

*"With the cunning and verve of GILLIAN FLYNN
but with an intensity all its own."*

*—Megan Abbott,
author of
The Fever*



INSTANT
NEW YORK
TIMES
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LUCKIEST
GIRL
ALIVE

A NOVEL

JESSICA KNOLL

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LUCKIEST
GIRL ALIVE

Jessica Knoll

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To all the TifAni FaNellis of the world.

I know.

CHAPTER 1

I inspected the knife in my hand.

“That’s the Shun. Feel how light it is compared to the Wüsthof?”

I pricked a finger on the blade’s witchy chin, testing. The handle was supposed to be moisture resistant, but it was quickly going humid in my grip.

“I think that design is better suited for someone of your stature.” I looked up at the sales associate, bracing for the word people always use to describe short girls hungry to hear “thin.” “Petite.” He smiled like I should be flattered. Slender, elegant, graceful—now there’s a compliment that might actually defang me.

Another hand, the skin several shades lighter than my own, appeared in the frame and made a grab for the handle. “Can I feel?” I looked up at him too: my fiancé. That word didn’t bother me so much as the one that came after it. Husband. That word laced the corset tighter, crushing organs, sending panic into my throat with the bright beat of a distress signal. I could decide not to let go. Slip the forged nickel and stainless steel blade (the Shun, decided I liked it better) soundlessly into his stomach. The salesman would probably emit a simple dignified “Oh!” It was the mother carrying her crusty-nosed baby behind him who was the screamer. You could just tell she was that dangerous combination of bored and dramatic, that she would gleefully, tearfully recount the *attack* to the news reporters who would later swarm the scene. I turned the knife over before I could tense, before I could lunge, before every muscle in my body, forever on high alert, contracted as if on autopilot.



“I’m excited,” Luke said, as we stepped out of Williams-Sonoma and onto Fifty-ninth Street, a gasp of icy air curdling in our wake. “Are you?”

“I love those red wine glasses.” I threaded my fingers with his to show him how much I meant it. It was the thought of the “sets” that I couldn’t bear. Inevitably, we were going to end up with six bread plates, four salad plates, and eight dinner plates, and I would never get around to completing their little china family. They’d sulk on the kitchen table, Luke always offering to put them away and me snapping, “Not yet,” until one day, long after the wedding, I’d get a sudden, manic inspiration to take the 4/5 uptown, storm into Williams-Sonoma like a warrior Martha Stewart, only to discover that they’d discontinued the Louvre pattern we’d chosen all those years ago. “Can we get pizza?”

Luke laughed and squeezed my side. “Where does it all go?”

My hand went rigid in his. “It’s all the working out, I think. I’m starving.” That was a lie. I was still nