We'd love to bring you to campus to talk compensation. Please call me at your earliest convenience. This is, I regret, a time-sensitive offer.*

After a few more listens, I deleted the voicemail and sprinted back to the cabin, worried I'd stayed out too long. The lights were on when I returned. Barney was not on the doorstep yowling to go back inside. I took a few elongated breaths. "You didn't do anything wrong," I muttered, preparing to explain myself to Dyson. I hid my phone in my pocket—for all he knew, it was still at the foot of a tree—and opened the door.

"Hello, Stacy." Art Flemings was sprawled over the couch, his boots crossed on the armrest. Mud flaked the floor underneath them. Barney, that traitor, lay in his lap oozing a lathery purr.

I stepped into the kitchen and washed my trembling hands at the sink, feigning indifference. "It's illegal to break into houses," I said.

"The rules are different when you're an officer of the law."

"You're a firefighter."

"Let's not waste time on semantics."

Dyson flung open the door. "Where's my itty-bitty kitty?" He squatted and Barney ran to his hands. He scooped the cat up, took in the scene. "Am I interrupting something?"

"I'm the one interrupting," said Art. "I let myself in while Stacy was out."

Dyson gave me a *where were you?* look. Barney leaped free of his arms. He smiled at Art. "Well, tell us the good news," he said. "For what do we owe the invasion?"

“You’re so sensitive with your boundaries.” Art walked to the sink and filled a glass of water, remained at my side as he glugged it down. “I’m afraid there’s no good news. None from me. I’m here on official Johnsonburg business. Dyson. Stacy. I’m shutting you down.”

“Shutting what down?” asked Dyson.

“Don’t think for a second I like what I’m doing. Look at my hands.” He straightened his arms in front of his chest. “You can’t see the binds, but I assure you they’re tied. Tight as my granddaddy’s anus.”

I coughed in disgust.

“With all that’s happening across the country Johnsonburg can’t let unlicensed men congregate without supervision and permits.”

“I assure you our men are supervised,” Dyson said.

“But are they vetted? Have they been tested? These hordes aren’t just rescuing kittens anymore, okay. No more carrying grammies to doctor appointments. They’re throwing axes at taxis and stuffing firecrackers through mail slots. One of ’em drove a truck through the front of a pharmacy, I heard. Just think of all the repairs. Across the country, over six hundred million dollars in damages—and that’s only this month. Every four hours a new one’s bubbling up. Did you hear about the one down in Arkansas? Seven men scrubbed a pedestrian bridge—real good deed, I bet you’re thinking—until they curled over the railing, straight to their deaths. Three men in a Walmart turned handguns on themselves. Don’t think it’s some problem for the other side of the country. Last week—not even ten miles away, over in Willoughby—a horde formed in a hardware store and you know what they did? In a store stocked with hammers and saws and nail guns and chisels? It buckles me even to think about it. The horror of it.”

I gripped the counter so tightly my nails dug into the wood. “No need to tell us,” I said.

He said, “I’ll tell you what happened. These seven men pluck crowbars off the shelves and march into Home Renovations, where the families are shopping, the mothers and kids and effeminate dads, the ones who can’t protect themselves and their families, and these men step right up to the wall of paint cans, slapping

crowbars into their palms—and they pry off every one of those lids and start slopping paint over all the moms and kids and effeminate dads. *Red* paint.”

“Just paint?” I asked, disappointed.

“Terrible, right? Imagine that for a minute. You’re some little kid there with your mama begging her to buy you a pop or a candy bar, something they keep at the register, when all of a sudden your face is totally lacquered, sticky and dripping, and when you claw the paint out of your eyes you see seven spittle-faced lunks pouring a full can of paint on your mama. *Red. Paint,*” he repeated. “The lunks start lumbering toward you to get you again and you run for your life, slipping over the paint on the floor, splatting onto your stomach. You’re terrified. The men dump another can on your mama. Even if you escape, even if *nobody’s* hurt, you’re haunted for the rest of your life and it wasn’t even that bad. You’re lucky you didn’t get one of those bad hordes. One of the hordes that strangles puppies or topples trees in your yard. Imagine that. Those spittle-faced lunks sawing the maple your granddaddy planted.”

“Tell us what you need from us,” I said.

“I need you to tell me how many men you have in this camp—what is it you call yourselves again?”

“We don’t have a name,” Dyson said.

“Because I’ve been hearing that a castration cult is somewhere around here.”

“Twelve men,” I said. “We have twelve men total.”

“Including you?” Art asked Dyson.

“Thirteen,” he said.

“Just over the limit,” he said.

“You’re harassing us,” I said. “You broke into our house.”

“Your cat let me in.”

“Don’t you need a warrant?” asked Dyson.

“In a state of emergency all I need is a list of your men. It’s the law now: Any collection of men numbering higher than twelve must be vetted for P.H.I.: Prior Hording Involvement. This isn’t me trying to piss on your party. As of today, it’s federal law. Passed in emergency session.”

Dyson and I nodded along like *Of course, I remember.*

Art said, "This isn't just about you. We're checking all collections of men: basketball teams and football teams and barbecue joints and any number of dens and god knows how many boards of directors and the legislatures in over thirty-two American states—not just the ones run by Republicans, mind you. No one is above the law. Not with the crisis we're facing. I'll need to run your men through our database to check the P.H.I. status of the men in your club."

I blanched at the thought of giving up Peter—not so much Peter, but the release our sex had been bringing me. "What if we do?" I asked.

"Then I do what the law does. I take 'em away. For your safety. And the safety of the fine people of Johnsonburg—none of whom are happy about y'all being so close to town."

"That's all you need?" Dyson asked. "A list of names and you leave us alone?"

"That or a bribe." He winked.

"Aren't you a cop?" I asked.

"Fire department."

Dyson lowered the kitchen table from the wall. He sat down and started to write.

"First and last," Art said. "And middle if you got 'em."

"No need," I said. I slid the legal pad away from Dyson. "No need to go through the trouble of searching your database, Art. It must be time-consuming and expensive."

"Like you wouldn't believe."

"It's okay, Sasha," said Dyson. "All our men are clean."

"We have a man who's been in a horde," I said. "I'll give you his name."

"What man?" Dyson asked.

"What man?" Art asked.

"Leon Cranch," I said.

For weeks, Dyson had criticized Leon for his reckless effort and drive and for saying *Hoo-rah* after every sentence he finished. Leon tried very hard, but he hadn't finished above eleventh in a single one of our rankings. He purposefully coughed as others were trying to speak. He was expendable to me—a sacrifice worth protecting Peter. Dyson chewed his cheek, deciding whether Leon was expendable to him. I grew hot with shame watching him make up his mind. He

might not have liked Leon, but he wouldn't toss him aside. He didn't give up on people—if he did, The Atmosphere wouldn't exist. I wouldn't be here.

Art pulled a notebook out of his pocket. “How do you spell it?” he asked me.

I gave my feet a long look.

Dyson said: “*Leon* is spelled how you'd expect it. And that's *Cranch* with a C.”

“He admitted it during our therapy session,” I said, rejuvenated by Dyson's collusion. “He was in a gruesome horde a few months ago. One of those violent ones.”

“What did they do?” Art asked.

“Please don't make her repeat it,” said Dyson.

“My apologies,” Art said. He jotted down Leon's name in a notebook he kept in his breast pocket. “I'll still have to run it through the database.”

“You can do that or you can trust us,” I said.

“The law's a precise science,” he said.

“It's also a timely science,” said Dyson. “And if the hordes are as dangerous as you say it's best we get Leon out of here quickly. Tonight.”

“We don't want him infecting the others,” I said. “That's how it happens, right? One man turning makes the other men turn. And relapse rates, for horders, it's something like—”

“Eighty-seven percent,” Art said. “We need to fix it before there's no fixing it.” He unclipped a walkie-talkie from his belt and stepped outside to call for backup.

After weeks of drifting apart, I'd forgotten the fun of scheming with Dyson. We were children again, back on the bus lying to the driver. “This is so perfect,” I said.

“Who are you hiding?” Dyson asked.

“Come on. You've hated Leon since he got here.”

“Because he's easy to hate,” he said. “That doesn't mean he was in a horde.”

“Art wanted a name, we gave him a name. Art gets to be a hero.” I deepened my voice, scare-quoted: “*To protect the fine people of Johnsonburg.*’ And we're off the hook. We cut down to twelve—the safe number—and free ourselves of the worst man in the camp.”

“Art said you weren’t here when he got here.”

“Art says so many things.”

“Where were you?”

“So this is what we’re doing? We’re enjoying ourselves a minute ago and now you’re interrogating me. Like I’m a criminal. Like I’m breaking curfew. Fine, Dyson: I went for a walk to get fresh air and alone time. Barney’s a monster when you’re not here.”

“The last few nights I woke up and you were gone. Midnight. One AM. Are you meeting one of the men? Maybe Leon? Maybe something bad happened between you.”

“Maybe I don’t like listening to you make yourself sick, Dyson. Maybe it hurts me to hear you because I don’t know how to make you stop.” It was one of those rare, invincible lies: the lie so entangled with truth it may as well have been true. No, I didn’t leave to escape the sound of him purging—but the sound *did* hurt me; I *didn’t* know how to convince him to stop.

Dyson flopped onto the couch, hands in his hair. “If something happened between you two you can tell me,” he said, genuine care in his voice.

“Something happened between us,” I said, so monotone he’d have to know I was lying.

“Thank you,” he said. He needed a reason to send Leon away.

Art popped his head into the cabin. “The boys will be here in an hour.”

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Randy and Peter pounded on the door in the dead of the night. “Leon!” they shouted. “They dragged Leon away!”

Dyson and I stood in the doorway. “This couldn’t wait until morning?” I asked. Randy’s presence disturbed me. Only Peter knew the path to our cabin. He’d eaten here as a reward for placing first in the rankings—a privilege he should’ve known better than to share.

“Who took Leon?” Dyson asked.

“I guess it was the police,” Randy said. “Though only some were police. Maybe fire department? They said they were both. They said Leon was in a man



horde.”

“How did Leon respond?” Dyson asked.

“It’s not the type of thing someone repeats,” said Randy. “Not in front of a lady.”

“We’re past that,” I said.

“He told the police he was innocent,” Peter said.

“And that he’d stick their dicks in wood chippers,” Randy added. “And feed their chippered dicks to their children.”

I cringed. “We get it,” I said.

“And what’s left he’ll feed to their mothers.”

“Just tell us where Leon is now,” said Dyson.

“They hit him a lot,” Peter muttered. His voice was creaky with hurt. When the light from inside hit his face I flinched seeing the pallor over his cheeks.

“To get him into the car, he means. Leon put up a fight. You know Leon. He wasn’t gonna let them take him away. They even gave him a crack on the skull.”

“He was bleeding,” said Peter.

“It didn’t look good at all. Not one bit. If we had phones I would’ve recorded it. An obvious case of police brutality.”

“Thank you, Randy,” I said. “Thank you, Peter.”

“Should we do something?” Peter aimed the question at Dyson.

“It’s too late tonight,” I said.

Unpleased, Peter and Randy returned to the night.

I collapsed on the couch. “I feel so awful,” I said. “His skull? Jesus. We should’ve lied about how many people we had. We should’ve given fake names. He wasn’t checking I.D.”

Dyson sat on the armrest with his feet on the cushion. “We did what we had to do to get what we wanted,” he said, without inflection.

“I didn’t want anyone to get hurt,” I said.

“Do you really mean that?” he asked.

“Don’t treat me like some kind of sociopath.”

“Because people keep getting hurt around you,” he said.

I sat up, angled away from him. I had never wanted to hit anyone until then. “That’s the cruelest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“There’s nothing cruel about a statement of fact.”

“You act like I wanted Lucas Devry to die.”

“Is that what I said?”

“Of course that’s not what you said,” I told him. “But it is what you meant.”

“Don’t assume you know what I mean.”

“I have to, Dyson, because you never say what you mean. You’ve *never* said it. Since we were kids I’ve had to decode what you’re telling me. I’m sick of it.”

“Arguing won’t help either of us,” he said. He stood and walked to the ladder.

“And I’m tired of you bailing when things get difficult.”

“Good night,” he said, and climbed up to bed.

I stayed on the couch stewing and intermittently napping with Barney shelled on my lap. I couldn’t tell whether the distance I felt between me and Dyson was a new development or if it had always been there and was only now beginning to widen. I couldn’t tell whether I meant what I’d said: *Had* I spent years untangling a truer meaning from his words? Like most things, this was accurate and a lie. Yes, I often assumed some deeper meaning beneath Dyson’s words. But that didn’t mean I recognized what he wouldn’t tell me. *Most interpretations are false*, I tried to assure myself. Perhaps it was an objective fact: people were getting hurt around me. Even so, Dyson must’ve known how that fact, objective or not, would wound me. He couldn’t not. And that alone seemed proof of what I did not want to admit to myself. We were growing apart. We barely knew each other. Nonetheless, I was here, in his cabin, as if our friendship were fully intact.

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In the morning, before running, Dyson delivered a speech blaming Art for Leon’s arrest. The men stood in a horseshoe formation facing us. I stood with my hands clasped behind my back, acutely aware of how deliberately Peter was focused on Dyson.

“Flemings,” said Dyson, “fire chief in that backwoods turd of a town, came here to embarrass us. He came here because he’s stuck in the past that you all

came to escape. He's trapped in a world that doesn't value love or community. He's envious of us. He's unwilling to work on himself—he wants only to hurt other people because, for him, hurting people is how you make it in life. Art is the problem we're trying to fix in ourselves.

“Don't for a second think that means Leon was innocent. Leon kept an important secret from us. He didn't disclose his man horde involvement. First thing I asked you men, before I booked your plane tickets: *Have you ever been in a horde?* Leon? He lied to me. He lied to all of us. He put us in danger.”

The men grunted. They nodded. They clapped. “Fuck Leon! Fuck Leon!” Hughie Mintz chanted, hand pumping overhead.

Dyson veered in the other direction. “But Leon wanted to get better. The right way, by learning to discard the person he'd been. He came here to do what you're doing. For Flemings that wasn't enough. He couldn't *stand* that Leon, and men like you, cared enough to work on yourselves—he wanted to send us a message. Don't think this wasn't a threat. Don't think it was not an attack on our way of living.” He stepped forward. We closed the circle around him.

“You're probably thinking I'm paranoid,” he said. “But I'm no paranoiac. I know how this works. Sasha and I didn't choose to do this on a whim. We built The Atmosphere as a refuge because men like you needed someplace safe to get better. We studied the rises and falls of groups like ours and you know what always preceded their falls? The *r* word.”

“Racism!” Gerry shouted, always the eager student.

“Regulations,” said Dyson. “The communities were regulated out of existence. Their progressive efforts were sabotaged by draconian regulations. Rajneeshpuram. The Peoples Temple. The Eleven Tribes of the Sun.”

“Weren't those cults?” asked Dr. Mapplethorpe.

“They are now,” said Dyson. “Because outside forces launched vilification campaigns. Those groups had their problems, sure, but the problems you're worried about, their cultish qualities, arose as necessary protections against outside attacks.”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Randy.

“I'm not *suggesting* anything,” Dyson said. “I'm insisting you all work harder and faster. I'm insisting you be honest with me. Because we're about to enter

Phase Two of your training. Reconciliation. And we can't afford to lose anyone else to some dumb regulation or law."

Dyson hadn't mentioned Phase Two before then—he hadn't mentioned any phases. As far as I knew, The Atmosphere was free of phases, built on a continuous incline instead of the ladders and steps that defined the problematic cults that preceded ours.

After his speech, I pulled him aside to ask how to prep for Phase Two. I spoke in a chummy and diplomatic tone to hide my anger. I was tired of feeling trapped behind a wall, with him and the men trading secrets on the other side.

"You don't need to prepare anything." He patted my shoulder. "Reconciliation is between me and the men."

"I came here under the condition you would tell me everything."

"Everyone thinks they want to know everything until they know everything."

"What happened to cults being founded on honesty?"

Randy and Gerry stepped closer to us.

"Keep your voice down," said Dyson.

"Transparency? Capital *T-R-A*—"

Dyson blew his whistle, twirled his finger. Physical Training commenced.

"Aren't you coming?" said Randy, jogging in place.

"Not today," I replied.

Randy raced off to join the double-file worm jogging around the edge of the clearing. Dyson ran backwards, clapping overhead in an enormous circle, pushing the men to run faster. The men ran faster, enamored of Dyson. This is, perhaps, what he wanted all along. The men mindlessly trailing him in circles as I watched from a distance. I worried, briefly, that I had done something wrong—but I flicked that thought away. I hadn't done anything wrong. This was just Dyson, the Dyson I wished didn't exist: the Dyson who cared more about fleeting and superficial attention than he did about our friendship. This is the Dyson who moved to L.A. The Dyson who ignored me for months knowing I needed him. A Dyson I couldn't help but resent.

## twenty-four

I PACED ALONG the shore of the pond hoping for a call from Cassandra. Instead, Roger called me again. The idea of leaving The Atmosphere—with its hopeless men and Dyson's secrets, his new mysterious phase—seemed more appealing than ever.

But I couldn't stomach abandoning Peter. I had sacrificed Leon for him—and assured myself this was because I needed someone to fuck. I didn't want to love Peter. I didn't want to love any man or give part of myself to someone again, because I knew how deeply all men wished to hurt me. I was using Peter. Just as I used Leon to continue using Peter. This was okay because I had been used in the past—not only by Blake. There were too many men to name.

Peter was one of those good men that men were always telling me about. "What was it like to be famous?" he loved asking me after sex, and I loved slipping back to those days when I used to wait for the future as if it were a ship that would carry me to a Caribbean island.

Sometimes, as I hiked to the cabin after our rendezvous, I fantasized about setting the barn ablaze and running away with him. He would likely work hard for me and never complain. He wouldn't bother me. He would love me, simply, agreeably. With him, I could do what I wished, live as quietly or extravagantly as his work allowed. I got the sense from Peter that he would have embraced this life had I asked. But I never asked, because I didn't want a life with Peter. I only wanted clandestine hours with him. I merely wanted physical pleasure I couldn't get anywhere else. Most men believe they want this from women, too. They don't. They want ownership, control, the ability to leave whenever they like.

Peter was no different. However, his desire manifested how it only could in sensitive men: as a self-pitying, hangdog pout.

We met in The Crucible at our usual time the night after Leon's arrest. The night Dyson's Reconciliation began. It was an unreasonably hot and humid night, even for June, one of those slick, drippy evenings that makes you regret having skin—but Peter shivered bashfully when I unzipped his jacket. "I can't do it," he said.

"Is it about Leon?" I asked. "Because Leon is fine. I spoke to Art Flemings this afternoon." I hadn't. "And Art said they're letting him go, not pressing charges. But he can't return to The Atmosphere. It's a technical issue. Something with zoning."

"That's good," he said.

"All's gonna be fine." I kissed him hard, slid a hand beneath his waistband.

Peter unhanded me from his crotch. "I wasn't prepared for the lecture tonight."

"Reconciliation," I said, scoffing.

"I'm not up for doing much right now. Nothing like this."

"Tell me what Dyson did to you."

"I'm not allowed."

I reminded him that *we* had something more precious than rules. "Intimacy means sharing things with your partner," I said.

"Do you even think of me as a partner?" he asked. "Or just someone to fuck?"

*Of course I think of you as a partner*, I nearly spit. But his question was an attack; it exposed and quieted me. He was not one of those good men. He was no better than Blake. These men with their naïve vision of authenticity, their absurd demand for labels. "What a cruel question!" I shouted. "I refuse to answer something so hurtful."

I trekked back to the cabin, embarrassed and angry, forearm sweating from my eyes, muttering all the things I should have told him. Inside, Dyson purged jaggedly in the bathroom. "Just quit!" I shouted. But I regretted it immediately. When he slipped into bed I apologized.

"No, you're right," he said, his tone as dull as a cushion.

“I didn’t say I was wrong,” I said. I imagined a scenario in which I could reach for him, then a scenario in which he would turn toward me, kiss me—a world where I could work through the shame I felt over Peter by fucking Dyson—and I hovered my hand over his waist.

He said, “That isn’t us.”

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The next day, the men wouldn’t look at me. They muttered inaudibly during PIEs. Even Randy responded to my questions with sheepish deference. Together, we had been editing a movie—footage of the surrounding foliage put to Muzak, a source of joy and accomplishment for the men—but they were “too tired” to work on it today. I got the sense they were ashamed of themselves. They shifted uncomfortably when I stood close, like teenagers attracted to their teacher—but if that were an issue, wouldn’t it have revealed itself weeks ago?

Peter couldn’t go for a walk after PIEs. He needed to focus on the garden. I apologized for shouting at him, but he said that wasn’t the problem. He forgave me. He knew I was under a lot of pressure. “Just a quick walk,” I said. “To the forest and back.”

He refused. He needed time to himself.

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The next day was more of the same.

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The day after that was more of the same.

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The day after the day after that was more of more of the same.

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Peter quit meeting me in the night.

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I answered Roger's call—though I hung up before we spoke to each other.



# what the men needed to know

*There is no reason not to be honest.*

*Actions are only shameful when you keep them a secret.*

*Most likely no one will care if you tell anyone.*

*There is nothing to be embarrassed about.*

*There is no reason to be loyal to an employer—or leader.*

*Leaders demand loyalty to exploit the people beneath them.*

*Never trust anyone who demands loyalty from you.*

*Love is far more important than loyalty.*

# twenty-five

AS THE MEN set the foundation for the ninth shed...

as Peter fertilized his zucchini...

as Dyson swam laps in the pond...

I hammered a nail through a wall in the barn. I plugged a screwdriver into the hole and rotated the handle until the hole widened to the size of a dime. A scrunch of brown cloth fit in the crevice to prevent anyone from noticing.

Dyson kept a bottle of bourbon in the living room trunk. I needed three shots to work up the courage to spy on the lecture. At the clearing, my head hot with liquor, I expected to hear revelry spewing forth from the barn. Instead, there was silence. Rain pattered on the leaves, the roof of the barn, the sheds, wetting my hair and my arms. On the far side of the barn, the brown scrap of cloth I'd used to plug the hole lay in the grass. I pressed my eye to the hole.

**IV.**

# reconciliation

THE BENCHES WERE arranged into a square stage at the center of the barn. Dyson, Peter, and Gerry stretched inside the square, hopping on their toes, jabbing as if preparing to box. “Fight Club on a farm,” I scoffed, and nearly slunk back to the cabin. The rain had intensified, though, into fat, slappy, flu-giving rain, and I pressed my body closer to the wall, reluctant to flee the dry strip of grass beneath the lip of the roof.

The three men inside the square made exaggerated circles with their mouths. They silently read what appeared to be scripts. Dyson clapped. The men on the surrounding benches straightened their backs. Dyson said, “Today, I will play the part of Randy. Gerry will play Randy’s wife, Susan. Peter will play Randy’s daughter, Bridgett. Other parts will be played by... your imagination.”

The men chuckled nervously.

Randy sat on a chair propped on top of the table.

“You ready, Randy?” asked Dyson.

Randy nodded.

“Showtime!” said Dyson.

Randy cleared his throat before speaking:

“For a long time,” he began, “people saw my life as a fairy tale. I grew up poor and unloved to a pair of alcoholics outside of Norman, Oklahoma. I was the younger of two, but my brother died at eleven. He swallowed something under the sink. Looking to get loaded, I think. There was nothing the doctors could do. I was eight, the lesser-liked child, dimly lit in the shadow of his potential—he was destined to be a major-league pitcher.

“My parents didn’t blame me for his death. They didn’t wish me dead instead. But they couldn’t pretend my brother wasn’t their favorite, and seeing me made them feel guilty, so we avoided each other however we could. I’d follow complicated routes through the house—slipping into bathrooms as they came down the hall, hiding in the pantry if they entered the kitchen—until I became more roommate than child, especially after turning fourteen, when I began paying rent for my room.”

Dyson performed what Randy described. He inhabited Randy with a level of attention he’d never shown in his movies. He wept over Randy’s dead brother, crept through imaginary hallways, mimed handing cash to enormous parents, giggled proudly when he received his high school diploma. The performance mesmerized me.

In his early twenties, a car accident had left Randy with a clawing pain in his neck and an OxyContin addiction. Five years revolving through rehab clinics, he finally kicked the habit after meeting the woman who would become his wife: Susan Cleary. Gerry stepped into the square and took Dyson’s hands. Susan was the humblest and most patient woman Randy’d ever met. She was the first person he’d ever loved without also fearing. He got clean for her, learned to cook for her, woke up early for her, enrolled in college for her, graduated for her. They moved to Lubbock to live near her family. “It was like being married to a TV show,” he said. Her family held weekly barbecues in the summer; sisters went shopping together; cousins called to gossip; aunts offered prayers during difficult times. Randy had never lived among people who loved unconditionally. He kept expecting her family to give him the boot (Dyson mimed getting kicked in the butt). They welcomed him deeper into their lives. He brewed beer with her cousins. Her brothers brought him on fishing excursions. His father-in-law told him he loved him. He and Susan decided to start their own family.

“Some people are meant to be happy,” he said. “Then there are people like me.”

Susan gave birth to Bridgett Elizabeth Dent. He lavished his daughter with gifts—clothes and dolls and candy and video games and stuffed animals and butterfly stickers—loved taking her places without telling their mother: to the park when she hadn’t finished her homework, for ice cream when she was

grounded. More than anything else, though, Randy loved taking Bridgett to movies. One Friday a month, he'd pull her from school early to see a matinee in an empty theater on the outskirts of town. They'd gorge themselves on a bucket of butter-wet popcorn and a barrel of soda—Dr Pepper mixed with Sprite, her favorite—while trading contraband Peanut M&Ms and Sno-Caps and gummy worms they'd bought at a pharmacy. Most important: they never told Susan that they went. It was a small secret as secrets went, but it tightened the bond between him and Bridgett, and he prized feeling like his daughter loved him more than her mother. He cast himself as the gift giver and rule breaker, the one who let her do what she wanted—though making Susan the disciplinarian eroded his marriage.

“Little jolts of tension whenever we spoke. I didn't expect to resolve it. For all I knew, that was how family worked. You're always mad at each other, scared of each other. I figured our lives were on track.”

Then his daughter got sick. Peter lay on the floor clutching his stomach. Gerry and Dyson argued in the corner of the square. All over town children were getting the flu. For weeks, Susan insisted they ought to get their daughter a flu shot. Randy wouldn't allow it. Everyone who got the shot became a little bit sick. Even a little bit sick was too sick for his girl.

His parents blamed doctors for his brother's death—for failing to undo the inevitable—and he carried their paranoia and blame inside him. Her fever climbed to 101. He refused to bring his daughter to the ER. Instead, he put her to bed with cough syrup and an aspirin, hoping sleep would lower her fever, make her tummy less grumpy. In the morning, Bridgett lay stiffly in bed with her eyes fixed on the ceiling. They rushed her to the hospital. The virus resisted antibiotics. The doctors were sorry. So sorry. She was less than a month into her eleventh year.

“A smart friend of mine, this philosophy guy who quit on college to work construction, used to tell me God is a novelist. Nothing is too convenient for God. You think: *I couldn't possibly lose my daughter at the same age as my brother.* But God—and I don't mean *God* god, because fuck him, I mean whatever's shaping this world—only has so many notions.”

Randy grieved. Susan grieved and resented. They spoke to each other in barbs, thirsty to hurt. She filed for divorce. “Divorce meant the end of everything: job, barbecues, the conversations in supermarkets, fishing trips, love from her parents. All of it gone. And why? Because I wanted to protect my daughter from quacks.”

Dyson shaped his hand into a pistol. He paced in front of Gerry-as-Susan waving his handgun-hand. He pointed it at Gerry-as-Susan—head, then stomach, then heart.

“I wanted her to love me again—that’s it. Like she’d loved me when we met, when I was a mountain of trouble and need. I thought she’d love me again if I was in trouble.”

Dyson-as-Randy pressed his fingertip-barrel to his left forearm. They fired. Dyson dived forward in pain.

The men on the benches applauded and hollered. Dyson jumped to a stand. He locked arms with Gerry and Peter. They bowed. Fled the stage. Randy carried his chair to the center but didn’t sit down.

His history didn’t surprise me—I assumed each man harbored some violent or disturbing act in his past—but knowing what led him to Dyson, then here, and knowing he didn’t know that I knew, made Randy malleable and small in my mind, like a cloud of pillow filling, or mud. The rain had calmed down by this point, and the performance seemed to have ended—but Peter and Gerry joined the other men on the benches. Randy circled the chair. He eyed the empty seat, cracking his knuckles, his face tight with nerves. The energy in the barn sharpened. He clapped his cheeks to psych himself up.

Dyson stepped into the center of the square wearing a loose cotton dress patterned with suns and Mary Jane shoes. A wig clung to his head—blond—the sides pulled into pigtails. His outfit was one giant lollipop short of a joke. But no one giggled or snickered. They leaned over their laps, as captivated and haunted as I was. Dyson sat on the chair. Randy got on his knees.

I turned away from the peephole. There was no reason to punish Randy with some deranged public sex act. How stupidly cruel. No wonder Peter couldn’t have sex with me. I wanted to drag open the door and end this before it

happened. But I was curious, too, as curious as I was disgusted—and I returned my eye to the hole in the wall, prepared for the worst.

Randy clasped his hands. He pleaded, “Bridgett, my love, my baby girl, my only child: I can’t begin to tell you how much I love you and miss you and how sorry I am that I lost you.” He listed everything he loved about Bridgett—the buttery scent of her hair, how she said the word *happy* (like *hippy*), her terror of cats, her dream of one day riding a horse (“such a simple, obtainable dream and I kept putting it off, kept telling you we’d do it when you were older, assuming you’d be older”)—while interrupting the praise with sticky pleas for forgiveness.

“None of this was your fault,” he said. “I’m the reason you’re not here anymore. I’m the reason you and me and your mother are no longer together. I’ll never forgive myself for losing you so early in life. Every day I wish I could tell you how much I love you and miss you.”

His devastation hosed through the hole in the barn. Drenched in his remorse, I regretted the cruelty I’d shown him, then regretted that regret, because Randy should never have acted with such callous stupidity—over a flu shot! I regretted only that his daughter had died so young, that his wife had suffered such an indelible grief. I wished Randy did not have this story to tell. As he spoke, my mind drifted past *his* contrition, and I imagined his face slumbering off to expose new faces beneath: Blake’s face, Lucas Devry’s. When Randy said, “Please forgive me for all I have done,” I saw Blake speaking these words. I heard Lucas Devry saying, *I’m sorry, so sorry; I never should’ve acted so reprehensibly.*

Randy bowed forward. He tapped his forehead on the floor. He was himself again: “Please. Please. Please. Please. Please.”

Dyson leaned so close his lips hovered above Randy’s head. I expected a kiss, or for him to lift Randy’s hands to his heart, grant him the release he desired. Dyson shook his head, though, as if Randy were meat beginning to spoil. He stood.

The men rose up from the benches. *Absolution has to be earned*, they chanted in unison. *Absolution has to be earned. Absolution has to be earned.*

Dyson exited the stage. The men whistled. Randy dissolved into the fetal position.



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I didn't plan on returning to the barn. Something about my presence felt voyeuristic and intrusive. Dyson didn't invite me for a reason. On a rational level, I understood the men deserved to work through their traumas under controlled and protective conditions. They deserved to share unwatched. However, the next evening, after Dyson left for the barn, I became increasingly frantic and curious about which man would tell his story that night. "Perhaps it's even more irrational," I said to Barney, "for me to remain in the cabin. Who knows what these men have done? Why privilege their safety over mine? Shouldn't I be made aware of their transgressions?"

Barney licked his left paw in agreement.

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At the barn, Dyson played Gerry:

Gerry held down a stable career as head of IT for an elementary school on the outskirts of Bakersfield. "Over nearly three decades," he said, "I saw *centuries*' worth of innovations. From fixing scriggly intercoms and laserdisc players to teaching the teachers—you heard that right—to scan worksheets using their phones." The job made him feel important and necessary. He loved marching through hallways knowing someone waited on him, loved the teachers' pleading tones, and, more than anything else, he loved solving problems for students. The children cheered whenever he came into class. He remembered their names—the Michaels and Jorges and Jennys and Vanessas and Jaders—and their favorite subjects, the sports they played, their dreams of becoming firefighters or doctors or superheroes or surfers. He gave the children dollars out of his wallet when they needed money for lunch. Not only his favorites. Gerry—a father of none who'd wanted kids since he was a kid—considered himself a surrogate father to these children, an extra father, the one who cared for them when their true parents could not.

At the start of his twenty-ninth year, the district hired a new principal. "Some young skank out of a coastal poindexter college" brought on to lead The 2024 Initiative—a euphemism for "changing everything in the school that already

worked.” She arrived ready to cut extraneous costs and revitalize its pitiful reputation. She dressed sharply, spoke precisely; her nails were lacquered in the school’s colors (Bakersfield Blue and Burgundy).

Shortly after her arrival, Gerry was summoned to her office to fix a glitch locking her out of her email. She took her lunch break as he worked. “*I trust this will be ready by the time I return*,” she told me. Nobody’d ever been more condescending.” Gerry fixed the problem immediately but hung around skimming her emails. He forwarded himself a thread labeled *Technical Options*. As part of The 2024 Initiative, the district planned to hire outside contractors to run the IT Department. Gerry would no longer serve as a surrogate father for students who needed him.

He told none of his colleagues about what he’d learned. Instead, he sent the superintendent an anonymous email claiming he had been verbally harassed by the new principal. He received no response. So he sent feistier emails accusing the principal of further transgressions: theft, sexual misconduct, tardiness, slovenliness, aggressive behavior toward students, toward animals, toward the flag in the courtyard. Over ten days, two dozen emails were sent, all from separate email accounts. All from his home computer.

On a Saturday morning, as Gerry refreshed his inbox, anxious for a statement announcing the principal’s termination, the Bakersfield PD kicked in his door. The principal—who wanted to avoid a scandal early in her tenure—dropped charges on the condition Gerry never again set foot on school grounds.

I assumed Dyson would play the role of the principal—the one harmed by Gerry—but he wore burgundy shorts and a blue mesh football jersey, standing in for all Bakersfield students.

“I let you down,” Gerry said from his knees. “In trying to protect you I put you at risk. I left you all alone at that school with that woman. Can you ever forgive me?”

Dyson seemed to consider it. Then he stood.

*Absolution has to be earned*, chanted the men.

Beneath the rapturous cheers of the men was the trickle of Gerry weeping into his hands.

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The men stood shoulder to shoulder as Hughie Mintz threw a football to Dyson. Clouds barged across a beach-water sky. A midday shower had left the grass dewy, prone to mud. “Throw me a diver,” Dyson would say, and Hughie would place the ball just outside of his reach, forcing him to leap for a difficult catch. A few men caught me watching from the edge of the woods—if Dyson noticed he didn’t let on. Three times in a row the ball sailed through his arms. On the fourth throw, however, he thudded against the ground with the ball pressed to his chest. He rolled onto his back and waved his muddy arm in the air. “Touchdown!” Hughie shouted.

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What I saw through the hole in the barn was an entirely different performance from what the men saw from inside. For me, the audience was part of the performance, just as compelling as Dyson and the other actors, as compelling as the man on the chair telling his story. No story is ever a story alone. I learned this watching bootleg movies with Dyson. Stories are never realized through their telling but through the reactions they elicit. As a child, I obsessed over the shrieks and laughter and crying of the theatergoers accidentally caught on camera. And as an adult, watching through the hole in the barn, I obsessed over fists clenched in sympathy, the aggravated yawns when performances flagged, the incantatory *Absolution has to be earned* as the teller wept before Dyson. Watching the audience, I saw grief and tenderness course through the viewers, and, in this way, a little slug of sympathy slipped into my heart, marking its trail. Had someone been watching me watching the men watching the performance, they would have seen me unconsciously softening. Pity, I would have called it, but it wasn’t pity. It was something far scarier and more destabilizing, something I would never let myself name so long as I needed to feel superior to their pain.

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How was Mack March supposed to know the dog was sleeping under the car? He was late for work—he couldn’t be late again. Would his kids rather have a

house than a dog? How was he supposed to know his kids were watching him leave from their bedroom windows? How was he supposed to know the kids would return to that morning—if not the sight the sound, the yowling and barks, the crunching—for decades to come?

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Benjamin Tire begged his daughter to forgive him for the affair he had with her mother—his mistress—and for calling her psycho when she told him she was his daughter.

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Reconciliation taught the men—and me—a valuable lesson: forgiveness could not be obtained through pain or time or public pleas for contrition. It required work—the sort of work I put in every day. *Absolution has to be earned*. I treated the phrase like a mantra. I whispered it to myself during particularly difficult PIEs sessions or meals, in moments when I craved comfort and validation. I was the model of proper contrition. And if I had not been forgiven for my mistakes, the men had no right to jump me in line.

What an intoxicatingly cruel way to think, I realize now. There are consequences for treating forgiveness like a rare and finite resource.

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William Gremb didn't even *know* that word could be seen as offensive. It was just a description. A loving description of skin color. Delivered with admiration and care. How could you bar someone from the ashram over one word? What happened to forgiveness? What happened to meta? What happened to letting go—accepting people where they were?

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Dr. Mapplethorpe Lang apologized to Christina Lane, whose mother, Susan Lane, died while driving to work during a hurricane. It was entirely Dr.

Mapplethorpe's decision to keep the office open. All the others in the region had closed for the storm.

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"Scalloped potatoes were my father's favorite," said Dyson as he lowered the serving tray to the center of the table for Family Dinner. There would be no Emptying Out that evening.

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What was she even doing in his office, Lawrence Footbridge still wondered, if she wasn't attracted to him? Why else would a student take time out of her busy schedule to come see him? Why else would she act so intensely professional other than to conceal her true feelings?

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Kevin Sweston's daughters seemed like alien creatures, too friendly to be human, too abundantly blond. They made him uneasy—the same way their mother made him uneasy—with their tiny fingers and sizable questions. Rather than work to know them better, he hung out in his garage, stayed in the bar until close, assuming their mother could carry the parenting on her own—a burden he imposed on his wife, a burden his daughters never forgot as they grew older.

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Even if Dyson didn't know how to ride a bike—and I was sure that he knew—a grass clearing was no place to learn. But still the men clustered around him, holding the handlebars to steady him, palming both shoulders, Gerry's hand on the flat of his back, pushing Dyson until he was confident enough to shout, "Let me go!" The men scattered butterfly-like. They cupped their hands over their mouths: *I'm so proud of you, Dyson!* He pedaled in wobbly circles.

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Hughie Mintz didn't know what he had done wrong. Did his son not like him boxing his ears? Should he never have told the boy's girlfriends that the boy had wet his bed through seventh grade? And a little bit more into eighth? Maybe he shouldn't have clapped him awake on Saturday mornings for agility drills—but his boy was too slow. He'd get embarrassed on the court. Maybe he shouldn't have shouted so furiously at his son's basketball games. But didn't he want to feel his father's love at the games? Maybe he never should've told the boy, *Love is something you earn from a father, not something you're given*. A joke! Couldn't the boy take a joke? What he knew for sure is he never should've been the one to teach the boy to throw a football. He should've known the boy couldn't throw a spiral. What did he think would happen? Maybe he shouldn't have shushed him at dinner—or maybe the boy should've made that lay-up. A fast break for Christ's sake! Wide open! Maybe he should've let the kid have a fish. A fish never hurt anybody. The fish was the issue. He apologized for the fish. "I'm sorry I never let you get that fish," Hughie Mintz said from his knees. "Sorrier than you'll ever know."

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For months I'd wondered what Dyson hoped to gain from The Atmosphere. I assumed he wanted what he had promised me: power, redemption, and, most important, fame. If we succeeded, his face would appear on every screen in the world. Far more attention than he received as an actor.

It was an easy equation:

Change men → Change the world → Get famous

But he wanted something deeper than fame. He could have brought these men anywhere—finances allowing—yet he dragged them to property owned by his father's parents, he chose to train them and feed them in a barn built by his father, he ran them through Physical Training echoing what his father demanded of him, he made them perform ridiculous shows of contrition—futile shows of contrition. I was a smart and intuitive person. Dyson and I had been friends for most of my life. It should not have taken me months to figure this out.

Dyson wanted a father. Rather: fathers. An army of surrogate fathers to replace his own father, a man who wouldn't apologize for the domestic sadism of mocking his son, a man who now could *never* apologize for that most callous decision: driving his truck into the median. I couldn't decide, however, whether Dyson intended to forgive these fathers—and, in the process, learn to forgive his own—or if he wanted merely to punish them.

"Do you ever wish you could punish your father?" I asked him one night, during a movie.

"He already punished himself," he said. He asked why I asked.

"I wish I could punish mine." I didn't realize I wanted this until I said it. But it seemed true to me, and I wondered how long I'd been hiding this from myself.

"Maybe that's why we have fathers," he said with a laugh. "To ensure everyone a person to punish."

## twenty-six

ON THE WEEKENDS I spent with my father, I swam. He was a limber, work-bludgeoned man with a brushy mustache who wore the same stained gray crewneck every day. He was not the type of man, I'm saying, to possess a pool, or to live in a complex home to a pool, or even the type to swim, as far as I knew. But he rewired foyers and installed chandeliers for people who did, the McMansioners spored across identically affluent New Jersey suburbs like Short Hills and Millburn and Creek.

I was nine the summer my parents split up. On my father's weekends, he brought me along on his jobs to show me "the finest pools in the state." He couldn't offer me money or gifts, but he took pride in giving me access to rich people's pools. All my favorite memories of him involve when we were driving to one of his jobs. Rarely did I see him happy, especially after the divorce—my mother's decision—but in his truck he traded his grieving baritone for a goofy, carnival bark to describe the fantasy pools where I would swim: jungle pools with waterfalls frothing the rims, wintery pools lined with thick bricks of ice, lavender-scented water, high dives requiring parachutes, platinum lions jetting shimmering water into the shallow ends, pools built into natural caves, pools suspended midair, pools with no conceivable bottom, pools where dolphins arced out of the center like signatures.

Even the most luxurious pools could never live up to what he described. Perhaps I should have been angry at him for the expectations he put in my head, but I carried his fantasy versions with me as I swam, imagining dry ice water slides or beluga whales drifting beside me as I paddled through the bland rectangular pools of the conventionally minded elite. Over that summer, I swam



in square pools, circular pools, octagonal pools, pools shaped in the profile of their owners, kidney-shaped pools, Olympic pools, wave pools, indoor pools with chalky lining that turned my toes blueberry blue, saltwater pools, exercise pools, endless pools, edgeless pools, and pools home to the chunkiest beetles I've ever seen in my life.

Never aboveground pools, however, which were too tacky for the neighborhoods where my father worked.

The homeowners encouraged my swimming. They cherished the tickle of generosity that came with allowing a blue-collar daughter to taste the fruits of their wealth. The mothers—and there were always mothers, hair-sprayed and made up, in floral summer dresses and sandals—treated me with condescending benevolence. They would rest flutes of Cherry 7UP on the ledge and beckoned me over to talk. They praised me for taking advantage of the pools their children neglected. They referred to their children as spoiled or bloated or unmotivated or dumb as the children looked down at us from their windows with teeth-gritted, envious scowls.

“Must be nice to join Daddy for work,” the mothers would say, and I'd mutter, “Uh-huh.” I never used the word *daddy*. Hearing it attached to my father made me shudder. Many asked what *Mommy* was doing. I never knew. Her weekends alone were fortresses; she rarely granted me access. These conversations exposed the canyons between the homeowners' lives and my father's, between his and mine. I hated pretending their assumptions about us were accurate—that my parents were married, that my mother's life was mine to know. I fielded their questions as quickly as possible before paddling back to the deep end to hold my breath underwater.

Late that summer, my father took a job at a secluded stone mansion at the top of a hill. The husband, Mr. Hensey, opened the front door dressed in white slacks and a red Lacoste polo. Sunburn made flaky meat of his cheeks. He said something indecipherable, then dragged a spit-roped retainer out of his mouth. “I expected you earlier,” he said. We followed him in. The rest of the Hensey family was “out on the island,” but he stayed behind, he said with a laugh, to ensure my father didn't “dickle around on the clock.”

My father laughed because Mr. Hensey laughed. I'd never wanted out of a conversation so badly. "My dad said I could go swimming," I said.

Mr. Hensey blinked at me like I asked to take his car for a spin.

"She's a water rat," added my father.

"Of course," Mr. Hensey finally said. "Let me roll off the tarp."

The pool was bathwater warm and free of beetles and leaves. Sunlight cast prisms against the vinyl lining. A smooth cement walkway surrounded the pool. *Hensey* was painted in script on the side close to the house, and between the name and the house was a row of umbrella-shaded lounge chairs. What caught my attention, though, was the diving board hanging over the deep end, like a plank. Diving boards were rare in such lawsuit-averse communities. I flung off my towel and sprinted to the board, dived splashlessly through the surface, swam to the shallows and back. My mother didn't like me swimming laps. "It makes your shoulders so broad," she would tell me. "Just flounce around, play with a noodle." Flouncing bored me. And the Henseys didn't allow noodles—those were public pool toys. So I performed my normal routine: ten laps as quickly as possible. Then I repeated the circuit until I beat my original time.

That day, I ended my laps in the deep end, lungs pulsing, and pulled myself onto the diving board. The air made me chatter and shiver and I rushed to the edge of the board but paused. It felt like something was clenching my waist. Back in the house, Mr. Hensey smiled flinchingly from an upstairs window. He swiped an encouraging wave across the glass. The boys who peered at me from their bedrooms normally scrambled when I noticed them staring. Mr. Hensey, however, didn't scam. He wanted something from me he felt he deserved. I didn't know what he wanted, or why he shouldn't have wanted it, so I waved back, a whipping windmill of a wave, and he gave me a thumbs-up. It seemed only right to put on a show. I tried a flip for Mr. Hensey and mistimed the jump. The back of my head smacked the board.

I woke up on a lounge chair with my head swaddled in gluey red towels. Mr. Hensey was shouting at my father about lawyers—"the best in the country," he kept saying. I called for my father. "Thank god you're up," he said. He scooped his arms beneath my knees and my neck and carried me to his truck, muttering figures. He was tallying the cost—not of the emergency room but of losing this

job. “You shouldn’t dive like that,” he said as he buckled me in. At the truck, he hollered, “I’m sorry!” to Mr. Hensey. He promised to finish the job early that week.

There were no signs of brain damage, but I suffered a minor skull fracture. A lengthy gash on the back of my head required seventeen stitches. News of the injury spread to my father’s clients. Talk of him suing Mr. Hensey caught on. Mr. Hensey had likely started the rumors to cast my father as an opportunistic money-grubber using his daughter’s injury to steal money from someone who’d earned it. I doubt my father knew the first thing about hiring lawyers. Still, his clients grew wary. In the coming months he lost nearly all of his scheduled jobs, and that winter he moved to Florida. He’d always wanted to move there; now work wasn’t holding him back. In Boca Raton, he met his second wife, a stylist named Patricia, and started a family with her. We’ve spoken on the phone four times since he moved, haven’t seen each other once.

For decades, I blamed myself for his departure. *You shouldn’t dive like that* sliced through my mind whenever I thought of him. I missed his harried jokes and loopy scenarios. I missed driving with him to jobs. Even after it became clear what Mr. Hensey had wanted from me, I still wished I had known better, that I’d flipped him off and slipped fishlike under the water. Had I been more mature, my father might have remained in New Jersey, in my life.

Watching the men at The Atmosphere apologize, though, uncoiled a rope of rage inside me. I’d wasted years furious at myself when I should have been angry at Mr. Hensey. My father shouldn’t have apologized; he shouldn’t have scolded me for diving. I began to daydream about my father kneeling before me, hands clasped, begging me to forgive him for running away.

## twenty-seven

A DIAMOND MOON reflected against the glass of the pond. Peter and I had just guilelessly fucked behind the barn—the first time in a week—and a faint flame of lust heated my heart. The illicit thrill of spying on the men made me pulse with desire. I was anxious to return to our daily routine. I wanted Peter constantly throughout the day—not Peter, but his body, the power I felt over him, and my wanting made me reckless. I grazed two fingers across his elbow at lunch, nudged close to him on the morning jog. He tried to ignore my advances; his standoffishness only made me desire him more. Who was he to not reciprocate? We didn't so much as fuck that night as he conceded himself to me, more out of obligation than want. Alone, I meandered to the cabin, wishing I felt more wickedly wanted. I paused at the pond to check my phone. A voicemail from Roger awaited. I slipped out of my shoes and stepped ankle-deep into the water, drifting into the future he offered.

*Sasha: It's Roger. We're two weeks out from the launch. I see you've gotten some undesirable attention recently. Don't for a second think that reduces our interest. We're still committed to making this work. But I need to know if you're interested. Whatever you think we can pay you we'll double it. Please give me a call.*

# twenty-eight

PETER SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the chair on the table. The sight of him inside the barn ready to confess to his greatest misdeeds twisted my stomach. I fixated on him, wishing I could drag him away. I didn't want him to go through this, I tried to convince myself, but I knew immediately this wasn't true. I had no real interest in saving Peter. I had no interest in authentically knowing him—which is why it hurt me to see him on the table. If I heard his story, faced his grief and regret, I would have to see him as a person, to see the parts of him I tried to avoid during sex.

He rapped his knuckles against his knee, exhaled with fluttering lips, a nervous tic that frustrated me. He never knew he was doing it. Plenty of times, I'd told him to quit and he'd genuinely asked, "Quit what?"

"Everyone, take their places," said Dyson. He and three men stepped onto the stage. "Showtime," he said.

My face was stuffed against the hole in the barn. Peter fluttered his fingers. Randy slipped out of the barn without me noticing. Peter was all I could see. He shook his head like a dog drying off. "I should probably start with my mother," he said.

Randy latched onto my shoulder. "Well, well, well," he said. "What a pretty little fish I caught in my net."

My heartbeat shot into my ears. I swung around. "Get inside," I said in a paranoid hush.

"I'm pretty positive you're not allowed here."

"I'm allowed everywhere, Randy. There's no place I can't go."

“Come on inside, then.” He dunked his eye against the peephole. “Much better view inside. I’m sure Dyson would love you to join us.”

I stuck my thumb over the hole. “Just tell me what you want, Randy.”

He assured me he didn’t want much. “Only what we deserve,” he said. “A reward for the work we’ve put in.”

“Your spot at The Atmosphere is its own reward.”

“I want to get out of this place.”

“We told you from the beginning: no one’s keeping you here.”

“Just for a day. A field trip. For us all to go out for a meal, or a concert, or maybe go sailing—I don’t really care. I want to have fun together in public.”

“There’s work to do, Randy,” I said. Though I already knew I would give in, and this filled me with a piercing shame. “We can’t quit working because you want to have *fun*.”

“Dyson always talks about movies.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

He returned his eye to the hole. “Looks like your boyfriend’s finishing up.”

“Spreading rumors won’t help your cause.”

“Does Dyson know? We know. All of us do. I bet Dyson would wanna know, too.”

“I don’t know what Peter told you—”

“Peter didn’t say anything. Not about you, at least. Not like he used to. One day he just quit talking about you to us. Out of nowhere. It couldn’t have been any more obvious.”

I ran my hand through my hair, settled myself. “Go back inside and I’ll do what I can.”

“You know I came out here to pee,” he said. “Been an awful long time for a piss. Dyson will be suspicious. Not saying I can’t make an excuse—but should I?”

“I’ll talk to Dyson.”

“You’ll talk to him or you’ll convince him?”

“I’ll convince him. Okay?”

“You say I don’t care, but I care. I’m sacrificing a lot for you. I’m protecting you.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

“With big news, I hope.” He ambled inside and joined the men as they stood in applause.

I sprinted to the cabin.

---

I proposed a movie to Dyson that evening. He couldn’t believe the idea hadn’t occurred to him earlier. “This is why we need two people,” he said. “This is why other groups fail. You put one person at the top and their mind atrophies. But you put two creative people together and—” He draped his hands over my temples and kissed my forehead, then quickly thumbed the skin he had kissed, as if he left a mark. “Lennon and McCartney, Jobs and Wozniak, Diego and Frida.”

“Sasha and Dyson,” I said, genuinely pleased.

Dyson smiled moonily.

It had been weeks since I’d felt this kind of kinship between us. I gulped this feeling, as if it were fresh air after being held underwater. Perhaps we hadn’t drifted as far apart as I believed.

We drew up pros and cons for every movie currently playing. Around three in the morning, we compromised on a revenge thriller starring Mark Wahlberg and Jeremy Renner as cops hunting the gangsters who bombed their precinct. *Just Us*.

---

We told the men about the movie over breakfast. Randy cheered quietly, proud but unwilling to gloat. They changed the tires on the bus and gave it a fresh coat of paint—royal-blue base, *The Atmospherians* in red on the sides. Dyson wanted the world to know who we were.

# twenty-nine

THE MEN JAMMED together in three- and two-seaters at the front. They dangled their arms over the seats in front of them, teasing one another, shouting and laughing like a football team riding home after a win. We had given them AirHeads candies as a treat. On the highway, the men closest to the windows pressed their faces to the glass, nostrils stretched until their noses looked like snouts. They flattened their palms against the glass and stared into the blurred greens of the passing scenery.

I took a two-seater at the front thinking Dyson and I might play the role of a driver and teacher. This dynamic of adulthood had always intrigued me as a child. But Dyson was too distracted to talk. Two months had passed since he'd driven the bus. He struggled with the bare bone of the gearshift, dragged the shifter using two hands, swearing and sweating as the engine let out scraggly shrieks. I feared the bus might catch fire.

Peter sat with Gerry a few rows behind me. Whenever I swiveled my head to look at him he wasn't looking at me. I tried summoning him with my mind. *Peter*, I thought, *Peter, come here*. I craved his company most in the moments when we needed to hide ourselves.

Randy plopped into my seat. He was chewing candy that smelled like a mountain of cherries. "You could at least give me a hint," he said.

"Be satisfied with what you already have," I said.

"You're gonna jam something sappy down our throats, try making us weep in public."

"You shouldn't feel ashamed of crying."

"I like to cry where I'm comfortable," he said. "In bed. On the toilet."



I turned to the window.

“Just name an actor. A supporting actor.”

“Maybe there are no actors.”

“Where’s it set? Just give me *something*.”

“Randy,” I said, in a tone of *cut it out*.

He gripped the seat cushion and said, “Don’t pretend I’m the only one getting something.” He spoke loud enough for Dyson to hear. “I might get a movie—but you and Petey get to keep doing your thing in the night.”

Dyson angled his ear in our direction.

I held one finger over my mouth. Two weeks earlier, I might’ve cursed out Randy for threatening me, but I was taking a different approach. I was above Randy, now, and not only in the arbitrary rankings of The Atmosphere. Seeing him at his most vulnerable, pitted within his deepest regrets as he begged Dyson for forgiveness, made Randy pitiable and explicable. It is difficult to despise someone once you’ve seen them at their weakest. Randy’s threats were less expressions of malice than of confusion and pain. His pain was no greater than mine—I would never put his above mine—but it existed, it shaped him, and knowing this let me see him and treat him the way I might treat a child: Patiently. Patronizingly.

*Mark Wahlberg*, I mouthed to Randy.

His eyes bulged into balloons. “He’s one of the greats,” he whispered. “Maybe the greatest.” He danced back to his seat. There was no danger of him telling the others. He relished being the only one to know.

The highway was congested. Dyson downshifted. “What’s that about?”

“You know Randy,” I said.

“That’s why I’m asking.” It sounded like an accusation. Though I wasn’t sure against whom. He cranked the wheel to the right. We’d reached our exit.

---

The cashier at the theater sat behind two inches of bulletproof glass. She removed her mouth from the straw of a bucket-sized soda and spoke into a microphone. “Will your group need special assistance?” she asked, then sniffed

dramatically, smelling us. Hygiene was no longer an important aspect of Atmospherian living. I'd let my own legs get mossy and dark.

The men sat cross-legged at the foot of an escalator. They wore their tracksuits.

"They're more than capable," Dyson said.

"We like to avoid preventable incidents."

"They're just men," I added, as if this cleared anything up. "Just regular men."

She slid our tickets through a slit in the glass.

We joined the men at the escalator. Dyson said, "You're here to work. You might laugh a little, you might get excited, might cheer, but our goal is analysis. The movie we've chosen is *Just Us* starring Mark Wahlberg and Jeremy Renner as two cops driven by vengeance."

"I knew it!" Randy shouted.

"Go, Cornhuskers!"

Others muttered mild *oomphs* of excitement.

"This isn't a pleasure cruise," Dyson said. "You will not *watch* this film. You will use the cognitive thinking skills Sasha and I have taught you to critique the ethical, ideological, and aesthetic failures of the movie."

The men blinked at Dyson.

"What he means by *ethical, ideological, and aesthetic*," said Lawrence Footbridge, "is what are the good and bad qualities of the film."

"That's not what I mean," said Dyson.

Lawrence winked at him. "Guys like us need to water it down."

Dyson sighed, clapped once. "Here are your tickets," he said. "And Sasha will give you the notepads."

In my haste to pack snacks, I'd forgotten the notepads. I troubled the cashier for paper. The closest things they carried were coloring books. "I'll need fourteen of them, please."

She said, "Coloring books are only available in our birthday packages."

Peter agreed to say that he was turning thirty-three today. We paid an extra hundred dollars for the privilege of coloring books, child-sized popcorns, party hats, and sixty minutes of access to a small green room between the bathrooms.

The vast purple-walled lobby was dense with employees' boredom. They stared at their phones, picked their noses, and flicked. On the walls were murals of grotesquely painted celebrities walking the red carpet. I hadn't been in the world since the Hertz Shirts fiasco, and, fearing the worst, I shielded my face with my hand, worried some stray man who used to protest outside my apartment might cross through the lobby.

In the movie, friends were killed, women were threatened with rape, a Mob boss died in a fire, and, bloodied and limping, Wahlberg and Renner professed their mutual respect for each other—despite their highly emphasized differences in personality. One other person sat in the theater: a man the same age as our men. Dyson invited him to Peter's birthday party.

"I don't know you," he said.

"I'm sure you'd fit in," Dyson said.

"You seem like some kind of cult," the man said.

"That's exactly what we are," said Dyson. "Started by me and run by me. Dyson Layne."

The man hurried away without looking back.

I slowed from the head of the line to the middle until Peter and I walked next to each other. I pressed my elbow into his. A few days had passed since we'd last had sex, and I imagined dragging him into the bathroom for something quick. "Happy Birthday," I said. "Wanna bail on your party?"

Peter shifted his elbow away from mine. Without looking at me, he said, "I don't think you like me."

"I like you so much," I said.

"You like having sex with me."

"Because that's what we have," I said. "That's who we are."

Peter paused at the top of the ramp and turned toward me. He flashed what was, perhaps, the most condescending smile I had ever received in my life, far worse than anything from Cassandra or Sy Cunningham or any number of elite influencers. The smile reopened something scabbed over inside me. I had never felt so alone.

Peter continued into the lobby by himself. Randy shouldered up behind me. "Yikes," he said. "Ever heard of the Bechdel test? Wahlberg could learn a lot

from us. You'd fix that man in a day. You're the real deal. A pro. You're going places." He launched his hands into the air as if they were a rocket blasting off. "Straight to the top."

"Are you implying something?" I asked.

"Always so tense," he said. "Mellow out. We're here to have fun."

In the green room, we wore pointy party hats and sang "Happy Birthday" to Peter. Hand dryers and flushes thundered through the walls. The employees delivered a round blue cake, flat as a dish. It tasted of chilled feet.

The men read from their coloring books:

*Explicit violence*

*Gratuitous cussing*

*Simplistic revenge narrative*

*Reductive female characters*

*Whore/Madonna dichotomy*

*Men's worth determined by possessions*

*Men's worth determined by pain*

*Violence as the sole means of communication and bonding*

Dyson nodded at me with knowing pride. I couldn't help but nod back. I wanted to pat every man on the head, to express admiration, disbelief—condescension. Peter sat at the far end of the table. Blue frosting smudged his lips. He played the role of the birthday boy with equal parts cheer and embarrassment and self-absorption. The room seemed to levitate in collective joy. The men were softening—and I was softening, against my best intentions. For two months, I'd worked to prevent myself from seeing these men. I'd had no interest in sitting with their pain. After all, they showed no interest in sitting with mine. But weeks of seeing them weep and beg before Dyson had eroded the cement barrier I built up between us. Randy was not the only man who now seemed pitiable and explicable to me. They all were. And, for the first time since I'd arrived, the men seemed happy, and their happiness made me happy and happy for them, because they finally weren't wrenching with pain or anger. They were the most human they'd been. Perhaps they had been this way the

entire time, only I was just now beginning to see it. Instead of eleven men sitting before me, I saw the children they had been, the innocence at their cores, and I hated seeing this part of them, because if I could see it in them then I could have seen it in anyone, including in Blake, in Cassandra, in Lucas Devry. Seeing this side of the men was like wiping the steam off a fogged bathroom mirror. For a second, there would be perfect clarity, only for the steam to immediately return. I could have continued palming the steam away from the glass. I could have allowed myself this empathy, this softness, but it scared me. It is always easier—safer—to look away.

---

We walked across the parking lot still wearing our party hats, scrapes of frosting stuck under our fingernails, laughing at a joke that Gerry had cracked. Dyson, at the front of the group, held up his right arm when he saw the bus. The men clambered into one another. Three of the bus's tires were slashed. Every window was shattered. Dicks of varying sizes were spray-painted across both sides.

"Hooligans," said Lawrence Footbridge. "Rats with too much time on their dirty hands."

"They can't do this to us," said Gerry.

I doubt the broken windows or tires or dicks upset Dyson. This was, after all, the kind of attention he'd been waiting for: any attention. What upset him, I suspect, was that over where the men had stenciled *The Atmospherians* someone had painted *Fuck Sasha*.

The bus was parked at the outer edge of the lot, dragged across a half-dozen spaces, with no cars anywhere near. Whoever did this had long ago driven away. Dyson stood quietly as the other men threatened and griped. His fists were clenched. He breathed shallowly, dramatically.

"It's just a few tires," I said to him. "We'll drive back slowly."

"This happens every time," he muttered.

I knew immediately what he meant but asked him nonetheless.

"It happens every time," he said again.

"Not in our house," said Hughie. "This doesn't happen in our house."

“Shut up, Hughie!” I said. To Dyson: “Let’s just get out of here.”

“It happens *every* time,” he whispered. He had decided something, and nothing I said would change that. He stepped out farther in front of the men and gestured toward the bus. “It appears there has been a misunderstanding.”

“We understand perfectly what happened,” Randy said. “We’re under attack.”

“This is a test,” said Dyson. “A test of all the progress you men have made over the last two months. Yes, we have been attacked and ridiculed by cowards who won’t show their faces. That is clear. But our response should not be as cowardly and destructive as their actions were toward us. Remember: The sun doesn’t stop shining when the soil is bad. The sun shines no matter how unlikely something will grow.”

“Touchdown!”

“That’s why we will spend the rest of the afternoon recruiting outside the movie theater. Clearly, the people who caused this damage are hurting and ignorant. They don’t know how wrong they are about us. And the only way to prevent similar events from occurring in the future is to educate those who would seek to do us harm.”

I was just as confused as the men were. We had never discussed recruiting, had never come close to practicing. The men had no idea where to begin.

“It’s simple,” Dyson told them. “Walk up to a man who it appears might benefit from our operation and tell him this: ‘Hi, I’m... your name... and I’m a member of The Atmosphere, a transformative community for men founded and led by Dyson Layne. Dyson, a former actor and current visionary, has created a foolproof system for helping men achieve the lives they deserve.’ The rest is simple. Just tell them how I’ve helped you change your life. Any questions?”

Gerry raised his hand. “Should we mention Sasha?”

Dyson turned toward me, addressing everyone. “Should we mention you, Sasha?”

I flashed the most *fuck off* smile I could muster. “This is Dyson’s project,” I told the men. “He deserves all recognition.”

“There you have it,” said Dyson. “Let’s get working.” He clapped twice to send them on.

As I watched the men walk away, a heaviness spread through my stomach. I didn't want to look. I didn't want to participate, and I told Dyson as much.

"I didn't expect you to," he said.

"No one's ready for this."

"There's only one way to be ready."

"I would much rather have everyone think this was yours. Do you know how painful it is to step outside and see the same anger I had to face outside my apartment?"

"That's why I'm trying to clear your name."

"Do you know how painful it is when you ignore everything I'm telling you? It's not my fault I'm here, getting credit. I don't want it. I don't want any of it. But you act like I've stolen something from you."

"You did steal something from me," he said. "You stole my story to start ABANDON. Or did you think I never watched your videos?"

I chewed my cheek, stalling, ashamed. Dyson placed the keys in my hand and jogged to the men. On the bus, I wiped glass shards from one of the three-seaters near the back and lay down, hoping to nap.

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My eyes couldn't have been closed for ten minutes when I heard Dyson screaming, "Start the bus! Start the fucking bus!" Outside, the men were racing in my direction, their baggy track pants sinking past their hips as they ran. I was groggy and slow, and Dyson was on the bus, demanding the keys from me, before I stepped out of my seat.

"What's happening?" I asked

"Man horde," said Randy. Gerry, Dr. Mapplethorpe, Hughie, William, Mack, and Lawrence followed him onto the bus.

Dyson started the engine. He shut the bus door.

"What about the others?" I asked.

"They're up there," said Dr. Mapplethorpe. He pointed to the roof of the movie theater, which was under construction. Our men joined the hired

construction crew; they were tossing scraps of building material into a chute feeding into a dumpster.

Dyson shifted into drive.

Our men quit tossing trash in the chute.

“They’ll snap out of it, Dyson. We should go grab them.”

The bus lurched forward.

“Turn around!” I shouted. I ran up to the front. “I’ll talk to them. We can talk to them. Sometimes they snap out of it.”

“They don’t anymore,” he said.

The bus continued driving. The men and I congregated on the left side of the bus, on separate three-seaters, kneeling in the bite of broken glass, eyes fixed on the roof of the theater, where Peter, Benjamin, Kevin, and David stepped to the edge.

Peter went first.



# thirty

A headline would appear the following day: *Man Horde Sufferers Die After Leaping from the Roof of Movie Theater*. There was a photo—but I didn't look. All four were classified as John Does.

# thirty-one

“No one could’ve known that would happen,” said Dyson. We were sitting side by side in the cabin. It was the first thing either of us had said to the other since leaving the bus.

“I’ve been telling you this would happen since we got here,” I said.

“I took every precaution.”

“I told you not to recruit at the mall. We should’ve just driven back.”

“Most of the men hording these days are recidivists. I made sure none of the men had horded before. I asked them all to their faces.”

I didn’t feel guilty for hiding Peter’s secret. I was angry at Dyson, instead, for making the men return to the theater. This wouldn’t have happened if he had driven us back to the camp. “How are you not grieving?” I asked. “Aren’t these men *your* men?”

“One of them must have been lying to me.”

“It’s not about lying, Dyson. It’s about your reckless behavior and your obsessive drive for attention.”

“We’re doing this to help other people,” he said.

“You got four people killed today.”

“Because one of them—at least one of them, probably more—was lying to me. I told you from the beginning that cults were founded on honesty.”

“Just say it, Dyson: *I got four people killed today.*”

“If I say it then you have to say it.”

“I got four people killed today,” I said. It was easy for me to say. I didn’t believe it.

“Not that,” he said.

“Then what?”

“Use your superpower, Sasha. Decode what I’m trying to tell you, since I’ve never once said what I actually mean.”

“I’m not gonna say it.”

“I’ll go first,” he said. “I killed four men today.”

“I have no reason to say it,” I said.

“I killed four men today. Your turn.”

“Dyson.”

“Your turn.”

I couldn’t say it because I believed it. Despite my resentment, despite my righteousness, despite insisting on my innocence, I had believed it for months.

“You can’t move forward if you hide from your past.”

“Fuck your meaningless mantras,” I said.

“I killed four men today,” he said.

“You’re trying to hurt me.”

“What about you? What have you done?”

I needed to say it because I believed. “Please don’t make me,” I said.

“You can’t move forward if you hide from your past.”

“I did it,” I said. “I killed Lucas Devry.”

# thirty-two

ROGER HANDSWERTH ARRANGED for a car to pick me up.

“Don’t you need an address?” I asked.

“We already know where you are.”

Dyson begged me to stay. “What does DAM even make?” he asked. “Who are they?”

“They’re people who’d never leave anyone for dead,” I said. Though I couldn’t be sure. I knew so little about DAM, only that Cassandra thought I should work with them and that Roger believed he needed me, that he planned to double my rates.

I spent my final night fretting on Peter’s old cot, sleepless with grief and guilt. The men lined up to wish me good-bye in the morning. We hugged chastely, one by one down the row, as a black town car idled behind me in the grass. Dyson didn’t show. I doubted I’d see him again. But he texted me on the drive: a fusillade of remorse. I deleted every text.

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At the San Francisco airport, a bull-chested man in a pinstriped suit held a tablet with *MARCUS* blinking onscreen. “That’s me,” I said.

“Place your hand on the screen,” he said. The tablet scanned my fingerprints, glowing red and heating before flashing green in approval. A TSA agent walked us to a rooftop helipad. The man in the suit handed me earmuffs. He wished me good luck.

The ease with which Roger Handswerth conducted my travel made me feel like a dignitary. I'd never known anyone capable of wielding such power—Claire Lance had come closest, but her influence seemed so pedestrian compared to Roger's. Flying over lush Douglas firs en route to DAM's headquarters made me ache for the pines at The Atmosphere, for Peter. Dyson popped into my head. I flung him away.

A glass building sprawled, spiderlike, at the foot of a mountain. Eight annexes snaked out from a bulbous Epcot-style globe at the center. The chopper landed at the tip of one of the spider legs. The helipad was painted as a silver shield: the DAM insignia. The blades halted. Sound returned to my ears. I listened for glass cracking, braced myself to plummet through the ceiling. The pilot slid open the door. The air smelled like a lumberyard—like pine—and a single hawk circled overhead in a white sky. Below me, DAM employees sat at long oak tables typing on laptops. I felt omniscient hovering over them. A few of them waved hello, and I flinched in embarrassment for assuming they couldn't see me.

"Don't be afraid to wave back." I placed the voice immediately. Roger Handswerth was a bony Black man, nearly a full head taller than me, with a trim gray beard and an enveloping voice. He wore a slim suit the color of the ocean at night.

I waved out of obligation.

"I'm so thrilled we finally convinced you to join us," he said.

"No one convinced me of anything," I said. "Circumstances made it impossible to stay where I was."

"A tragedy," Roger said.

"What makes you say that?"

He leaned close. "I'm in the business of knowing," he said, in a tone meant to chill me.

Inside, meditative rain sounds played through the hallways. Employees paused to smile and wave from inside their glass-walled workstations. I felt as if I were touring a future museum, passing dioramas showcasing how people once worked. It all seemed for my benefit.

"Don't they find the glass walls distracting?" I said.

“The walls promote transparency and encourage communication,” he said. “Which we value above everything else here at DAM.”

The cafeteria was a spacious eye-white room decorated with photos of employees posing with celebrity chefs. Every week Roger hired a rising star to test out a new menu on his employees. The chefs were given complete control of the kitchen. “It does wonders for employee morale,” he said. He asked me if I was hungry.

My stomach answered with a volcanic rumble. “I’d rather see more.”

“I admire your ambition.” Roger pulled a granola bar from his inner jacket pocket. “You won’t ever eat a better bar.”

It was somehow chewy but crisp, loaded with dried cranberries, chopped macadamia nuts, *DAM* drizzled in white chocolate script otop. I downed it in two feral bites. “I’ve had better,” I said, though I hadn’t.

“There’s no award for not being impressed.”

“What about dignity?” I said, which made Roger laugh.

In the domestic facility—the bulbous globe—sweat-drenched employees chatted with Roger outside the health club. At DAM Elementary, enthusiastic teachers stood before classes no larger than six. Pollocks and Rothkos hung on the walls of an apartment complex’s lobby—Roger made sure to tell me they were originals. We passed the chapel, the mosque, the synagogue. Employees told me how grateful they were I had decided to join them. They deeply admired my work and named their favorite videos from my ABANDON days. “You’re too kind,” I told them, absorbing their praise. I felt like Gretel, fattened on flattery. I ate as much as I could. A reckless confidence. I had joined The Atmosphere thinking I wanted to change the world, to help people, but perhaps I only wanted what helping people might give me: attention, validation, vindication. Forgiveness? Possibly. I wanted the envy of Cassandra. I wanted Blake to wish he’d never dumped me. At DAM, however, I received something far greater: a chance to become the Sasha Marcus I’d been before Lucas Devry.

Very few DAM employees were white. They were Middle Eastern, Latinx, Black, East Asian, South Asian, African, predominantly women. They were queer. Fat. Disabled. And happy. Compared to DAM, The Atmosphere was asphyxiatingly white. Dyson had done this intentionally: White men must be

isolated to protect other groups. White men should be the ones to help other white men work on themselves—this work should not be the burden of others. But the longer I spent in DAM, the more the pain of my isolation among those men had seemed to sharpen. It was as if I'd narrowly escaped a car accident and the danger had only just dawned on me.

Roger made a point to explain DAM's diversity. He criticized how tech companies and their employees were portrayed in the media. "The image of start-ups as freewheeling, fun-loving playgrounds for nerd bros has done the whole sector a major disservice. When I first started hiring, nearly ninety percent of applicants were men. Ninety-four percent of those men were white. They were sexists. Racists. Homophobes. They assumed DAM was a toxic playground of misogyny—one long party of *Fortnite* and genitals jokes. We condone none of that here. DAM has a *moral* obligation to guide society forward. Part of that means changing how we imagine technology start-ups and their CEOs.

"At DAM, we don't hire tech bros or self-appointed geniuses. This is a business. We treat it like one. From nine to five, we work. After work employees do what they like—and there is a lot of fun to be had on campus. Don't think there isn't. But we don't believe in forced fun or team-building activities—not when they're in the service of making employees log extra hours. Our employees do not compete in Ping-Pong tournaments. They do not escape from escape rooms. They don't play *Mario Kart* during lunch. Our walls are not for climbing but for dividing contiguous rooms. No yo-yoing during work hours. There's not a single Hoverboard or Segway on site. No one is allowed to wear shorts. Headphones cannot be used while working—we prioritize interaction, connection. Slack has been banned. Adderall: banned. Soylent: banned. Mountain Dew: Mountain Don't. You won't find an energy drink within twenty miles.

"Most importantly, though, we treat everyone here with the care they deserve: Every employee—including retail, health, education, and dining—receives health benefits for them and their families. We have our own doctors on-site, some of the most well-respected specialists in the country, many of whom have chosen to work for DAM *because* of our amenities."

Roger provided housing for employees, too. The best education imaginable for their children, delivered by competitively compensated teachers. There were lawns for pets to roam. Running trails. A quarry for children to swim in—including a safe but no less exciting water slide that spelled *DAM*. Movie theater. Bowling. Buses to the city on weekends. And a four-hundred-mile-long steel wall surrounding the DAM property to protect against encroaching fires.

“DAM isn’t a corporation,” he said. “It’s the future of life in America. People need to come together. I hate how fractured we all are, always at each other’s throats. The problem is not that we hate each other—and I truly believe, deep down, it’s impossible to hate someone once you understand them—the problem is communication. No one communicates. They’d rather troll and drag and call out and harass and cancel. It’s painful. And my industry is the problem—tech companies killed communication, with social media, texting, apps that tell you when to express your love for someone. At DAM we want to bring communication to life. Like Lazarus.”

“Which would make you Jesus.”

“Which makes all of us Jesus.” He laughed. “DAM is a team.”

“I don’t even know what you make,” I said.

“We make the world safer.” He gave me a steely, blink-less look of self-importance meant to impress me. I regret that it worked.

Dyson’s promise to make the world safer had ended with Peter and three other men dead, with Leon Cranch curled up in a jail cell, with the dissolution of my oldest friendship. “But how?” I asked Roger. “Your website says you offer ‘Preventative Atonement.’ That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Ours is an era of impatience. Investors value potential over product. According to *Forbes*, *Bloomberg*, and *Barron’s*, DAM has the potential to fundamentally alter how we talk to each other over the coming decade. Silicon Valley has never seen potential like ours. No investor wants to be late to the party. And the party?” He checked his watch. “Starts in eight days.”

We returned to the office beneath the helipad. I was pummeled with titles and names.

“María Hernandez,” said María Hernandez. “Head of outreach technology.” She was a short, dark-haired woman wearing chunky heels and a loose tunic the



color of sand. The gold bracelets ringing her wrists *tinged* as she led me to a corner of the room so close to the forest branches scraped the glass. “Sasha, I don’t know if they’ve told you—and forgive me if you’ve heard this already. But you’re a real inspiration. The integrity and strength you showed, after all you’ve been through, it just—” She thumbed a tear from her eye. “I admire you so much.”

“It was a very difficult time,” I said.

“You were my first choice from the beginning. We *all* respect you at DAM—but me more than anyone else. I know you’ll do amazing work for us.”

There were questions I should have been asking: *What work? Why did you pick me? Why the hell does everyone here look so happy?* But María’s enthusiasm blotted out my concerns. I collected her praise like a bee gathering pollen.

She sat me down in a deep leather chair facing a flat-screen TV. She capped headphones over my ears. A promotional video played:

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Four white women sit around a small outdoor table in the courtyard of a crowded restaurant, sharing mimosas. A voice-over says: *There used to be a time when we could speak freely.* The women clink their glasses. One woman says, *This mimosa is my spirit animal.* The other women laugh—one spit-takes her drink. The first woman photographs herself holding her drink. *There used to be a time when our communities supported us. Understood us.* Beneath her photo, she types her joke, then posts. *There used to be a time when we looked out for each other.* Her phone buzzes and chimes on the table. She coyly ignores it.

*My god, Shelly, you’re blowing up.*

*What’re they saying?*

*Are you faaaamous?*

Shelly gasps when she picks up her phone.

*What’s wrong, Shelly?*

*What happened?*

*They’re saying I’m... I don’t want to say it.*

Comments like *RACIST* and *COLONIZER* and *UGH WHITE WOMEN* and *UR CANCELED SHELLY MAGUIRE* flow over the screen. *But major shifts in technology and the expansion of communities have drastically changed how we interact.*

*You know I'm not like that,* says Shelly. *It was a joke.*

*Pretty tasteless,* says one of her friends.

*I would never have posted it.*

*You can't take risks with comments like that.*

A montage follows Shelly through weeks of isolation, crying in her shower, getting fired, dumped, her friends ignoring her calls. It concludes in the restaurant where it started. Shelly, with deep bags under her eyes and frazzled hair, sits alone in the corner, glaring at the table where her former friends currently sit and refuse to look at her.

The video cuts to footage inside a technology lab. Employees type on laptops and mark figures on enormous touch screens. *There used to be a time when no one got hurt. But those days are over.* Employees hugging in hallways. Footage of a verdant forest and children swimming in a quarry. *But some of us still have faith in humanity. Some of us still believe in the value of teamwork and are working to ensure the prosperity of our communities for generations to come.* Mixed-race friends walk down the sidewalk, laughing and licking ice-cream cones. A puppy licks the face of a child. *Introducing DAM. A revolutionary new technology that shows users how their words will be interpreted by people outside their communities. DAM uses advanced algorithms to simulate over four hundred billion possible outcomes for whatever you might post online. We all make mistakes. But what if we can atone for our mistakes before making them?* A series of bars rise and fall on various graphs. They shift in color from green to purple to orange to red—the screen blinks as if indicating a nuclear strike. *DAM's risk analysis summary provides users with a full overview of how their words might be interpreted. Once risk is determined, users complete a multi-step confirmation process before they can post their comment or photo.*

*This mimosa is my spirit animal,* says Shelly again—clearly skinnier than she was in the first clip, and prettier, too, with shinier, blonder hair. The friend spits mimosa over the table. Shelly pulls out her phone and drafts the same post from

before. Only this time, she taps a shield icon in the upper left corner of the screen. *DAM SCORE CALCULATING* flashes. *RESULT: 39% chance of causing harm to Indigenous and Native People. 22% chance of losing followers. 8% chance of professional repercussions. 17% chance of personal repercussions. 99% chance of unjustifiable appropriation. DO YOU STILL WANT TO POST? Y/N?* Shelly types: *N*. She sets down her phone. *I love spending my Sundays with you*, she says to her friends. *Awwwww, Shelly Bell*, they say.

DAM hammers onto the screen: *It's your strongest defense against yourself.*

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María uncapped my ears.

Roger patted my shoulder. “Remarkable, right?”

“I still don’t get it,” I said, though of course I got it. I envied Shelly—this symbol of women like me—for escaping the punishment she didn’t deserve.

“You don’t need to *get* the technology,” Roger said. “I hardly get it myself. All you need to know is that it works.”

“Do you want me to produce videos for you?”

“That’s what I love about her,” María said, to Roger. “The modesty.”

“I wish I could say the same about me,” Roger said.

He and María laughed.

I laughed.

Then nobody laughed.

María said, “Sasha, you’ll star in the promotions.”

My lungs shrunk. “Doing what?”

“Reenacting your infamous night,” she said. “We think your story will really resonate with our clients. What you said to—”

“Lucas Devry,” said Roger.

“I’m not an actor.”

“You don’t have to be,” said María. “You’ll be playing yourself.” She squatted beside me and laid a hand on my knee. She spread her other arm to the sky. “We open with you in the back of a taxi. Is that right?”

“An Uber,” Roger corrected.

“A Lyft,” I muttered.

“We open with you in the Lyft giddy from a wonderful night on the town. You’re on top of the world. You’re laughing; you’re tired; you’re *proud* of yourself. And you have every right to be. You just got some *excellent* news. When you pull out your phone, though, you see that an awful man has left an awful comment on your beautiful photo. Close-up on the screen. You type your response, something like...”

“*I am trying to create a loving beautiful world,*” said Roger. “*And the world would be so much more beautiful if you and everyone like you were dead.*”

“A fairly innocuous comment,” María said. “Mean-spirited, yes. But on the internet that’s like flicking a pea at someone—if it had been made in a vacuum, that is. Sadly, we don’t live in a vacuum. If we did, we wouldn’t need DAM.”

“If only we didn’t need DAM,” Roger said.

“This time, though, instead of posting you tap the DAM shield on your screen.”

“Upper left corner,” said Roger.

María read off a tablet: “*Forty-four percent chance of causing offense. Twenty-nine percent chance of follower loss. Sixty-four percent chance of personal repercussions. And finally: eighty percent chance of personal repercussions.* Now, because one or more of your scores exceeds fifty percent, the application advises you not to post. But you’ll type *Y* anyway—you’re angry; we get it. And what happens? The app delays the post for five minutes, and during that time it gives a comprehensive overview of how other users might interpret this post. This, of course, is available only for DAM Platinum Members. But it’s worth it. Because after five minutes, you change your mind. You type *N* when prompted again. The Uber drops you off at your apartment. You wake up refreshed in the morning. You go on with your life, with your career. You and I never meet.”

“Sounds wonderful, right?” Roger asked. “That other life.”

I felt like a magician’s assistant standing inside a box pincushioned with swords. “There must be other celebrities,” I mumbled. “Ones who’ve made even bigger mistakes.”

“Sure, there are other celebrities, but we don’t want to work with a *celebrity*. We want to work with you. Because we love you, Sasha. We’re huge fans of

ABANDON.”

“My sister-in-law was a subscriber,” said María. “She changed her life because of you. I don’t think she’d be with us today if it weren’t for your program.”

“We admire *all* your work with your clients—the care and respect you showed them,” he said. “And the work you’re doing now. Were doing, I mean. With those men in your cult.”

“You’re the perfect fit for the campaign,” María said.

“People know you,” added Roger. “But they don’t *know you* know you. A large segment of the population (thirty percent) will instantly recognize you. Another thirty will be sure you’re familiar but won’t know without searching. The final forty won’t have a clue who you are. To them, you could be anyone. You could be their sister, their mother, their wife, their daughter: themselves. You’re everyone and you’re no one. You know what that makes you?”

“Trapped,” I said.

“Ha-ha!” said María.

“That makes you a unicorn,” Roger said.

“Something terrible happened to me,” I said. “People died because of me.”

María rubbed my shoulder and leaned in for a hug. “That’s not true,” she whispered. “You know that’s not true. Lucas Devry was sick. You had nothing to do with that.”

I was eager for exoneration. Dyson had said similar things to me months ago. But I hadn’t felt the words until now. María meant what she said; she understood, intimately, how unjust my guilt was. Her words lifted a weight I hadn’t realized was there until she spoke.

“I don’t know if you think of yourself in these terms,” said Roger. “But to me, and to María, you’re an artist. While some artists use paint and words and film and dance, your medium was inspiration, kindness, advice. You renewed people’s faith in themselves. And artists—all *great* artists—create from places of trauma. They transform trauma into art that addresses the masses. That’s what you’ll do with DAM. Suffering transformed into joy. You’ll commune with people facing similar issues. There is no higher calling than using your pain to help others.”

I shivered, icy with pride. “No higher calling,” I said.

“We don’t intend to exploit you.”

“I’m just trying to understand—I’ll be in the ads for the app?”

“It’s far more than an app,” said María.

“We will compensate you competitively for the emotional toll. Physical, too. We’ll get you an on-site counselor—and a masseuse. Have you even seen anyone since the incident?”

“There wasn’t any time,” I said. “Or money.”

“Soon there won’t be much you can’t afford,” Roger said.

“The offer includes lifetime housing at the DAM campus,” María said.

“We think you would benefit greatly from the amenities offered by on-campus living.”

“Do I get my own room?” I asked.

“*Room?*” María said. “Sasha: You’ve earned far more than a room.”

“You get your own furnished apartment.”

“More of a penthouse.”

“Your cabin days are over,” he said.

The employees typed merrily on their laptops. Perhaps everything was okay. Perhaps this truly was a great opportunity. I had no reason to punish myself. María was right: I deserved to feel better. “Tell me what I do to be happy like them,” I said, nodding at the employees.

“You stay here,” said Roger. “You inhale the air. That’s what DAM does for the soul.”

The world he promised—the safety, the stardom, the second chance—seduced me more easily than I like to admit.

# thirty-three

THAT EVENING, I ate dinner with María and her family. Her husband was a thick, lotion-scented white dude with a balding man's buzz cut and veiny eyes. He worked as a freelance graphic designer, parented their two young children during the day. For dinner, he made seared salmon and roasted asparagus—drier and more elastic than the food Dyson prepared, though I didn't complain. I ate how I ate around Dyson: hastily mashing the food together, flinging it down my throat. I finished before anyone else started.

"Would you like more?" asked María.

I was too embarrassed to say yes. "It was just so delicious," I said.

The husband spoke: "María tells me you were in some kind of cult before coming here."

She shot him a look.

"She told you?" I asked.

"No secrets at DAM." He folded his hands over his heart. "Not a single secret on-site. We always say what we feel—even when it's offensive or hurtful." He gnawed the tines of his fork, trying, for reasons beyond me, to stoke some simmering fight between himself and María.

"Maybe let's not when there's company, honey," she said.

"There's been a misunderstanding," I said.

"*Cult* was shorthand," she said. "A harmless joke."

"It sounded pretty serious to me," said the husband.

She gave me an eye-widening look: *What can you do about husbands?*

"I wasn't in a cult," I said to him. "I was its leader. I wielded all the power."

"Prime position," said the husband, laughing.

“But my co-leader and I had different visions of how to move forward. You know how it is with cults.”

The husband laughed again, as did María, though hers was a laugh of discomfort. He launched into the story of their lives—a story of personal disappointment disguised as triumph, a story, I gathered, he’d been trying to tell all evening. “We used to be in Rhode Island,” he said. “We had a great life there. Thought things couldn’t get better. I bet that’s what you’re feeling. You must have had a great setup at your... *cult*.”

I flashed a wincing smile.

“We had a three-bedroom Tudor, schools lined up for the sprouts; I was working at RISD. A dream life. The job I’d *always* wanted. I thought: Leave our friends and family? Never. I’m an East Coaster. My blood’s a hundred percent Atlantic Ocean. I never thought I’d move west. But I can’t tell you how...” His voice cracked. “I can’t tell you how much better life has become. There were so many things I thought were normal. I thought: That’s life. That’s how it is. But that’s not true. It *can* be better. I didn’t realize that until María took over and moved us to DAM. I didn’t want to. Nope. Not one bit. But I am so *so* grateful we’re...” Snot bubbled out of his nose as he wept.

María mouthed an apology.

I excused myself for the bathroom. Dyson had left me a voicemail. I listened to it to buy time away from the husband’s breakdown. *Things have gotten interesting*, Dyson said. Nerves rattled his voice. *I wish you were here to help settle things down*.

“Fuck. You,” I whispered to my phone. I felt squeezed by his call and by dinner—I hadn’t been alone since I’d landed at DAM. María’s family grinned at me when I returned to the table. I told them I needed some rest. At the door, María apologized for her husband, but I assured her he wasn’t the issue. “We’ve all had husbands,” I said, flustered and eager to leave.

“When were you married?” she asked.

I kissed her cheeks good night. Behind her, the husband waved, his eyes red.

My apartment was identical to María’s: cathedral ceilinged, walls blemish-less. A marble island in its open kitchen fed into an airy dining room. Bland canvasses the color of seaweed hung above the couches and chairs and the bed. In the



center of one was the word *Grow*. In another: *Inspire*. A third and fourth: *It Happens*. They produced a light, draining sensation at the base of my skull that made me want to lie down. I stretched out in bed with my arms and legs extended in the shape of an X.

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The next morning, I pampered myself beneath a lather of bubbles in my apartment's whirlpool tub. I conditioned using a product that smelled of rosemary and mint. It had been months since I'd opened a dresser to find something other than athleisure, T-shirts, and jeans. But DAM had stocked my closet, and I put on the simplest outfit I could find: a breezy blue wrap and tights to hide the hair on my legs. I wore a touch of foundation and lipstick, mascara. It reminded me of life before The Atmosphere, before Lucas Devry, a life without pressure and guilt. I let my hair down—like María—which I had never done at the camp.

María and I spent the day in a spacious conference room overlooking the quarry. We read through the script, practicing lines and rewriting passages. She treated me with patience. "This must be difficult," she said, even when it no longer was. Rather, less difficult than she assumed. It had been months since I'd spent time with other women. The tension weighing on me at The Atmosphere was not, I realized, normal in everyday life. I knew the men far better than I knew María; nevertheless, our silences didn't cause me anxiety. I didn't clench my teeth when she spoke. She smelled nicer than the men, a subtle, fruity scent reminiscent of Cassandra.

Over lunch, we talked about her childhood in the suburbs of Houston. She had been raised by staunchly middle-class parents. "Office to coffin types," she said. As a child, she loved dismantling and rebuilding gadgets—cameras, TVs, radios, toasters—and built computers for her parents, her brother, her sister, herself. She used programming terms but was polite enough to explain when I looked confused. She said, "I know DAM might seem weird. I know the people here seem a little too happy. I felt the same way when I arrived. This isn't how people are supposed to act at their jobs. But Sasha: This place has been

wonderful for me. Roger hires based on skill alone—the diversity here, it’s not part of some grand PC conspiracy; he doesn’t check boxes or chase percentages, despite what *some* people think. DAM is how a company looks when people are given the chances they deserve.”

“Your husband doesn’t seem to approve.”

“He’s a white guy. He thinks a certain way about things. He’d kill me if I told you this. But after that cult stunt—and I’m sorry again—he deserves it.” She looked over her shoulder, to check for her husband. I was pleased she was inviting me into her confidence. She whispered, “He applied to work here, positive he’d get a job on the graphics team, and he didn’t. He didn’t have the skills or experience and it’s taking some time to get over that.”

An employee stepped up to our table rambling about an “urgent matter” he was reluctant to describe. He turned toward me and, with contrived shock, said, “Oh, my god, you’re Sasha! I’m Raúl. I’m on the accounting team—assistant to the director of finances, really.”

“Weren’t you telling me something?” María asked. “An urgent matter.”

“I can take care of it,” he said. He smiled at me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

“May I sit down?” he asked.

“We’re eating,” said María. “And you have to finish whatever made you interrupt us.”

He gave a slight bow and departed.

“Starfuckers,” she muttered, smirking.

“Can you blame them?” I waved a hand in front of my body, feigning vanity. “I’m joking. I’m really much more modest than this.”

“Don’t be,” she replied. “I mean what I said. And everyone here: they really are starstruck. You’re an inspiration for the employees.” Part of the fun of being a *star*, María knew, was being reminded of your importance. She was flattering me, imploring me to dive headfirst into DAM—and I dived, just as she wanted.

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Roger and I shared dinner at DAM's fanciest restaurant, a dimly lit Italian place where the chefs made pasta from scratch and waiters smiled like they had guns at their backs.

"You must love it here," he said.

"It's been one day."

"Imagine more days, even better than this one."

I took a long drink of wine. "Roger, why are you doing this?"

"I told you: to make the world safer."

"But that's not the mission." I'd spent the whole day memorizing lines, absorbing the purpose of DAM. Their mission sounded nothing like the safe internet he described. "You're selling this as a way to protect sexists and racists from themselves."

He set down his fork. "Come with me on a journey, Sasha."

I pretended to buckle up.

"Imagine a father who learns his son is gay when his son isn't home. He sees something his son posted online, or is told by the father of a friend. What matters is that he's furious—he's regressive; some fathers are—and texts his son something cruel like, *Come home right now, you...* insert the word. Imagine the pain that boy has to live with for the rest of his life after reading that message. What if he feels so unloved, reading that text from his father, that he never comes home again? He runs away or—god forbid. Can you imagine the pain of that boy and the pain of the father? But what if that father, before he sends the message, is shown how hurtful that message would be to his son? A boy he truly loves. What if there's a program that directs the father to photos of him and his son enjoying each other's company, reminding the father how much him loves his son, no matter how the boy chooses to live? And now imagine that father deletes the text and writes: *I love you I'm here if you ever need to talk.*"

"Were you that boy?"

"Whether I was or wasn't the boy doesn't matter."

"So you were the boy?"

"I wasn't the boy, Sasha. My parents are wonderful, loving people, and they aren't the point. The point is that in situations like the one I described, you and I, we understand how important those moments are. They really get us right

here.” He knocked a fist on his chest. “But they don’t appeal to investors. Because if you’re rich enough to invest in a start-up, you’re likely racist and sexist, a homophobe, definitely a dullard and wimp. That’s how people make money in a world like ours. And: I admit. We focused our campaign on how DAM might help sexists and racists. I wish we didn’t have to pander to get money—but we do. That’s the reality of the industry, Sasha. It’s abhorrent that no one would toss me a dime if I told them I wanted DAM to protect vulnerable people on the internet.”

“That’s so cynical.”

“It’s only cynical if you’re naïve,” he said. “It’s only cynical if you’re unwilling to look honestly at the world. I know where the seed money comes from. I know who’s willing to pay, and for what. I’ve stretched myself thin as a ribbon to get to this point. Look at me, Sasha. I’m thirty-two years old and my beard’s a permanent frost. You know how you go gray at thirty-two? You go gray from seeing doors slammed in your face. From dial tones in your ear. I used to call DAM The Bridge—a way to cross over trolls. Nobody cared until I promised to protect assholes from themselves. Should I abandon the project because seed money eugenicists only care about their reputations? Should I give up because they’re terrified of their Fifteen Minutes of Shame?”

“Eventually the investors will figure out you’re exploiting them.”

Roger tore off a hunk of baguette and dunked it in olive oil, chewed slowly. “Sasha,” he said with his mouth full. “Everyone’s getting exploited. Me, you, María, even that dude you told to fuck off. I won’t say his name out of respect for you. But his life wasn’t *great*. And the investors—I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

I heard Dyson in Roger: the ends justified the means. “There’s no guarantee it’ll ever protect the people you hope to protect,” I said. “The investors, those bigots and dullards, will find new ways to harass. Everyone finds a way. Lucas Devry died four months ago and I’m still getting emails from people who think I ought to be boiled alive. Your app—”

“It’s way more than an app,” he said.

“DAM will only stop someone who feels they have something to lose.”

“You really think there are people who don’t have anything to lose?”

My mind flashed to the men, though it seemed condescending to name them. They might have lost their families and jobs, their dignity, yet they had followed Dyson to The Atmosphere hopeful for transformation and change, believing some better future awaited them should they put in the work. What they had to lose was what I had to lose: the future. The redemption Dyson had promised them, and promised me, as bait to draw us to the camp. Roger was right. Everyone had something to lose. But the allowances he made for DAM disturbed me, and it disturbed me that despite his brilliance he couldn't imagine those allowances hurting him.

"What I think is that thinking that way is a trap," I told him.

He knocked the table next to my wineglass. "Wake up," he said, legitimately angry. "We're all already trapped. Better to create new ways of living inside of the trap. People are smart, Sasha. I have *faith* in humanity—I wouldn't have built DAM if I didn't think people can change. And once DAM exists people will learn its true value: reminding people to not speak out of pain, selfishness, rage. DAM will show us how to communicate with kindness and love."

"And you'll be cashing the checks," I said.

"My parents were engineers with Microsoft. They invested wisely, and they left me a very generous inheritance. Without it I never would have had the money to start this company. The money DAM makes—I don't care. Most of it goes to my employees."

"And to your castle."

"I'm no king."

"People talk about you like one."

Roger sighed, frustrated with me. "Sasha, I don't control how people talk about me. I'd rather they praise me than resent me. And they praise me because I praise them. DAM is a supportive environment, and we expect that level of support from everyone here, including you."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's the farthest thing from a threat." He took a long drink of water. The ice clinked in his glass. "Everyone here would be grateful if you recognized how fortunate you are to be here. You were not in an ideal situation, with your men."

With the news stories about you. And we're willing to remake your reputation from the ground up."

I didn't want to be beholden to anyone, especially not to him with his inflated notions of grandeur. "You must know that DAM won't change how anyone thinks. That father won't become any less bigoted because DAM reminds him he loves his son."

"Worst-case scenario, Sasha: it doesn't. Worst case he sees the pain he might cause and sends the message anyway, the sadist. But at least he had to think about it. At least he knows the consequences of his actions. Because that's the problem, now: everyone has all these thoughts and ideas and they spread them without considering whether they might hurt someone else. Maybe we can't unracist the racists. Maybe we can't unsexist the sexists. But we can keep their words out of *my* head. Out of my *employees'* heads. Out of *yours*. You're telling me you wouldn't want that man to *know* how his comments might hurt him? Imagine he sees he might lose his job. That he might be racked with shame over it. That people might troll *him* just as hard as he trolls you. Maybe he decides it's not worth it. Doesn't that sound like a much better life?"

I drank the remains of my wine. "Then we would never have met."

He refilled my glass, then lifted his. "Cheers. To the world where we never met."

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In my apartment, I read over texts from Dyson. From what I could gather, the attack on the bus helped him convince the remaining men to stick around—he fed them an Us Against the World narrative that modestly deepened their commitment. But without me there to offer a comforting and stable unified front, Dyson's control over the men had begun to crumble. Even through text, I could sense his desperation and fear.

He texted: *What's happening?*

He texted: *I just want to check in with you.*

He texted: *To see how you're doing.*

He texted: *To tell you again how sorry I am.*

He texted: *Things are getting out of control.*  
I typed: *Then figure it out.* But I erased the message.  
He texted: *Were you writing something? I saw the dots.*  
I turned off my phone.

---

Roger and I shared dinner again—sushi. He flirted with me how a lion tamer might flirt with a lion. I couldn't tell if he wanted me or merely wanted to use me, and I refrained from flirting back, though I knew if I put in even the teensiest effort he would end up in my bed.

I didn't want him in my bed. I wanted Peter—half out of desire, half out of guilt.

"María tells me you're making great progress with the commercial," he said.

"She's a very generous person."

"It sounds like the ad will be ready for the gala on Friday."

My face went blank, quizzical. It was the first I'd heard of the gala.

"In celebration of Saturday's launch. Don't worry. These events aren't really for us. They're for the investors. To see their contributions put to good use." He took a drink, dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "We'd love you to address the audience."

"I'm already doing so much," I said.

"We're paying you generously for your work."

"I don't have time to write a speech."

"We have freelancers for that. Writers who used to write for the president."

"Which president?"

"One of the good ones, I assure you."

My mind drifted to the image of me triumphant before an ocean of tuxedos and gowns. Hands were slapping together to cheer my perfectly delivered speech.

"And your friend will be there," he said.

"Dyson?" I asked.

"No cult leaders on the guest list—that I know of," he said with a laugh. "I meant Cassandra. Cassandra Hanson."

Her name made me cringe. I heard myself refusing her pity all those weeks ago in the woods. But here I was: a hypocrite. Worse: a fraud.

“I can’t wait to see her,” I said.



# thirty-four

MY DAM SCORE had been calculated. I gawked at the green-screen phone in my hand, trying to appear terrified and remorseful in the face of my ruined future.

“Cut!” said the director.

Roger opened the car door for me, clapping. “Touch my arm, Sasha,” he said. “Goose bumps from shoulder to wrist. You have such a command of a camera.”

I thanked him emptily. The filming drained everything from me.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about your health.” He draped a hand over his heart. “I’ve scheduled you an appointment with our finest holistic clinician. Emotional. Physical. Spiritual. Lynda takes care of everything.”

“That would be great,” I mumbled. But when the time came to leave my apartment for the session, I shut the curtains and napped until dinner.

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*I’m having a very hard time, Dyson texted. I get lonely at night. I’m scared. The men have been... doing things. They’re unhappy. They’re angry.*

*What things?* I texted in a moment of weakness. I was angry at him, yes, but I missed him—even though I wished I didn’t. We shared too much history.

*I thought you’d never respond!*

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“That’s it!” said Roger from the set. “That’s exactly it! I’ve never been so moved in my life.”

I crumpled over the phone in the back of the car, my eyes ready to empty. To make myself cry, I'd thought about Peter. *Monster* and *killer*, I'd thought. *You never loved him. You were using him. You never even knew him.*

María helped me out of the car. Together, we walked off the set.

"You're an icon," said Roger. "We knew you could do it. We never once doubted you."

"Are you okay?" asked María.

I nodded, but I wasn't. Roger gave me a stiff-armed hug that felt like being bundled by a pair of steel beams. He treated me as if my pain were contagious.

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At five thirty, on Friday, someone pounded on my door. The week of filming and polite formalities with DAM employees had left me scooped out, crisp as a cracker, and it took me a while to answer. The woman who had been knocking shoved a dry-cleaned black strapless gown into my arms. "The gala begins at seven in the ballroom. I recommend you practice your speech." She handed over a black padded clipboard with thick white paper glued to the surface.

"Where's the ballroom?" I asked.

She was already too far away to hear me.

I swallowed a pair of caffeine pills to revive myself. I showered, then requested a stylist, who put my hair in a mermaid wave she assured me could withstand a hurricane. Afterward, she called for a colleague to apply my makeup. Together, they zipped me into the gown, which was so tight that it made me feel like a bullet.

Outside the ballroom, a line of hundreds of strangers in gowns stretched out from the entrance. Ushers checked IDs against the guest list. A lanky blond man in a red tuxedo fought with the ushers. "Roger invited me personally!" he shouted. The usher tapped the list, shook his head. The guest took a swing at the usher. Security swarmed. They dragged him handcuffed into an unmarked blue door down the hall.

The guests gasped. They clutched at their hearts. María palmed the small of my back. She leaned to my ear: "He's an actor. Roger hired him to create a sense

of exclusivity.”

Inside the ballroom, staffs of colored light beamed out from the ceiling, zigging drunkenly over the floor. A hologram of Kendrick Lamar performed for a crowd of aging white men who had been dressed in designer T-shirts and flat-brimmed caps. Weed lollipops poked out of their mouths. They nodded insecurely, clapped vigorously, stomped their feet without singing along. I’d stepped into a rave for and by people who hated raves. On the far side of the room, clustered in front of the stage, were waist-high dinner tables, no chairs. “Standing tables reduce the musculoskeletal damage of sitting,” María told me. Everywhere, investors posed for photos with B-list celebrities. The celebrities included daytime talk show hosts, the stars of TV dramas, game show prodigies, failed presidential candidates, child actors, the generically and talentless hot. María and I passed a long blue tent with a neon tablet hovering over the entrance. *The Mistake Tent* read the tablet.

“I never thought anyone would go for it,” said María. “Confessing the worst thing you’ve ever done in your life. On camera. But Roger was right. Who wouldn’t want to confess?”

“What are the videos used for?” I asked.

“If you have to ask...,” she said with a chuckle. When I didn’t laugh, she added: “We should join Roger.” He stood onstage nodding and glad-handing with Ben Affleck and Jay-Z and, María informed me, Samantha Power.

“I’ll be up in a second,” I told her. I drifted over to The Mistake Tent, curious about the type of people it attracted. Sy Cunningham and Claire Lance waited near the front of the line, gesturing patiently, sipping drinks from stubby cups. The sight of them made my legs quiver. My worst memories had climbed out of my skull. I spun around to look for María but heard a familiar voice calling my name.

“My god, Sasha! Get over here now.” Cassandra towered over me in red stiletto heels and a silk, sleeveless gown the color of an aging rose petal. She lowered her hands to my shoulders, kissed both cheeks. “How *long* has it been since we’ve seen each other?”

“You didn’t tell me you’d be here,” I said, trying to sound friendly.

She took my hands in hers. “You’re shaking. You must be freezing.”

“I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Tsk, tsk. Roger promised me he’d take care of you. I *told* him to take care of you.”

Her words plucked me bare. “It’s nearly seven. I should go find my seat.” I doubted I would survive catching up with her.

“These things never start on time,” she said. “Never one worth attending, at least.” There was Cassandra’s knowing charm, her sense of ownership over all things.

And here I was: shaping myself to accommodate her. “Can’t start without me,” I said. “I’m giving the keynote.”

“Oh, my god! That’s amazing.” She shouldered my shoulder. “I am so proud of you. I always knew you’d make it this far. I always believed in you.”

“You did,” I said. Though I meant it to sound like: *You did?*

“You must tell me, Sasha. I’ve been so curious about your thing. That thing you’re doing—changing the world, the universe. I’ve been so intrigued since you told me about it.” It was impossible to tell where her curiosity ended and her condescension began.

“It’s still very much in development,” I told her. “I’m here for a brief spell before I return to the real work. Back to what I love doing.”

“I love that you love what you’re doing.” She let out a toothy, beaming laugh, like headlights in the night. “I’m in the middle of something, as well—sworn to secrecy on it. But I’ll be so excited to share it with you. Soon we’ll have to collaborate. Like the old days.”

“Would you really want that?”

“You’re so adorable,” she said. She snapped for Sy Cunningham’s attention. “Sy! Come talk to Sasha and me.”

Sy Cunningham stepped out of line and held out his hand for a shake. “Sy Cunningham,” he said. He’d had his mole removed since I’d last seen him, but the surgeon had botched the procedure. A pale red circle the size of a nickel balanced on Sy’s lip. He hovered his hand over his mouth to hide it. “I host the podcast *Sylence*. Have you heard it?”

“Don’t say anything, Sash. It’s a setup.”

*Sash*, I thought.

“So,” he said. “Have you... *heard* it?” He laughed to himself.

“Sy only has one joke and he unloads it on every new person he meets. It’s funny in a not funny at all kind of way.”

“We’ve met before,” I said.

“I’m positive we haven’t,” he said. “I would’ve remembered someone of your —” He coughed. “Reputation.”

Cassandra shook her head. “Leave it to Sy Cunningham: always the most indiscreet man in the room. Always says what everyone knows not to say.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” he said.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Cassandra said.

I was impressed by Cassandra, grateful to have her back on my side.

“Don’t think people won’t be hearing about this. Don’t think I won’t tell *everyone*.” She eyed him forcefully. He quivered dramatically. They cracked open in laughter and hugged. I tried to laugh, too. They looked at me like I’d discovered them kissing. Sy stepped into the tent.

“Oh, Sasha, I’ve missed you,” Cassandra said.

It felt good to shadow Cassandra again, to reside inside her confidence. I let myself imagine lengthy dinners together whenever she visited California, vacationing with her on various Mediterranean islands—the life she had once made me envision.

Guests were beginning to shuffle to their spots. They slipped the ushers business cards and folded fifties in last-ditch efforts to earn seats among more powerful and beautiful donors.

Cassandra said, “What you’re doing for DAM is so generous. I don’t know if Roger told you, but he had the most difficult time finding someone to take the position. He reached out to everyone. Literally everyone. Twice. When I heard he was so desperate, your name immediately popped in my head.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I *never* thought you’d take it. Never. And I mean that with the utmost admiration. I assumed you’d have something better than this—especially when you told me about that world changer. Which is to say I admire you for accepting a job that most people might find demeaning. Because DAM is so important. They’re taking real risks. I completely understand why no one would

work with them. I turned them down for those same reasons. But you: you're above that noise." She pressed her finger against my sternum. "That's what I love about you. You always surprise me."

I felt small, squashable, listening to her speak at me.

"It's hilarious. Not funny *ha-ha*, funny *huh*." She shrugged playfully. "If you asked me last year to predict how our lives would turn out, I *never* would've guessed this. Not in a hundred billion years. That's life for you. Un-Pre-Dic-Table. The only way to find out what happens is to live it. Imagine me saying this three months ago: *Sasha Marist: spokeswoman for DAM*."

Every ounce of blood inside me leaked free. I was nothing but skin, bones, my body as wrinkled and flat as a discarded pillowcase. "You know my last name," I said.

"What did I say?"

"*Marist*," I said.

"Isn't that it?"

Her condescension enraged me. I no longer felt small; I felt used and derided, feelings I'd felt throughout our friendship—though it was never a friendship. "We worked together for three years," I said. "You know my name."

"I'm sorry I misremembered your name," she said. "Remind me: What is it?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"How childish, Sasha. We don't deserve help if we're unwilling to help."

"I'm not going to tell you," I said. "I want you to say it."

"Clearly, Sasha, the stress of everything is getting to you. And I understand. I really do."

"I know that you know it."

"Of course I don't understand personally. It's nothing *I've* gone through. But I sympathize with you and your plight. That's why I'm so happy you're working for Roger. This is such a perfect fit for you. You'll thrive outside of the spotlight. The pressure buckles you when you're at the center. I say that without any judgment. The center isn't for everyone. Life in the center is *hard*. I'm *barely* surviving. I am so happy you found a place where you can be valued for the journey you're on."

"You're nothing without your little thimble of fame," I said. "I pity you."

*Ladies and Gentlemen, please take your places* came over the loudspeaker.

Cassandra kissed my cheeks. “I love you,” she said, then leaned to my ear and whispered, “Remember: Your future is riding on this. This time, don’t fuck it up.”

María waved from the tables onstage. Cassandra’s comments had put me in a morose trance. I followed the movements of her hand as if dragged by a tractor beam.

Roger, María, and I stood at a table left of the podium, with Roger closest to it and María between us. On the other side stood Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and a former president (a bad one). They opened the ceremony with timbered speeches praising Roger’s “revolutionary technology.” I gazed into my clutch, refreshing my phone, hoping to find a message from Dyson—for any distraction from this evening.

Roger stepped to the podium. He opened by thanking his guests. He thanked donors. He thanked his employees, name by name, even the ticket takers at the DAM movie theater. “When I started DAM,” he said, “my goal was to create a safer online community. A place where my friends and family and, knock on wood, children would never have to fear the threat of online harassment. And with your help, we’ve created that place. A place that’s not only safe for people like me and our employees, but safe for people like you. Safe for people like Sasha Marcus, a visionary influencer whose career was tragically cut short by a slip of the thumb.”

Behind him, an enormous screen descended from the ceiling. The lights were respectfully dimmed. A montage tracking Lucas Devry’s death played over a somber piano melody.

“But DAM can help us prevent such tragedies,” Roger said.

The commercial premiered. My fifty-foot hands typed a response to Lucas Devry. I brought one hand to my face, quietly trying to hide. Applause cascaded through the room. The guests marveled at the alternate world promised by DAM. In that world, I wasn’t onstage. I stood among them applauding some other pariah demolished by public humiliation.

Roger said, “A toast to Sasha.” Everyone lifted their glasses. “Sasha has brought honor, grace, courage, and dignity to DAM. DAM was created because

people like Sasha deserve to save themselves from themselves. They deserve what you deserve: Preventative Atonement.”

I stood—and the applause intensified. María clutched my hand, shook her head no. It wasn’t yet time for me to deliver my speech. But I was angry at Roger for casting me in such a demeaning role. I felt humiliated, upset with myself for agreeing to come here. I would have been better off at The Atmosphere. At least there I had some agency. There, I was Sasha. A leader of sorts. Here, I was a prop in DAM’s ad campaign. I was Sasha Marist—at once special and interchangeable—merely a mannequin in a display window.

I joined Roger at the podium.

“Here she is to say a few words.” Roger gestured for the crowd to keep clapping.

The applause eventually diminished.

I said, “There’s something very important you should know: Roger hates you. Every one of you. He thinks you’re dullards and cowards, all you demented investors, you failed celebrities, the C-list influencers who live off the self-doubt of your clients. You mean nothing to Roger.”

He lunged for the microphone: “Let’s give it up for Sasha!”

I tugged the microphone back.

He stepped away to avoid a confrontation.

“I don’t blame him for hating you,” I said. “Because I hate you, too. I hate that you’re funding a way to insulate yourselves from your worst instincts. You’re not saving yourselves. You’re avoiding yourselves. And I’m happy Roger made me the spokeswoman for DAM. Because if I’m here, then I’m not out there with you, hated by someone like me and by everyone who works for the company you think will protect you. I’m here to tell you, though, that nothing will ever protect you.”

Their applause grew even louder, more manic and charged. The only thing these donors liked more than being praised was being held accountable. These were people who never spoke without checking their privilege. They loved me for telling them they deserved to feel guilty.

“I have been to a place where people are committed to changing the world. I have seen men saved from their worst instincts by the beauty of nature and



companionship. I have seen genuine expressions of love made by people who couldn't care less about profit. I have seen men sacrifice their lives to protect a cause they believe in. I have seen the childless parent the orphaned. I have seen the repressed reveal their innermost selves to strangers. I have seen men become better men: patient and caring and whole. I watched myself mature into a better woman, wiser, more forgiving and honest. Where did this happen?" Nobody released a breath. I floated inside their anticipation like an astronaut. "Not anywhere close to here. It happened on an abandoned campsite in rural New Jersey. The Atmosphere. A place far too good for *any* of you."

The crowd stomped and whistled and wept. Fists pumped. Hats were thrown in the air. My name was chanted. Roger pulled me in for a side hug. "You gotta love her," he said.

I hurried out of the ballroom. Investors gave me thumbs-up as I passed. Some leaned out of their chairs to stretch for high fives, and, unthinkingly, I tapped my hand against theirs.

Even in my apartment, I could hear the audience cheering. I vomited in the kitchen sink, longing for every atom inside me to dissolve into nothing.

Dyson had left me a voicemail during the speech. I listened to it on speaker as I rinsed out my mouth. His voice was a fractured whisper:

*Life must be amazing at DAM. Things are different here. The nights are sour. I've tried something new in the days—something I've always wanted to try. But the men haven't adjusted. Randy says hi. Gerry says hi. The doctor says hi. Everyone says it. You know I didn't want you to leave, but I understood. But now, we need you to return. I'm sorry. I know you won't and you can't. You shouldn't. I don't expect you to return. Why should you return? But you were this place. I mean we were this place. Mostly it was you. It was us. And I miss having our—*

A loud crack interrupted him. *Fuck*, he said. Twigs snapped as he sprinted through the woods, the phone full of his breathing. The voicemail ended.

Champagne and adrenaline swelled my heart with sentimentality. The pleading need in his voice made me want to return to him. I wanted what I always wanted from Dyson: for him to need me to save him, to show *him* how to live. Dyson never wanted to hurt me—unlike Cassandra. I knew he hadn't wanted to hurt Peter, either. Dyson wasn't a killer. He wasn't cruel. He was

beleaguered by grief and incompetence—and he needed me. More than Roger needed me, more than Cassandra, more than Blake, more than my clients ever had.

I loaded clothes and soaps into a suitcase. The closest exit was on the other side of the ballroom. Applause reverberated through the building as I dragged my suitcase through the halls. Curious, I peeked inside the ballroom. The guests were watching Mistake Tent recordings.

I continued to the kitchen. Cater-waiters huddled around a tub of bussed plates stuffing leftovers into their pockets and aprons and mouths.

“We’re allowed to do this,” said a redheaded woman. Sauce spotted her chin.

“What size do you wear?” I asked her.

“If you’re calling me fat,” she said, “I’m no bigger than you.”

“I’ve got a suitcase full of designer clothes for you if you drive me to the airport.”

“Prove it,” she said.

I unzipped my suitcase. She picked through the dresses, nodded approval. “You’re the woman from the video,” she said.

“Does that mean you won’t drive me?” I asked.

“That means we better go out the back,” she said. And I followed her.

# thirty-five

GROCERIES WERE STACKED across the back seat of Dyson's car. He quivered with nervous energy, rapping the wheel and grimacing. Decades of stress had seized his face since I'd last seen him: gray hairs weaved through his eyebrows, and his neck was chicken-like, wrinkled.

The past week had made claims to my youth and dignity. I spent a significant chunk of the flight—which I'd charged to a credit card Roger provided—stretching my face in the bathroom, fending off impatient knocks by responding, *I'm shitting*. My cheeks always appeared greasy and crinkled in those mirrors, a prank of the light, but they were even greasier, even more crinkled, on this trip. Blackheads peppered my nose; bumpy irritations clustered under my eyes. I plucked gray hairs from my scalp. I blamed Roger for these developments. Then I blamed grief. Finally: Dyson. I remained in the bathroom until the flight attendants forced me out for landing.

"How was your... DAM?" Dyson asked in the car.

"Thank you for picking me up," I said, diplomatic and stern. I wished I could be grateful for Dyson, but that seemed impossible now. "I'm not here because I want to be here."

"I read an article about it," he said. "Something about your speech making investors drop out. They don't want to be associated with DAM. They're delaying the launch. They might never launch. What the hell did you say to them?"

"Please don't pretend you haven't already watched it."

"I understand completely if you don't want to talk," he said. "I couldn't understand more. And I respect that. I know you need privacy. I know you're

furious at me. You have every right to be angry. You need your silence. I get it. But there are some things—since you're coming back—some things I should warn you about."

I drooped my head into the seat belt as I listened along.

The men had become paranoid after the other men's deaths, and my sudden absence only made them angrier, more suspicious. One evening, as Dyson prepared the Family Dinner, the men had charged through the fence and raided the pantry. They ate together—excluding Dyson—in one of the sheds. No one Emptied Out. They dug up Peter's vegetable garden the following morning—for sport, it seemed, just to cause trouble—and set fire to three of the sheds before slashing the bus tires, including the spares. Dyson had hidden in the cabin the last three days, living off aging cabbage-and-vinegar slaw and wafers, and Barney's company.

Now the scent of charred wood seeped through the windows as we entered into camp. Flames engulfed a fourth shed, splashing light over the grass, though none of the men appeared in the light. Dyson parked close to the path that led to the cabin. He cut the engine. "Dyyyyyysssooon!" the men bellowed. "Dyson, what have you brought us?"

"Grab as much as you can." He nodded at the back seat. "And run."

We sprinted to the cabin with bags of junk food bulked in our arms. The lights inside were lit. We unloaded the food in the kitchen. We checked the bathroom and closet for men. We checked inside the trunk and under the sink. We barricaded the couch against the door.

Dyson whistled for Barney. "Don't be scared," he said. His voice was tippy with fear. He shook a bag of treats, but the cat didn't come. He shoved the couch aside, hollered Barney's name from the porch. "Barney boy, come get your dinner!"

I climbed upstairs for a change of clothes. The bed had been crisply made—comforter tucked beneath the mattress, pillows square at the head—and in the center lay Barney, a pair of flies looping above his body. I covered my nose and mouth to keep from gagging.

Dyson came back inside. "Barney baby!" he yelled. "I owe you a scratch on the head."

“I found him,” I said.

Dyson remained in the loft with Barney for nearly an hour. I huddled on the couch with my knees to my chest, listening for agonized wailing, waiting for Dyson to curse out the men—even my dislike of Barney couldn’t keep me from crying. Dyson’s silence only heightened my pain. He climbed downstairs with Barney cradled in one arm. Bloody fur stuck to his T-shirt. He washed the cat in the sink, his face as blank as a sheet of steel. Afterward, he towed Barney dry at the kitchen table, humming a tune and shivering. His grief tugged a loose thread of my anger, unraveled it all. I had never seen him so genuinely hurting.

He joined me on the couch and placed Barney between us.

I scooted away until I was practically curled over the armrest. “Say something,” I said. “You’re freaking me out.”

He retrieved an unopened bottle of rum from inside the trunk and drank from it. I drank from the bottle after he passed it to me. It was cheap rum, difficult to keep from spitting out.

He drank again and said, “They’re going to kill us.”

“They should leave if they hate you so much.”

“They can’t leave,” he said. “Not yet.”

“They can’t possibly be so loyal to you.”

“It’s not about loyalty,” he said. “It’s about money.” Before The Atmosphere started, when Dyson collected enrollment fees from the men, they each paid as much as they could—for most, it wasn’t much, but it *was* all they had, often their entire savings or the sum they received from selling a house. Their money had funded The Atmosphere. “The building materials, the food, their clothes. I didn’t have the cash to pay for that on my own.”

“You couldn’t have spent *that* much on this place.”

“I didn’t spend it all on The Atmosphere,” he said.

“Then pay them back,” I said. The solution couldn’t be any more obvious.

“I invested it.”

“In what?”

“In you,” he said.

It took me a second to understand what he meant. Once I did, though, I screamed into my hands. “Give me that,” I said. I took a long pull from the

bottle, three full glugs, like a pirate.

“DAM seemed like it would thrive for decades,” he said. “Especially with you working there. They had a link to invest on their website. A bad sign, now that I think about it. They must’ve been starved for funding. But it seemed legitimate. I figured I’d recoup the enrollment money in no time, either to pay the men back or keep The Atmosphere running.” He rubbed Barney’s belly as he spoke. “This is why you’re the visionary. Between us: you’re the one who can lead. I thought I had it in me, but now it’s obvious that I don’t.”

“I refuse to feel bad for you,” I said.

“I just wanted to help them. I wanted to *love* them and they murdered my cat.” He scratched behind Barney’s ears.

I swiped his hand away. “You’re gonna catch something,” I said.

“And now they’re coming for us. They’ll kill us because of me.”

“Self-pity won’t help anything,” I said. Though I was swimming in self-pity and loathing. I wanted to punish myself for lashing out at the investors. I should’ve quietly slipped out the back. I should’ve never returned to the camp—but I needed to be here. Dyson needed me here. He could never untangle himself from this mess on his own.

Most of us want to be more than who we are. We want to exceed our conditioning. Dyson wanted this for himself and for the Atmospherians, for them to evolve into kinder, gentler men, men untroubled by rage. For years, I tried to obtain this for myself. ABANDON was founded on the belief that women should ignore the toxic impulse toward self-hatred and sacrifice. Women deserved to be more than who we were told to become. Yet here I was, correcting the blunders of men, correcting those very men, and finding in this an unsettling sense of purpose and drive. Perhaps this is because I loved Dyson. I still felt responsible for his heart attack when we were in college, though none of that was my fault. I still cared for the sad boy who invited me to his house to watch bootleg movies. Perhaps if he had been anyone else—if Dyson had been some other man, some man off the street, had he been Blake Dayes, or Randy, had he been Lucas Devry—I would have left him to fend for himself. I like to believe this is true.

Dyson grabbed a package of Oreos off the floor. “We’ll give them what’s left of the money,” he said as he mashed a small stack of cookies into his mouth. “I’ll pay back the difference in time.” Two more cookies. “And they return to their lives.” Three more. “And you return to yours and never have to see me again.”

“They sold their houses,” I told him. “They have nothing left but this life.”

“They can have the property.”

“You’ll be lucky if they don’t sue you.”

“I can’t believe I did this.”

“You were trying to help them,” I said. I needed to calm him down, for his safety and mine. “You were trying to help me.”

“I mean *this*.” He kicked the empty Oreo tray. “I haven’t eaten junk for years—and now... a whole package. I can feel it inside me, Sasha. I feel so disgusting—so stupid and fat.” We raced to the bathroom and I reached the toilet before him, sat on the lid.

“You really want me to suffer?”

“I want you to sit with this feeling,” I said. “No matter how much it hurts.”

He grabbed a bottle of melatonin from the medicine cabinet and shook it. There couldn’t have been more than five pills inside. He swallowed them all and unloaded a stuttering cough, hand planted over his heart, as if auditioning for a soap opera.

“You don’t get to sleep through this,” I said. I trailed him to the living room and slapped his face to keep him awake. “You don’t get to leave me alone with the men anymore.”

“You’re so much stronger than me,” he mumbled. He stretched out on the couch with Barney clutched to his chest. No one had ever been more dramatic. “I’ll be with you shortly, my baby,” he said to the cat. “This life wasn’t made for creatures like us.”

“The pills won’t even kill you!” I shouted.

He dissolved into slumber.

# thirty-six

I CRACKED OPEN the door.

“Welcome back,” Randy said from the porch. His tracksuit sleeves were rolled to his biceps. His hair was slicked to the left with canola oil. He reeked of fire and meat.

Dyson snored on the couch. I joined Randy outside and shut the door behind me.

“We left you a present upstairs.” He flashed a teeth-gritted snarl meant to intimidate me.

It worked how he wanted it to. But I covered my mouth to hide my fear. “Very threatening, Randy. I see you men haven’t learned anything since you got here.”

He chewed his cheek and tilted back on his heels. “Tell Dyson we need our money back.”

“What do you plan to do with it?”

“I’d give it to charity. A charity for unfortunate women. The most unfortunate women I can imagine.” He mimed a hat tip. “To prove to you how much I’ve learned from your lessons.”

“You entrusted your money to Dyson. You entrusted it to The Atmosphere. A group that I manage on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, you entrusted it to me, and what I want to know, Randy, is why you deserve the money more than the group?”

“I need to start a new life.”

“You’re not ready for that. This whole thing—”

“What thing?”



“This *thing* with murdering an innocent cat, blackmailing me, setting fire to sheds, and threatening Dyson. You’re no helpless victim. You chose to join this community, and now you want out because you regret the choices you made. Well, that’s bullshit, Randy. You need to live with your decisions. That’s what’s wrong with all of you here. You’ve never had to deal with the consequences of your decisions. But that changes today.”

Randy stood there breathing at me like a dog on a chain. Dyson’s snoring grew louder. I felt more alone than ever here. All these trees, all the leaves and lichen and stones, and not one thing could protect me. I folded my hands together and smiled impatiently. Condescension seemed like my most potent defense.

“Dyson used to be there for us,” he said.

“Heartbreaking.”

“He used to listen, and now he’s so wrapped in his plans to expand.”

“Would you rather The Atmosphere fall apart?”

“I’d rather he gives us what he promised us: jobs, financial support.”

“Go apply for a job. Surely you’re a better candidate now.”

His voice deepened with importance. “Dyson used to be there for us.”

“You’ve told me,” I said. “Now tell me how you plan to move forward. Do you plan to pity yourself and wish the world were kinder to you? Do you plan to moan about your broken relationship with Dyson? You’ve been here over four months. You’ve been participating in therapy for nearly a year, yet you have shown minimal emotional growth.”

“You’re a bully,” he said. “You’re bullying me just like you bullied that man.”

“What a waste of potential.” I stared through him. The wind bent the branches of trees at his back. Each second of silence seemed to signal I had done something wrong, that Randy, tonguing his cheek and bunching his fists, was preparing to lunge for my neck.

When he came for me, though, he came crumpled and slumped. He wept into my shoulder, desperate for touch. “This has been so much harder than I expected.”

I eased him away from me. “Let it out,” I muttered. “Let it out.”

He wiped his eyes. “I want things to go back to normal.”

“Those days are over—you need to accept that.”

“We want the old Dyson back.”

Dyson stirred on the couch, calling my name.

I leaned close to Randy. “Listen, I understand completely. I miss the old Dyson, too. We *do* need him back. And I’m going to do everything I can to restore him to his previous form. But I need you to take control of the camp.”

Randy asked if Dyson was inside.

I snapped for his attention. “Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I think I can do that.”

“You think you can or you can?”

“I can. Absolutely,” he said. “You’ve made the right choice.” He saluted me and scrambled into the forest.

Dyson called for me again. I remained on the porch wondering what to tell him. Randy didn’t *really* want the old Dyson back—despite what he said. He wanted to skip backwards in time and start over. The old Dyson only existed in Randy’s sentimental memories. If the two men sat down together—even with the intention to work everything out—it could only end in disappointment. More likely, in tragedy.

I entered the cabin planning to tell Dyson we needed to run.

He sat up with one arm draped over the back of the couch for support. “You were talking to someone,” he mumbled. His words were heavy with sleep.

“Randy,” I said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so angry.”

“I should talk to them.” He stood but tumbled back down.

“Do you want to end up like Barney?”

“I never should’ve let it get so bad.”

“We need to escape, Dyson. Tonight.”

“If we escape they’ll find us eventually.”

“They’ll kill you if we stay,” I said. I didn’t know how else to convince him to leave.

“Not just me,” he said. “They’re gonna kill both of us.”

“That’s why we need to get moving,” I said. “I’ll pack our bags.”

“I loved them. I really did love them. I do. Still.” He let his head sink to his chest. “They really want me dead?”

I squeezed next to him on the couch. “That’s the impression I got from Randy.”

“Then we need to beat them to it,” he said.

I flinched away. “We can’t possibly kill them,” I said. “We’re not murderers.”

“No.” He lifted his face so his eyes were level with mine, our noses nearly touching. He knitted his fingers in mine. “We need to kill me.”

# thirty-seven

"REMEMBER LUCAS DEVRY," said Dyson.

"Don't make me," I said.

Dyson and I were digging a grave for Barney behind the cabin. Sweat dripped from our elbows, made mud of our dirt-crusteds palms.

"I mean how people treated him after he died," said Dyson. "Everyone who hated him made him a martyr. The same thing will happen to me. Our men are sentimental. If they think I'm dead, they'll forgive me. They'll saint me. They're not the type to speak ill of the dead."

The plan to fake Dyson's death assumed the men were still furious at him. I could've told him what Randy had told me: he and the others wanted to reconcile. In a perfect world, we might have made such an arrangement with the men. In a perfect world, I would not have needed to exaggerate the extent of their anger. I didn't lie to Dyson, exactly. I didn't manipulate him. Simply: I saw past the men's surface emotions. Randy didn't want to make peace with Dyson. The sheds were burning. The bus tires were slashed. Barney was dead. They couldn't hold a civil conversation with the man who'd stolen their money. Dyson had trapped them in the woods. He let Art Flemings arrest Leon and beat him. He left Peter to die. He left Benjamin, Kevin, and David to die. He made a ritual of refusing their pleas for forgiveness. I knew what would happen if Dyson begged them for mercy. Our men may have been sentimental, but they were not the type to forget.

"As for The Atmosphere," he said. He placed the shoebox containing Barney into the earth. "I want you to promise me you'll keep it running."

“I’ll take it as far as I can,” I assured him. I couldn’t imagine The Atmosphere lasting more than a week once he left. “We’ll implement routine expressions of deference to our fallen, benevolent leader. L. Ron Hubbard. Joseph Smith. Dyson Layne.”

“I’ll need a shrine,” he said.

I laughed. He didn’t.

“Sure,” I told him. “We’ll make you a shrine—something classy.”

“It needs to be gaudy,” he said. “Repulsively gaudy.”

As we worked, we imagined the cheesiest possible shrines: Dyson riding a horse, Dyson riding two horses, Dyson meditating on top of a cloud, Dyson kneeling to spoon-feed bran flakes to a middle-aged man. His death was harder to imagine. That evening, we burned through a dozen candles—Dyson believed they aided his thinking—as we traded ideas for his death.

“Maybe you get attacked by a mugger,” I said.

“What mugger?” he said. “In the woods? We’d need too much blood, anyway. What about a car accident? We’ll drive the hatchback off the highway.”

“You’ll need a body,” I said.

“Maybe we drive it into the ocean. Maybe my body gets eaten by sharks.” His ideas were less practical than mine. They were more attention-grabbing, riskier.

He proposed heart failure on the bathroom floor. “I’ve been—as you know. And people have—” He stuck out his tongue, clenched his eyes closed. “In the past from it. Let’s say you find me in the bathroom already dead. The men would believe it.”

“And your body?”

“I’ll slow down my breathing. Play dead. Daniel Day-Lewis could do it for hours.”

I nodded as if seriously considering the idea.

“I’ve been practicing,” he said. He lay chest down on the floor. His breaths welled up through his back; his nostrils flared. After a few minutes, he jumped to a stand. “Could you tell?”

“That was amazing,” I lied. If Dyson had to die, it seemed only fair to let him die believing in his undeniable talent. But I worried the men would see through the performance. Despite my anger—over Peter, over the money, over just about

everything else at The Atmosphere—I couldn’t shake my guilt-ridden impulse to protect him. The night I found him draped over the toilet, in the dorm bathroom, Dyson had become my responsibility. He had no one else to keep him safe. And I hated myself for already failing him once. “But once the men find your body,” I said, “no matter how good you are at playing dead, they’ll want to bury you.”

“We’ll build an underground breathing device. A series of tubes or something.” He made a wavelike gesture with his arm. “You’ll send in water and food. A few days later you dig me out, fill up the grave.” He wanted desperately to prove himself as an actor one final time.

But if the men noticed him breathing? If they dropped him, caused him to shriek in agony? How might they react if the scheme fell apart? Heart failure was too risky, I decided. Our ideas grew progressively worse as the day dragged on. Eventually Dyson—frustrated and blocked, groggy after eating another package of cookies—passed out on the couch.

I walked where I always walked: in the sliver of service. An afternoon chill lifted the hair on my arms. My phone lit up with messages from Roger and from reporters and, of course, from Cassandra. “You’re the reason I’m here!” I yelled at my phone in a moment of tremendous self-pity. I strangled the phone. I flung it into the water, as if I were starring in a movie, but it wasn’t a movie and I needed my phone and I sprinted into the pond, spurred by regret. The phone hadn’t traveled far. Water bubbled behind the screen. I tossed it back to the shore and kept swimming.

I had given up swimming after my father moved to Florida. This had begun as a self-imposed punishment—appropriate, I believed—but over time swimming had become something I just didn’t do, like smoking, or painting my nails. But as I paddled deeper into the pond, that day, I was struck by a surreal sensation of being nine years old again, as if only two weeks rather than decades had passed since the incident at the Hensey house. My body refused to acknowledge the passing years. It tried to convince me I was a child again. It hadn’t known this motion—my arms arcing forward, legs slither-kicking—since childhood, and my body had every reason to believe I still was a child, and for brief slices of time I was able to let it convince me of this before my mind

interrupted. *No!* I wasn't nine, I was twenty-nine, and what would happen to that child couldn't be changed—Lucas Devry and Blake Dayes and Peter Minston and Cassandra Hanson had already glided through my life like biplanes crop-dusting fields.

Dyson, too, would soon glide out of my life. We agreed to never communicate after his disappearance. It was safer that way. But I hated to imagine the empty shape of that life, and I redirected my attention back on the problem we'd been facing all day: how Dyson would die. I bobbed in the center of the pond and ducked beneath the surface. As I gazed into the endless murk underwater, it occurred to me what needed to happen. I sprung through the surface. The pond widened like the unhinging jaws of a snake.

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We scripted Dyson's drowning that evening. Rather, we scripted my reaction. He wouldn't need to perform for the men or police or whoever might later ask me what happened to him. He only needed to swim to the shore, grab his duffel bag, hitch a ride on the road, and vanish forever.

I, however, had to dive into the pond wearing my clothes. I had to shriek. I had to see him slip under; I had to see him never come up. We debated whether I should remain in the water long enough for my fingertips to shrivel. We decided I must. I must dive in wearing my shoes to prove the urgency of the situation. I must appear to do everything I could to save him. In the cabin, I practiced shouting for Dyson and weeping, rehearsed my story of desperation and grief.

"You'll need to be convincing," he told me. "Even when you're in the water. If you can *convince* yourself, you can convince everyone else. Be ready for the men to follow your shouts to the pond. They might see you trying to save me—they need to *believe* you're trying to save me."

His condescension exhausted me. "I've been saving you from things all my life," I snapped. "I more than anyone know how to do it."

We tumbled easily into fights that final day. I bit my fork a few times at dinner, accidentally, but a bad habit that Dyson had grown to resent. "I'll be happy to never hear that again," he said. I sniffed dramatically and waved my

hand in front of my nose. “I’m lucky I’ll never smell your B.O.,” I said, though he never smelled very bad. We didn’t fight out of anger. We commented on those things—my fork biting, his B.O.—because soon we would want each other back, even the flaws, and fighting helped convince us we needed to part. It was psychological warfare: not against each other but for each other.

Thinking about our separate futures made my insides shrivel with grief. I had lost people in death—grandparents, pets—but never knew loss stripped of its closure. The closest I’d come was my father—though I knew if he died, someone would tell me. If Dyson died, I would never find out. If he became ill, I would never visit him in the hospital. If he was depressed, tired, looking to vent, we would never discuss it. He would exist for me the way most people alive existed for me: present but unknown. The agony guaranteed by this future seemed reason enough to come clean about the men’s desire to talk—but I believed they would hurt Dyson, or hurt me, if they encountered each other. I was the only one in the camp—including the men—who truly understood how dangerous the men were.

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July seventh. The day of the drowning. As Dyson prepared for his death—packing a duffel bag, transferring what little money remained to a personal bank account—I tried to lead the men through a normal morning routine.

They waited for me outside the barn wearing their exercise clothes.

“Let’s only do one lap today,” I said.

“So we’re not gonna talk about this?” Randy said. He swept his arm toward the destruction: the charred remains of the sheds; The Crucible, razed, its mirror shards catching sun in the grass; the muddled, dug-up garden. “We have demands to discuss.”

The men nodded and clapped. A false show of support.

I whistled. I twirled my index finger to start the jog. The men followed me around the clearing. I saw no point in making them do crunches or stretch. At breakfast, I knocked the bran flakes to the floor and stared at the mess with my mouth open. Gerry swept up the flakes.



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Dyson waited on the shore of the pond wearing his swim shorts. Goggles hung around his neck. A duffel bag full of fresh clothes sat at the side of the pond closest to the road. “I never imagined I’d say good-bye to you and mean it,” he said.

“Me, neither,” I said. I asked if he was sure about this.

“I’m only sure if you’re sure,” he said.

I told myself I was sure. I told him I was sure.

We hugged for what felt like hours. I ran a hand down the left side of his face, my fingers skimming the well of his cheek. I wish I would’ve looked at him longer. I wish I would’ve touched his hair—finally long enough for a tug. I wish I would’ve brushed against his pockets. Maybe I would’ve felt stones, or whatever he’d used to weigh himself down. But we were already behind schedule. Dyson stretched his goggles over his eyes.

“So long,” he said.

My stomach lurched as he stepped into the water. I reached my spot on the far side of the pond before he swam to the center. It wasn’t supposed to happen that way. He was supposed to swim faster. But I took a pained comfort in the idea of him slowed down from weeping over our separation. I cried against the trunk of a tree. Dyson finally made it to the center. He lifted one arm. I waved back. He bobbed on the surface. He sucked in deeply—his mouth stretched to a canyon before clapping shut. I watched him collect his breaths. I watched him tread water. I watched him go under and started my timer.

At twenty seconds, I screamed, a signal for him to come to the surface. I screamed even louder at thirty seconds. Somehow even louder at forty. I kept screaming—screaming his name, screaming, “Come up; come up; please come up!”—through fifty seconds, one minute, two minutes. And then I was in the water, paddling against the weight of my clothes. I dived under where Dyson had gone under, flailing and scraping for his body, plunging as deep as I could, though when I opened my eyes I could only see murkiness.

The men followed my screams to the pond. “He didn’t come up!” I yelled.

Randy and Dr. Mapplethorpe dragged my kicking body out of the water. “It’s too late,” they said. “There’s no point in you dying, too.” The men draped me in layers of tracksuit jackets.

I watched the pond for hours—part of me will always be watching the pond—waiting for a hand to reach out of the water, for a head to dart up hunting air, for waves rippling out from the center, for Dyson to crawl to the shore, pondweeds hanging like tassels out of his mouth.

But it was only us on the shore. Only me and the men.

**V.**

# our mission

The Atmosphere began with a simple observation: men are behaving badly. For thousands of years, men placed themselves at the center of society. Their chase for power, attention, and wealth resulted in massive global disasters. Something needed to happen. Men had to be better. What was needed was a community where men could challenge themselves to step out of the spotlight and into the background—to provide the “atmosphere,” like extras in a movie.

At age twenty-nine, Dyson Layne left his promising career as a film and TV actor to team up with his lifelong friend, Sasha Marcus. Together, they started The Atmosphere: a supportive and secluded environment for men to learn strategies to undergo emotional, aesthetic, interpersonal, and professional transformation. Good things happen when men evolve—good things for everyone!

Dyson and Sasha started The Atmosphere on fifteen acres of farmland in southern New Jersey. The first class of Atmospherians were tested by food scarcity, man hordes, and tragedy. Late that summer, Dyson drowned during his morning swim. Sasha refused to give up on their vision, however, and five years later the Atmospherian lifestyle is practiced officially in over two hundred nations. Its training has helped resolve pervasive problems many men face, including hostility, envy, loneliness, philandering, cat calling, inconsiderateness, alcoholism, homelessness, sexual misconduct, sexual deviousness, sexual inadequacy, athletic nostalgia, unemployment, paranoia, misogyny, hoarding,

dyspepsia, and political ambition. Since The Atmosphere's founding, such miraculous things have happened:

- Workplace sexual misconduct claims have declined by 87 percent.
- Male suicide rates have declined by 79 percent.
- Male unemployment has fallen to 1.8 percent.
- The man horde epidemic has been eliminated.

In our New Jersey headquarters, a revitalized three-story shopping mall, Atmospherians are taught to recognize and communicate emotions through proprietary psychological exercises. They receive job training in call centers, coding labs, and a carpentry warehouse, where members produce our renowned Tiny House kits (available on our website). Each Atmospherian receives an individualized meal program developed personally by a company algorithm. We guarantee the most responsible and discreet treatment available. Past and current Atmospherians include actors, firemen, senators, dictators, judges, presidents, athletes, doctors, sons, brothers, and dads. Nearly 97 percent of Atmospherians choose to continue living in an on-site facility after completing the program. If you or a man in your life is struggling to keep up with our rapidly changing society, there is no treatment more effective, convenient, or safe.

The Atmosphere: where men become human.

# thirty-eight

THE MALL SPRAWLED over the parking lot. A ring of evergreens framed its asphalt, and beyond the trees was the highway, through which sounded the gurgle of engines and exhaust. The clouds lowered a thick gray tarp over the sky. Rows of pigeons smeared the ledges of the mall's roof; across the exterior walls, *CULT* and *SCAMMERS* and *FUCK OFF* and *MAN KILLERS* and *SLUT* were spray-painted in grand, manic script—besides hundreds of other words and images that Blair couldn't identify. Economy cars clustered near the entrance. Far too few for the thousands of men in the building, he thought, as he followed his driver to the entrance.

Blair was thirty-two years old, a decade younger than his driver. He was lanky and freckled, with dull brown eyes and a beard the length of his hair—both of which he buzzed in his bathroom every three weeks. He coughed a tickle out of his throat, took a puff from his inhaler.

The driver said, "There's a pharmaceutical plant half a mile north. They do a controlled release this time every day." He gagged dramatically. "You can really taste it."

"It's nothing," Blair said.

"Sasha takes care of us. That's why we stay indoors," the driver said.

"I'm excited to meet her," Blair said.

The driver found this funny. "Let's get inside."

Three years earlier, Sasha Marcus had lobbied the state to fund The Atmosphere's move to this site. It required a spacious, controlled environment, she argued, to ensure their clients the most responsible treatment. The Atmosphere performed a public good, after all. Many members had families,

friends, jobs, outside of The Atmosphere. They had every reason to leave—though very few did—and Blair suspected they were forced to stay. He didn't plan to be there any longer than two days. One weekend with a cult was plenty of time to take a few photos, record conversations, to corner Sasha and demand she tell him how Dyson had actually died.

Three weeks ago, Blair received a letter claiming Dyson had been murdered by Sasha in a power grab. There was no return address. No name at the bottom. But its directives were clear: Expose The Atmosphere. Expose Sasha Marcus. Dyson deserved justice—and peace. Blair was proud to be the one to do these things.

At the mall's entrance, two men in jeans and gray T-shirts reading *Atmospherians* opened the doors. A tall wooden desk split this area from a department store behind it. Inside the store, clothing racks and tables and displays and mannequins had been replaced by men in monochrome tracksuits of different colors. They appeared sickly under harsh yellow light—*malnourished*, an accusation the letter had made. Paired together, they nodded vigorously, counting on their fingers as if debating subjects of grave importance. Blair angled his ear toward the store to make out their words.

A receptionist stepped into the space between him and the other men. He placed a fizzing orange drink in Blair's hand. "For your jet lag," he said. "Full of electrolytes, complex carbs, everything you need to return to yourself."

"Plain water would be fine."

"This *is* water!" The receptionist winked. "Plus something else."

Blair sipped. He brushed the froth off his lip. "You can't give me water?"

"You need to finish your first drink. Gluttony breeds ingratitude."

Blair chugged the glass, his neck pumping as the orange liquid spilled over his chin.

"Very impressive," the receptionist said. He slipped into a side door, returned with a bottle of water. "Your reward," he said. "That was very impressive, indeed."

Blair spent an hour scrunched in a stiff, cushioned chair. Hung on the walls of the waiting room were posters of men knitting sweaters, drinking tea, petting cats, doing yoga, jogging. *Discover the Self You've Denied Yourself*, they read; *The*

*Atmosphere* was below that. Every ten minutes, one of the receptionists would spray and wipe down the glass entrance doors, alternating each time. Softly bombastic music played through the speakers, drifting between jagged intensity and shallow calms. It reminded him of an action movie soundtrack.

The receptionists encouraged Blair to read the aged magazines fanned across the coffee table. “There are some excellent profiles of Sasha.” Blair flipped through a *Time* from the previous year. Everything but Sasha’s profile spread had been torn out of the issue. Same for the other magazines.

Blair knew better than to brush off the receptionists and the drink and the magazines as harmless idiosyncrasies. He prided himself on noticing threats that others ignored. Most people never questioned the world, never poked holes in its design. They preferred to vilify those who made careers out of poking such holes. He fancied himself a truth teller. Unofficially: a reporter. He ran a Facebook page called The Pure Source, where he posted videos debunking and verifying conspiracies across the political spectrum: POW-MIA (disproven), the Koch Foundation funding protestors (proven), climate change denial (disproven), 9/11 (proven and disproven). A small squadron of followers returned to his page regularly, suggesting stories for him to investigate and incoherently debating in the comments. His traffic had been climbing over the last few months thanks to a pair of undercover videos: He had exposed a racist restaurant owner and a small chapter of socialists in small-town Oregon. The recent success had made him confident about an Atmospherians story—and excited him about the career prospects that would follow. The week prior, he had lost his cashier gig to a self-checkout machine. Rent was a month late—and only getting later. If done right, though, a story on the Atmospherians—an exposé—would net him enough to cover rent for a year, and likely lead to more lucrative work.

He hefted his backpack onto his lap and unzipped it just wide enough to remove a small spiral notebook. Miniature cameras, microphones, and his laptop gave the bag its bulk. The receptionist glanced at him. He slipped the backpack under his chair. He’d signed a contract agreeing not to make any visual or audio recordings.



Past journalists had visited The Atmosphere and left with puff pieces highlighting the hardship Sasha had overcome to build the program. In slick documentaries, she led filmmakers around the exterior of the mall; she allowed a brief glimpse into the carpentry warehouse where men built the Atmospherian shed kits that helped fund the program. On camera, she let free a single, poignant tear when asked about Dyson. The interviewers never challenged her version of the events: *Dyson suffered a heart attack while swimming at The Atmosphere's community pond. Attempts to recover his body by law enforcement proved unsuccessful; the pond was magnitudes deeper than originally assumed.*

Blair angled his body away from the receptionists and scribbled in his notebook:

- *Why give mysterious drink—who profits?*
- *Why not show me my room?*
- *What is happening in dept. store?*
- *Receptionists don't give names—keep me guessing, off-balance?*

A thin man of medium height stood before him with his hands clasped. He wore a shiny green button-down and black dress pants. A frayed white tube sock hung over his belt. A rust-colored stain shaded its heel. “Randy Dent,” he said. “We had a chat on the phone.”

Blair extended his hand. “I’ve been waiting awhile.”

The water receptionist lifted Blair’s backpack. “Heavy,” he sighed.

“I can hold on to it,” Blair said.

“Sorry,” Randy said. “No backpacks inside. Or phones. You read the contract, right?”

The receptionist opened his palm to Blair. He passed over his phone.

“And your other pocket?” Randy asked.

“An inhaler.”

“You didn’t disclose any medical issues.”

“It’s minor,” Blair said. He eyed his backpack. “I should really change my shirt,” he said. “Is there a bathroom nearby?” Maybe he could slip on a microphone if left alone for a second.

“Change here,” Randy said. “We’re all men.”

The receptionist lifted the backpack for Blair to grab clothes. “We’re all men,” he said.

Blair sniffed under his arms. “It’s not that bad,” he said.

“There’s so little time as it is.” Randy wrapped his arm around Blair and pulled him close, in a brotherly way, and walked him into the department store.

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All the men in the store had smooth, clean-shaven faces, shaggy hair past their ears. A man in blue sprayed cologne over his head. The scent irritated Blair’s nose. He kept bracing himself to bump into someone, but the men contorted their bodies and backed out of the way, pinning their arms to their chests to prevent any contact.

In the mall’s main promenade, the lighting changed to a fluorescent so white it turned Blair’s skin blue. He was surprised that they were on the second floor. All the stores had been remodeled. A sign above the nearest one read *Registration*.

Randy gripped Blair’s shoulder. “Used to be an engraving store. Precious Memories, where you carve your grandmother’s name on a plate. Sasha thought, *What better place for registration?* The stores have their own energies. *Souls*. The first few months, we housed registration in a former McDonald’s. Our psychiatrist met with clients in an old Bath and Body Works. But everything seemed... broken. The men were agitated. So Sasha—she’s truly incredible—suggested we match *our* aims with the previous stores. And I tell you, overnight,” he snapped, “everything changed.”

Blair nodded along. It was important to act impressed. It would prove he wasn’t a threat, that, someday, he might really believe this nonsense.

In one store, men in gray tracksuits spread out on a field tossing footballs to one another. “Champ’s Sports,” Randy said. “Now it’s the Fitness Field. Real grass, too.”

A man in a red T-shirt and shorts blew a whistle. The men in gray formed two lines and followed him on a jog through the promenade. Men in yellow

replaced the Grays in the Fitness Field. They retrieved the discarded footballs and began playing catch.

“Aren’t you against traditional masculinity?” Blair hoped to trap him in a contradiction.

“Sports are fun. We’re not against fun. The problem’s when men get competitive. All the pressure and stress—self-hatred born out of unrealistic demands. Here, we only ask that men try their best, have some fun—whatever that means in the moment.” Inside, the men tossed the footballs off target. The balls *blumped* off their hands. They cheered despite their mistakes.

“What about running?” Blair asked. “For some men it might be dangerous.”

“I tell you, Blair, this place—I wouldn’t be breathing if it wasn’t for Sasha—”

“And Dyson.”

A mournful grimace flashed on Randy’s face. “I came here with a lot of anger—buckets and buckets of rage. Enough to gum up a canyon. If you asked me six years ago if I’d ever feel this good, I would’ve bit off your hand. But you know what happened? I said *yes* after a life saying *no*. You run a bit, throw a football, seems dumb when you say it out loud, but you just need to do it. Embrace it, Blair. You’ll be amazed what you’re capable of.”

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Randy walked so close to Blair that the backs of their hands repeatedly grazed. His deep, meaty breath clouded their conversation. Blair couldn’t say anything about the suffocating proximity without arousing suspicion. But he asked if he could use the first restroom they passed. In a stall, he huddled over his thighs and scribbled into his notebook.

- *Film soundtrack through the speakers—unclear?*
- *Signs on ceiling point in direction of Freedom, Self-Actualization, Intentions*
- *Men wearing blue spritzing cologne*
- *Directory map replaced with scrolling list of men’s names ranked beside percentages*
- *TMA? RAX? WAR?*

Randy knocked on the door. “It’s been a while,” he said. “Everything working?”

“Coming right out.”

Throughout the tour, Randy held a demented fascination with the history of the stores: the Meditation Studio was a Yankee Candle, Primary Care was a Foot Locker, the Call Center was a Verizon, the Art Studio was an Art World, the Tailor was Build-A-Bear Workshop, Security had been a Justice, Compliment Speed-Dating was the McDonald’s where registration had once been, Radiology was The Sharper Image, and the Coding Lab was the Apple Store. The entire third floor was devoted to designing and building sheds. Randy found their transformations ironic and fitting, both *too perfect* and *unbelievable*. He praised the work they did teaching men to embrace life in the mall—a historically feminine site that men had been socialized to avoid. His excitement left Blair no room to talk about Dyson. He still hadn’t seen any photos of Dyson. The letter had advised him to look for such photos: their absence would prove that The Atmosphere was hiding something.

Blair paused at an unmarked store. Its windows were painted black.

“Victoria’s Secret,” said Randy. “We call it The Crucible now. It’s a place for men to test how far they’ve come. To really repress their most flagrant desires.”

Blair imagined sticky seats, peep shows playing for quarters.

“Available only to Elite Atmospherians. A lot of hard work goes into getting there.”

“What type of work?”

“Dangerous work,” Randy said. After a long silence, he laughed. “Don’t look so scared all the time. I bet you think we’re a cult. Everyone thinks we’re a cult. I’d think it, too, if this place didn’t save my life. But Blair: We’re a rehabilitation facility. That’s it. The only thing that sets us apart is that we’re rehabbing men for being men. It’s radical work.”

“Rehab facilities don’t house clients for years.”

“And that’s why people relapse,” he said. “Trust me. We care deeply about our men—and we can care about you. Isn’t that why you’re here? You want someone to care about you?”

“I’m here because I’m looking for the truth.” He regretted it immediately.

“Exactly,” said Randy. “Now you get it.”

In the center of the mall, the second level split open, offering a view of the main pavilion below. Hundreds of folding chairs fanned out in front of a rustic wooden stage. Onstage was a scarecrow. A loose red dress hung over its stick arms and single stick leg. A wig was propped on its Styrofoam head, where a face had been drawn on with Sharpie.

Escalators stitched all three floors together. A massive poster of Sasha hung from the rafters. In it, she stood before a chipped brown barn with her palms to the sky. Hearts were carved in the wall at her back. She appeared receptive and kind, transcendent, brown hair flowing past her shoulders. She wore pale blue jeans and a black Atmospherians T-shirt, like a band roadie or bartender. Many critics online insisted that Sasha controlled the men through sexually striking photos of herself. But Blair didn’t see it. Not her. She seemed more imposing than attractive.

“I’m sorry!” someone shouted downstairs. “I’m sorry—I’m sorry, okay?!” The man wore a gray tracksuit. Two men in red were dragging him by the arms. The Gray twisted and twitched against their grips, but the two men wouldn’t let go.

“What’d he do?” Blair asked.

“I’m not God, Blair. You can’t expect me to know everything—that’s Sasha’s job.”

The man’s screaming grew louder.

“I’d like to get to my room,” Blair said. “It’s been such a long day—I need to unwind.”

“We’ve only seen one wing,” said Randy.

“You can show me the other wings later.”

“I canceled meetings for this.”

Blair’s chest tightened. “Maybe someone else can show me around.”

“It hurts me to see such blatant self-sabotage, Blair. You came here for something, right? You came here to find what was missing. Who was missing. Now you’re saying you want to give up on that? On yourself?”

“What did that man downstairs do wrong?”

“You’re always so ready to see the worst in us,” Randy said.

The soundtrack cut out. The mall slipped into silence, like a bath after a body slipped in.

“Lucky you,” said Randy.

“The Final Countdown” blasted out of the speakers. The floor rumbled. Blair clutched the railing for stability. Men stormed the escalator. They spilled to the center of the pavilion from every direction, seating themselves on the folding chairs. In the first two rows, the men wore green—administrators, like Randy. Behind them were bands of red, purple, blue, gray, black, yellow, and pink.

The lights dimmed. The music cut out again. A spotlight tunneled onto the scarecrow in the center of the stage. Two Reds ran onstage and pulled the curtains aside. Behind it was a video screen the size of a box truck. Onscreen were the rankings Blair had seen on the directory map, names listed beside percentages and three-letter abbreviations. The image switched to a photo of Sasha posing with two smiling men in tracksuits. Then a photo of men building a shed in a meadow. Then men tossing footballs in the Fitness Field. A man spoon-feeding a baby. Sasha lowering her hand to the head of a man kneeling before her. Briefly: Dyson at a mirror sitting for makeup before a shoot.

Sasha’s voice emerged over the loudspeakers: “Welcome to today’s Power In Emotions Session. I’m so proud of you for coming today. It takes courage to work on yourselves. Remember: true courage is the child of cowardice. You all once fathered her well in your heart.”

The men applauded rabidly.

She said, “Let’s welcome Henderson Blue onstage to open today’s discussion.”

A salt-haired man in a blue tracksuit marched to the stage. He nodded at the video screen—now an image of Sasha in a hard hat cutting an enormous ribbon with scissors the size of a truck—then knelt before the scarecrow. He retrieved a microphone from under its dress and gazed into the scarecrow’s Styrofoam head. “Julia,” he said. “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am for how you felt when we were together.”

“Be specific,” said Sasha.

“I know you never think I helped you in the house—you thought I thought those tasks were beneath me. Julia: You were the goldenest light of my life. You

never saw how much I cared about you because it was hard for me to show my emotions. I tried. I expressed myself through the movies I asked you to watch, but you refused because they made you uncomfortable. I was trying. I had a father. And he was demanding and that made me demand things from you that you didn't think you could give. I hated myself." Soon he was weeping too deeply to continue speaking.

"That's enough," said Sasha.

The Blue sniffled and cried into the microphone. Two Reds dragged him offstage.

"What a difficult moment for Henderson," Sasha said. "Please show him support."

The audience clapped soberly.

"But remember," she said. "Openings should never be self-important. We do not apologize for how the other person felt but for what we did. Apologies are never about the apologist's feelings. I had hoped Henderson would give our guest a proper model for how to open. But perhaps our guest is lucky—we learn even more from mistakes."

The spotlight swung over to Blair. The men angled their heads at him, as if tugged by hundreds of strings. A man in a black tracksuit squeezed Blair's hands around a microphone.

"Guest," said Sasha. "Please tell us your name."

In a feeble, nervous voice, Blair stated his name. It echoed through the mall.

"Welcome, Blair," said Sasha. Onscreen, she led men on a run. "Tell me: What do you do for a living?"

Blair backed away from the railing, but Randy gripped his shoulder, held him in place. He guided the microphone back to Blair's mouth: "I'm between jobs right now."

"What would you like to do, Blair? What do you *love*?"

"My father," he said. "My father was a reporter."

Sasha's voice addressed the crowd: "Can anyone tell me what Blair is doing?"

Hands waved anemone-like. A Gray stood. "Deflection," he said.

"Perfect," said Sasha. "Blair is deflecting the question. It's quite normal. Nothing to be ashamed of. You're not used to being honest. Blair: Do you live

alone?”

“I don’t see why that—”

“That’s a yes.”

Everyone laughed.

She said, “What happens when we live alone?”

A Yellow stood: “When we live alone we lie to ourselves.”

“Exactly,” she said. “When we live alone. We lie to ourselves. There’s no one to keep us honest. Keep. Us. Honest. Makes it sound like a burden—like honesty is some kind of punishment. When the truth is, we punish *ourselves* when we’re dishonest. Remember: how we act in the night infects how we live in the light.”

Together, everyone said, “How we act in the night infects how we live in the light.”

“How we act in the night infects how we live in the light.”

“How we act in the night infects how we live in the light.”

“How we act in the night infects how we live in the light.”

As they chanted, Blair watched the screen for another picture of Dyson. The slideshow started over: Sasha in the middle of a row of men; men building sheds; man feeding baby. But the photo of Dyson did not reappear. The slideshow cut from Sasha over the kneeling man to Sasha cutting a ribbon, as if Dyson had never existed.

“Blair,” Sasha said. “You have so much to learn about yourself. But you’re in good hands—the best hands. You are in ours.”

Randy dipped over to the microphone. “What are you thinking, Sasha?”

“He might benefit from a chamber,” she said.

“You think he’s ready for that?” Randy asked.

“No one’s ready until they’re ready,” she said.

Blair tried to laugh off her words. Was she sentencing him to something?

She said, “I need volunteers. Men who aren’t afraid to fail.”

The chosen ascended the escalator. Two Yellows, two Grays, two Pinks, and a Blue.

“Thank her,” Randy whispered.

“For putting me in a chamber?” Blair muttered.



“He says thank you,” Randy said into the microphone.  
“And thank you, Blair, for trusting us with your growth.”  
The volunteers waited behind them, holding hands.

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They entered a store called CHAMBERS. Sasha’s voice echoed through the mall—interrupted by applause—but the walls of the store silenced her. Blair’s heartbeat ticked in his neck.

“Just tell me what we’re doing,” said Blair.

“This environment is totally safe,” Randy said.

“It’s a challenge,” said one of the Pinks.

“To test your competency,” said the Blue.

“It brings people together,” Randy added. “It’s fun.”

“Nothing about this sounds fun,” Blair said.

“We challenge each other,” said Randy. “Learn through team-building exercises. Remember our conversation? About saying yes?”

“Just because it worked for you doesn’t mean—”

“Sherlock’s Library fine with everyone?” Randy asked. The men nodded.

Blair’s legs were rubbery. The other men showed no signs of fear. Only anticipation bordering on joy. Blair tried to comfort himself by envisioning his future audience. He’d be the first to write about the Atmospherian chambers. It would bring him the attention he deserved—*No*, he thought, *it would bring Dyson the attention he deserved*.

Steel doors studded the walls of the hallway. Above the doors, placards read *Jobs’ Garage* or *Chaplin’s Factory Line* or *Zuckerberg’s Dorm* or *The Locker Room*. At Sherlock’s Library, Randy gripped the handle with both hands and pedaled backwards, urged them inside. The room had been transformed into an elaborate library: a fireplace featuring fake crackling logs, a wide mahogany desk, and a bookshelf stretching the length of one wall. A Yellow lounged on a psychiatrist’s couch. A Blue sat stiffly in a tall-backed chair, puffing a pipe.

“Who’s done this one before?”

Two men raised their hands. Randy asked them to leave. They claimed they'd forgotten the answers, but Randy couldn't risk any shortcuts. He locked the rest of them inside.

Blair's father used to punish him by locking him in a bathroom. Although his mother normally let him out after ten or so minutes, there was one weekend when she went to her sister's house and Blair was trapped in the bathroom overnight. He said nothing all night, worried he'd receive a worse punishment if he cried for help. In the morning, his father found him huddled in the tub. He laughed at Blair—*What the hell are you doing in here?*—as if he hadn't been the one to lock him inside. This room returned Blair to that room. He sat on a desk chair, now, one leg tucked to his chest, tapping his fingers on the armrest, inhaling and exhaling deliberately to fend off a panic attack.

Randy's eyes showed through a thin hatch on the door. He said, "You six men have infiltrated the personal library of the world's greatest detective: Sherlock Holmes. His vigilante detective work has undermined the authority of Scotland Yard. You have been sent here by Scotland Yard to gather dirt on Holmes in the hopes of sullyng his reputation. But he anticipated your arrival. A slow-acting poison gas is drifting into the room. You will be knocked unconscious if you inhale it for more than an hour."

Steam wafted out of a vent in the corner.

"Mr. Holmes's design is imperfect. The library is riddled with clues that will facilitate your escape. You must learn to see what the great detective cannot—and you must hurry." Randy shut the hatch. Above the door, a digital timer lit up at 60:00, started counting down.

"What the fuck is this?" Blair asked.

"It's Sherlock's Library," said the man on the couch.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," said the Blue. His attempted British came out Southern.

Blair pounded the door, begging Randy to let them out.

A Yellow said, "Jesus, buddy, it's a game."

"They're piping in poison!" Blair shouted.

"It's steam," said the Blue. He put his mouth to the vent. "Cherry flavored."

"I need to get out of here," Blair said.

“Then you better help solve the puzzle.”

“You gonna help us or pout?”

Blair puffed his inhaler.

“These chambers used to be huge. Every mall had one—couples would go to test their relationships. Companies sent their employees for bonding exercises. Have you seen *Saw*?”

“It’s like safe *Saw*.”

“It’s fun, too,” said the Blue. “My dear Watson.”

Blair scrunched on the desk chair. He covered his face to deter the steam. The other men’s confidence quieted his nerves, but he hated interacting with them. They were sheep following orders. His terror mutated into anger. When he got out, he would demand a meeting with Sasha. He would tell her what he knew about Dyson.

The Pinks clawed every book off the shelf. “I found something!” said a Yellow. He unrolled a scroll from around a candle. “*Sherlock Holmes is considered one of the greatest detectives to ever live. But his egotistical search for truth distracts him from discovering personal truths. What path does Sherlock follow? And how does his hunt for answers lead him astray?*”

“Masculinity,” said the Blue. “Sherlock thinks he needs to constantly prove he’s the greatest detective. He’s already great. He solves impossible crimes. But what does crime solving *prevent* him from solving? Himself. Just like being a man.” He nodded at the Yellow. “Sasha talks about the pressure we put on ourselves to be right. We think we need all the answers, like we *need* to know things to matter. Sherlock doesn’t feel worthy unless he solves crimes.”

A loud click sounded on the other side of the door. The men cheered.

“One dead bolt down—three more to go!” shouted a Gray.

A Pink spoke: “This reminds me of Chaplin’s Factory Line. How Chaplin didn’t need to always be funny. Like, there were all those other men doing their work as Chaplin cut corners, playing the clown for laughs. But he felt immense pressure to perform—and it wrecked him.”

The men used what they’d learned in other chambers to psychoanalyze Holmes: he used cocaine out of concern he couldn’t solve the crimes on his own; he feared intelligent women and ridiculed Mrs. Hudson to preserve his sense of

self-worth; his refusal to join Scotland Yard expressed a classically masculine impulse to privilege the individual over the collective.

With one bolt remaining, the clock at eight minutes, and the room clouded by steam, the men decided that, of all Holmes's problems, his greatest was how he treated other men: specifically Dr. Watson, his assistant and sole confidant, whom Holmes disparaged for failing to meet his own intellectual standards. Holmes maintained his status by placing people below him.

The men presented this answer to the door. The bolt didn't unlock. Fewer than five minutes remained. They repeated their answer. The countdown screen went blank. Words scrolled across: *How are you, Holmes?* The numbers returned: 4:41–4:40–4:39.

The men scrambled. *How are you, Holmes? How are we, Holmes?*  
4:01–4:00–3:59–3:58.

Blair couldn't handle watching them struggle. "Who have you treated like Watson?" he explained. "Who'd you exploit to make yourself feel better?"

"Of course!" said the Blue. "It's just like Jobs and Wozniak."

One by one, the men confessed to the door: school friends they'd bullied, coworkers with lisps, their own children, their siblings. Blair stayed on his chair, arms crossed, feet plunked on the desk. "I've never done anything like that," he said.

Cherry fog thickened the room. Blair tasted it everywhere in his face: on his tongue, in his throat, clogging his ears, up his nostrils. The timer dipped under one minute. "I don't see the point of it," he said between yawns. "If we lose we lose."

"Losing will hurt our statistics."

"It will hurt yours, down the line."

"Just do it for us."

A bell clanged: thirty seconds remained.

Blair held his inhaler to his mouth, coughing, which soon gave way to yawns. His face sagged; his fingers felt as feeble as ribbons. His inhaler slipped from his grasp. The timer beeped through the last ten seconds. The men slid to the floor. At zero, the final dead bolt clicked open.

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Blair woke in a low, soft bed, tucked beneath three layers of blankets. He rubbed the fuzz from his eyes. His lips were coated in stickiness. A dull ache pounded his skull. Sitting up exhausted him, so he rested against the headboard. A grid of floor-model beds stretched in every direction—the same cloud-colored comforters, the frilly pillows. The men from the chamber slept in nearby beds.

A figure evolved into Randy as it approached. “You’re awake!” he said.

“You tried to kill me,” Blair mumbled.

“Oh god—*kill* you! You’re not even—everyone thinks they’re the president. *Soooo* important.”

“You’re running some kind of death cult.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Randy held up his hands. “We’ve never had anyone fail. Three years running those rooms and your group is the first to ever stay trapped. I don’t know if you *heard* those answers, but Sasha never imagined they’d stump anyone. You, though—it’s impressive.”

“You piped in poison gas.”

“It’s not *mustard* gas.” Randy sat on the foot of the bed. “Nitrous oxide. Same as the dentist. Too diluted to cause any real harm. Even for people with your... condition.”

“You said nothing bad would happen.”

“That’s the thing about percentages, Blair. They only work with the data you’re given. They claim to predict, but they only tell you what’s already happened—and what happened to you and those men, I assure you, it’s *never* happened before.”

“I want an apology.”

“And you’re gonna get one: okay? You deserve it. But first, we need to talk. We need to have a conversation.”

“About you trying to kill me?”

“About the James Bond Double-Oh-Seven gear in your bag. Because that, Blair, that’s a breach of contract, a breach of *trust*—which is much worse, for someone like me. All of us here, including Sasha, we feel so hurt by what you’ve done—and we have a lot of questions for you.”

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Randy left Blair in bed to rest. He promised to return soon with orders from Sasha. Blair felt reckless for coming here, thinking he could expose Dyson's murder the way he'd exposed that socialist chapter. The socialists were nobodies. They had no money. They didn't pose any threat—not to the community, if he was honest with himself, and definitely not to him. The Atmosphere, though, had power. He'd been an idiot for thinking he had the skills to take on a project like this. Soon he'd end up like Dyson—dead at the base of a pond—forgotten.

No one would come looking for him. His parents were dead. His closest friend hadn't texted in months. He'd only had two major girlfriends. Both married shortly after leaving him. His followers might write him angry messages demanding fresh content. But they would never search for him. There was the letter sender. If weeks passed without Blair posting his findings, the sender might alert the police—but by then, it would be too late.

Two Blues stood guard at the foot of his bed. If he could slip past them, he figured, he could escape. He tried connecting with them: "This music must make you nuts."

"It's on a loop," a Blue said. "I always know what's coming, never surprised."

"The *Inception* soundtrack's almost on," said the other Blue. "Best time of the day."

"That soundtrack is so moving," said the first.

Blair peeled off his covers. "I'd go mad listening to it all day."

"You can get used to anything if you do it often enough."

"That's what Sasha tells us."

"That doesn't frighten you?" Blair asked.

"What's to be scared of?"

Blair set his feet on the ground. The men ran over and bent to help him stand.

"You can't jump into walking," said the first Blue.

"I'm just stretching," Blair said. A sandy sensation ascended his legs.

"You haven't eaten in hours."

"Easy does it," said one.

Blair shoved them away. He ran, wearing only socks, an undershirt, and boxers. His legs gave out and he fell face-first to the floor. He dragged himself onto a nearby bed. A pair of yellow track pants lay folded on the pillow. Blair slipped them on over his boxers.

“Are you okay?” shouted the Blues.

He continued running but was unsure where to go. Beds spread out in every direction, and the walls were mirrored, multiplying the beds into the thousands. But he chose a direction and, eventually, came to where the department store fed into the mall. The mall’s lighting frizzed his brain. Halved black orbs bubbled out from the ceilings, recording his every step. Clusters of men jogged past. The cologne men sprayed their cologne.

At the center stage, the mall split into three different paths. Blair took the one at his right, thinking it would lead back to the receptionists where he’d entered. The path was packed with black cushioned chairs where men were mending tracksuits or applying novelty patches. Some read from a hardbound *The Atmospherian Doctrine*. Blair picked a copy off an ottoman and slumped in a chair like the others. He flipped through looking for something incriminating, for some reason why outsiders weren’t allowed to read it, but on every page was a photo from Sasha’s former Instagram feed. Inspirational quotes were inscribed beneath each one, all attributed to her.

A Pink sitting beside Blair lowered his copy. “Aren’t you the guest?”

Blair sprinted ahead, in the direction of a thickening scent of grease. A mysterious choking sound intensified. He followed a sign on the ceiling pointing toward the food court, hoping there might be an exit nearby.

There was an exit. But Blair didn’t see it. The scene inside the food court shocked him in place. On the left side of the cafeteria, men lined up across a counter loading plastic trays with prepared plates. Others crowded around small square tables in the center. They chewed sedately. No one spoke. On the right side of the room, a single porcelain trough ran the length of the tables. A cushioned pad, like those in Catholic churches, extended in front of the trough. Men knelt on the pads and dug their fingers into their mouths, backs curved, heaving, their necks stretched over the lip of the trough as vomit fell through their lips.

Men finished their meals. They loaded their trays onto carts. They waited patiently behind men at the trough. Some men beat their chests before kneeling. Others jumped. One man crossed himself. Another slapped both cheeks. There were farts, burps, the occasional scream.

Randy knelt at the end of the trough, close to where Blair stood. The man beside Randy pointed Blair out to him. Randy stood. He dragged his forearm across his face to clear off the mucus. He burped into his elbow. “Blair!” he said. “Glad you woke up.”

Blair ran in the direction from which he had come, his socked feet slipping on the floor.

Randy’s voice echoed through the loudspeaker: “Atmospherians, you may remember our guest, Blair Hastings, from this afternoon’s PIEs session. Well, Blair is not responding to our generosity. He needs help. He is tired and confused, but he is in no way dangerous.”

*I am dangerous, Blair thought, When I get out of here I’ll show you how dangerous I am.*

“If you see him, please sit him down. Tend to him. Talk to him. Keep him in one place as long as you can, and either I or Sasha will be there shortly to assist you.”

Blair sprinted back to the main stage, passing men shouting, “Stop!” or “Hang on!” He folded a metal chair flat to use as a weapon. He rode up the escalator to the second floor. His windpipe had thinned to a straw. Men funneled at the base of the escalator. Others charged across the main corridors. He took the only path available, ditched the chair.

“Do not hurt our guest. Treat him with care and respect.”

The mob swelled at his back. Their mouths widened with screams. He ducked inside Victoria’s Secret—The Crucible—and skulked down a thin hallway of changing rooms. Light spilled out from beneath silver doors. Someone entered the store. He hid in the closest changing room. He braced himself for obnoxious sexual images, a box of tissues, guidelines for how to suppress the desire to masturbate. Mirrors covered all four walls. A gold plaque on the door read:



## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Remove your clothes.
- 2 Think nothing bad about the body you see.

Blair laughed at the stupidity of the instructions. Footsteps grew louder in the hallway. He covered his mouth, but his throat seized. Coughs cluttered his breaths until he was bent over, hacking into his hands. A pair of sneakers appeared beneath the door. It opened. Sasha stood over him. She wore a loose blue dress and black tights. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail. She held his inhaler. She knelt beside him and brought the air to his lips.

---

Sasha and Randy walked Blair to her office: a frigid concrete room in the basement. Round patterned rugs covered the floor. The office was long rather than wide. Near the entrance were couches, a Zen garden, a fountain shaped like a beehive. Framed articles promoting The Atmosphere hung on one of the long walls, across from a bank of video screens displaying every angle of The Atmosphere.

Blair stared at the screens, rigid with awe and terror.

“It’s my job to pay attention,” said Sasha. “If it’s bothering you.” She thumbed her phone. The screens switched to a clip of the ocean lapping the shores. “That better?”

The waves made him even more uneasy. They eliminated the world beyond this room. But he nodded nonetheless. His powerlessness seemed immense here. He wanted to leave more than he wanted the story about Dyson. There was no story here. Nothing worth dying for. He would apologize to Sasha. He’d promise to not publish anything. He’d never tell anyone he had come here—so long as she let him go.

Her desk hulked at the back of the room. She sat down, directed Blair to one of the two chairs facing her. Randy sat in the other. On her desk were framed photos of her and Dyson together, at least ten years old. Photos of them in college and high school. Young, beaming.

“Perhaps it’s best if you left,” Sasha said, to Randy.

“He’s a hothead,” he replied.

Blair coughed out a laugh, gelatinous from exhaustion.

“He’s less of a threat to me than I am to him.” Sasha smiled at Blair.

Randy saluted her from the door, then stepped into the hallway.

“Sometimes I just wanna...” She gritted her coffee-stained teeth. “You know people like him? Always *there*. Puppy dogs. Yap-yap-yap.” She made a dog mouth with her hand.

Blair said, “I don’t think I’ve—”

“Hold that thought.” She entered a room behind her desk and emerged a few minutes later wearing sweatpants and a billowy gray T-shirt smudged at the collar. She had rinsed off her makeup. Her face was cratered with pale scars on her forehead and cheeks. Her hair hung loose, in frayed strands. Bluish bags deepened her eyes. Yet her eyes, themselves, had a disquieting intensity that never seemed to lose focus on Blair. “You must be spent,” she said. “Of course you are. You’ve been through so much today—not even a full day—so much trouble.”

“I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

“Who does?” she said. “We so rarely *mean* any harm, but at the end of the day, we look back at a field of scorched earth. Friends, lovers, coworkers, siblings—everyone caught in the fire.” She snapped her fingers. “Do you know about me, Blair? What I’ve done?”

He knew she’d been a lifestyle coach—he knew about the man she bullied into killing himself, the preacher, the father of three. “I know what you did to Dyson.”

“Dyson comes later. I have a *lot* to say about him. But for now, I need a coffee. You?”

His hands were already trembling. But he said, “That sounds great.”

She called Randy. “Two coffees. One black and one...”

“Cream and two sugars.”

She grimaced. “One with cream and two sugars. Thank you.” She hung up. “You know that’ll kill you, right? Sugars and creams. Fifty calories here, there—they add up over time.”

“Don’t try to make me feel bad.”

“I’d never do such a thing.”

“I saw what you make them do... how they... in the food court.”

She shook her head. “Disgusting. A terrible habit. I want our men to be healthy. Eating disorders? That’s not healthy. It’s a holdover from Dyson—you know about Dyson, right?”

“What about him?”

“He’d always felt terrible about his body—and he did terrible things to it, things like you saw in the food court. Randy thinks it’s an homage to him. But Randy’s a fool. That’s why I keep him around. Keep your enemies close? Sure. But keep your fools even closer, right at the top where they can’t get into trouble.”

Randy knocked.

Sasha slipped on a white cashmere sweater she kept in a drawer and inched her chair deeper into the desk, to conceal her sweats. She punched a code into her phone. The door slid up.

Randy carried in two steaming mugs. He seemed like a docile pet, now, nothing like the Randy that Blair had feared in the chamber. “You’re fine in here?” he asked.

“Splendid,” she said, dramatizing her annoyance. “I was just telling Blair about Dyson.”

“His death was a tragedy,” Randy said.

“So unexpected,” said Sasha. She sounded genuinely hurt; her voice even cracked. She thanked Randy in a tone of *get out*. He got out.

She reached into her desk for a bottle of whiskey and poured a few glugs into her mug.

“The Atmosphere’s dry,” said Blair.

“What’s the point of leading a cult if there aren’t any perks?”

“I knew you were a cult,” he said proudly, as if he’d tricked her into the confession.

She pretended to gasp. “Blair,” she said. “Of course we’re a cult. We’ve been a cult from the start. That was Dyson’s vision for this place. Embrace the cult qualities. Reclaim the word. Hell: you wouldn’t *be* here if we weren’t a cult.” She shook the whiskey bottle.

He stretched his mug to her. The first sip of liquor blitzed his empty stomach, yet emboldened him. "I'm here because I received a letter."

"Be more specific, Blair. That's what I'm always telling the men: Be. Specific. They hide in the *ams* and the *abs* and the *eves*: *ambiguity*, *abstractions*, *evasions*."

"The letter said you covered up Dyson's death," he said. "It said experienced swimmers don't drown in ponds."

"It was more of a lake, we discovered. After his death."

"It says that you murdered him."

"But *how*, Blair? I'd like to know *how*. I've heard hundreds of theories—poisoning, strangling, gunshot, knife to the chest."

The letter didn't specify how she had killed him, only that he was murdered and Sasha had covered it up. No body was found. No autopsy performed. "Pretty convenient," Blair said.

"You call that *convenient*? That's the *least* convenient thing that could happen. I'd rather put this behind us. I'd love to clear this up. I'd love to bury my oldest friend." She dabbed her eyes. "Try knowing the person you love most in the world is stuck in the bowels of a lake decomposing. There's no dignity in a death like that."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"People's lives are so empty of meaning and purpose. They waste their days concocting elaborate stories. Conspiracies. I should be used to it—but it hurts every time I hear some new story about how I killed my oldest friend." She flattened her hands together in front of her mouth. She inhaled slowly to collect herself. "Do you have it?"

"I left it in Oregon," he said, a senseless lie.

"You're sure it's not in your bag?" She lifted his backpack from behind her desk and dropped it onto the surface. "If I look in here I won't find it?"

"I'm so scattered," he said. "I barely remember what I brought."

"Take a look."

Blair reached immediately for the compartment inside where he'd stored the letter. It was empty. He dug around elsewhere, pushing aside cameras and wires

and socks, grasping and grunting, increasingly frantic. He dipped his head in the bag.

“Blair-Blair-Blair,” said Sasha. She fanned her face with the letter. “I don’t need another *death* to clean up.” She laughed. So he laughed. She read the letter aloud: “*Dear Blair Hastings.*” She inflected obnoxiously, widened her eyes, gasped—she loved gasping—at the vague assertions put forth. Her tone gave the letter a farcical quality.

He tensed with shame. “Please stop,” he muttered.

She held up the letter. “Who do you think wrote it?”

“I don’t think it matters,” he said.

“It’s the key to everything, Blair,” she said. “Do you think it’s someone you know?”

“I don’t know many people.”

“But you insert yourself into people’s lives. You infiltrate and sabotage groups for your own financial benefit. Maybe they’d want you to embarrass yourself.”

“I hardly make any money.”

“Not yet,” she said. She pointed her thumb at her chest. “We’re your big break.”

He apologized again. “I won’t tell anyone I was here.”

“Surely there must’ve been thousands of other *truths* to uncover. Thousands of letters. We never did anything to you.”

“I wanted money. You’re right. But I don’t want it anymore.”

“Blair—money is one thing. This is about more than money. Be honest with me.”

“Forget I ever came here,” he said. He held his hands up, leaned away from her. “Forget I ever asked about Dyson.”

“*Forget*, Blair? I’ll never forget you. I like you. I really do, Blair. And because I like you I think you deserve to hear the story you came here to get. *Dyson* would want you to know. Hell, I want you to know. I want you to thrive—get the cash. I know you need it right now.”

“I’ll find other work,” he said.

“Aren’t you curious to know what happened to Dyson?” She leaned over her desk. “How I *killllllled* him?”

“I don’t need to know anything.”

“Well, I need to tell you. Because I need to tell someone. And it may as well be you. Consider it my favor to you: your big break. I spend my days with these earnest, naïve men who guzzle down whatever spills from my mouth. Don’t get me wrong. It’s important. It changes lives. I’m saving the world. But what I tell them isn’t true. Not in any meaningful sense.”

“He drowned. It was an accident. I’ll tell everyone whatever you want me to tell them.”

“I can’t sleep. I hardly eat. I hide my drinking from everyone here—I get it delivered in discreet pink packaging the men are too nervous to touch. This is no way to live, Blair. I’ll die if I keep living this way. I need to tell someone the truth.” She stood and beckoned for him to follow her. They settled on opposite couches facing each other in the center of the room, close to the fountain. She placed her clasped hands in her lap and started to speak: “The men were outside my building,” she said. “Four of them, ruddy, dressed in camouflage shorts.”

# thirty-nine

"TWO WEEKS AFTER his suicide," Sasha said, "Dyson's body resurfaced on the northern shore of the pond, close to where I made phone calls. Randy helped me bury him that afternoon. None of the other men knew."

The revelation knotted Blair's thoughts. Sasha had been talking for nearly six hours, and he was exhausted in ways he had never known. He felt like a dishrag being wrung out. "Why would you hide it from them?" he asked.

Sasha took a sip of bourbon—her fourth glass. "The remaining Atmospherians stayed on to rebuild a few sheds to sleep in as they looked for ways to return to their lives. I stayed because I had nowhere else to go. It was supposed to be temporary, and without the pressure of transforming these men, I found them hospitable and even kind. But one morning, a few days before Dyson's body resurfaced, two gruff men in their fifties emerged from the woods wearing hiking backpacks. The Atmospherian men and I were lounging in the grass, eating breakfast. They immediately stood and surrounded me, creating a wall of protection, but I made them sit back down. The men from the woods didn't scare me. I sensed, immediately, why they were here, and I waited for them to come to me.

"*Are you Sasha?*" one of them asked. I nodded. *We need your help*, said the other. I welcomed them to The Atmosphere. When I found Dyson's body a few days later, it seemed more prudent to bury him quietly and let the men believe something transcendent had occurred."

"You lied to them," Blair said. He shifted forward, closer to Sasha. Her revelation awoke something in him, and he felt the intense charge that had drawn him into this life. It was as if he were eating again after months of an

illness. "You took advantage of those men. Your life is a lie. You founded this entire place on a lie."

"I prefer the word *story*," said Sasha. She shrugged. "I told them a story. It's not my fault they believed it."

"Whose fault is it, then? Is it Dyson's fault that you're trapping men here against their will? It's definitely not the men's."

"Everyone here is free to leave," she said.

"You kept me hostage here. You had your men chase me around *knowing* I suffered from asthma. I could've died."

"Those are wild speculations."

"Don't think I won't tell everyone what you told me today. Don't think I won't take this to the *Times*, to the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*. They won't treat them like speculations."

"There's nothing I'd love more than for you to expose us," she said. "Do you know how boring it is being me? The same day every day for the rest of my life? But I made a promise to Dyson to do everything in my power to keep this place running. Let's say, however, I were tricked by a young, relentless reporter, a reporter who worked tirelessly to uncover the truth about The Atmosphere, who against all odds extracted the story from me, despite my protests, then I did everything that I could. I merely made a mistake. Undone by a superior mind. Why do you think I sent you the letter?"

Blair shook his head. "No, no, no," he said. "You didn't send me the letter."

"Who else would have sent it?"

"Don't patronize me."

"I already told you, Blair. I like you. And because I like you I've given you the story of your life: your greatest conspiracy yet. The faster you bring what you know to the—where was it? The *Times* and the *Guardian*. Did I miss anyone?"

"The *Washington Post*," Blair muttered.

"That's the one. The faster you expose me the faster I'm free. Hell, do post it on your website. Do whatever is best for you, Blair. You deserve the traffic. You've earned it."

Her encouragement maddened him. "And the second I step out of this office, your goons tie me up and force me into The Atmosphere. Make me empty out,



kneel in front of the scarecrow. I'm so far ahead of you."

"Is that what you want?"

"No, that's not what I want. I want to tell everyone what you told me."

"And that's why I brought you here. To tell everyone. To outsmart me. To finally bring The Atmosphere down." His backpack was at her feet. She nudged it over to him. "This conspiracizing. Your mettle and spunk. It's wearing me down. I've told you everything you wanted to hear. I couldn't possibly give you juicier details. I've told you things about myself that I've never told anyone—not even Dyson. You no longer have reason to be here."

"I'll write about what I saw here. I'll tell everyone everything."

She bit at one of her nails. "I'm very sorry that your experience here was so taxing," she said. "I assure you, this is not who we are. I'd like to pay for your flight back home to Oregon. The Atmosphere will reimburse you for your flight here and the cost of your stay, which clearly did not meet your expectations—or ours. This is not who we are."

"You're trying to bribe me," he said, hoping to bait her into keeping him here, proving herself the person he knew she was.

"Please accept a complimentary Atmospherian shed kit as compensation for your trouble. It will be mailed to your current residence."

"I live in an apartment."

"Everyone here at The Atmosphere is truly sorry for the inconvenience. Blah, blah, blah. We accept full responsibility." She flicked her wrist dismissively. The door opened. "Get out."

Randy stood at the entrance with his hands in his pockets.

Blair hitched on his backpack. He said, "Don't think I won't write about this. Don't think I won't publish a full transcript of what you told me."

"It truly was a pleasure to meet you," she said. "I wish you the best going forward." She tapped her phone. The waves on the video screens returned to the security footage. She reclined on the couch.

Blair spoke directly to Randy: "Sasha told me everything. I know you're lying to the men—to everyone. Don't think I won't tell the world."

Silently, Randy led him into the hall. The door slipped shut behind them. Blair continued talking, giving a clipped summary of what Sasha told him.

Randy nodded impatiently as if Blair were rambling in a foreign language. A deep sense of meaninglessness settled into him. No one would ever believe him. Worse: no one would care.

They walked through the main floor of the mall in silence. Men jogged past. Men spritzed cologne. Men answered phones in the Call Center, troubleshooting technical glitches in the DAM software—a partnership he now understood. Men tossed footballs on the Fitness Field. Men scrolled through *The Atmospherian Doctrine*. Men hugged. Men praised one another. Men praised themselves in The Crucible. Men's names scrolled through the directory boards. Men waved hello to Blair and good-bye to Blair. Men smiled. Men offered him bottled water and a small bag of trail mix for the road. Men opened the doors at the exit.

They wished him good luck.

Outside was the morning. The sunrise was like a broken egg yolk in the sky. The air had thickened and become almost buttery. It stuck to his tongue. He gasped into his inhaler.

Randy gave Blair a boarding pass and a check for five thousand dollars—far more than Blair had paid to come here. “We hope it will prove how truly sorry we are for your inconvenience. This is not who The Atmospherians are.”

The driver spun the keys on his finger. Blair followed him to the car but paused before getting in and looked back at the building. On the sidewalk, men in tracksuits of every color were lined up shoulder to shoulder along the entire perimeter of the mall, whitewashing the building to hide the graffiti. They rolled white paint up the walls, down the walls, each man rolling the opposite way to the man beside him, a perfect pistoning of concealment. Blair watched as the words faded under layers of paint, from blood to brick to antacid pink to the final and wonderful nothing. When the walls were entirely white, the men continued to paint. They appeared happy and content as they worked, free from the lives that led them here, safe from the pressures of jobs, rent, love, family, and friends—free from expectations and need. They dunked their rollers in paint. They rolled the paint on the walls. They were nourished.

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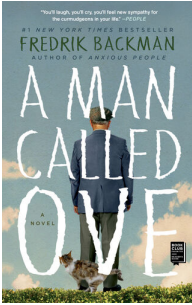
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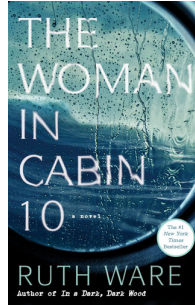
Finally, thank you to my parents for never asking what I planned to do with my English degree. You already knew the answer: write books.

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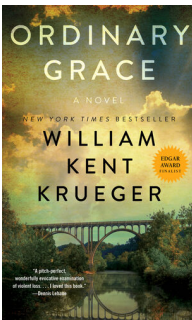
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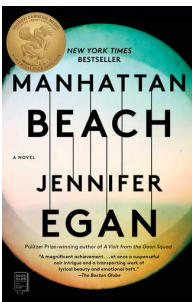
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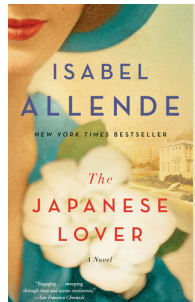
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# about the author



ALEX McELROY (they/them) is a nonbinary writer based in Brooklyn. They received their MFA from Arizona State University and their PhD from the University of Houston. Their writing has appeared in *Tin House*, *The Atlantic*, and *Vice*, and has been supported by the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Tin House Summer Workshop, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the Elizabeth George Foundation. *The Atmospherians* is their first novel.

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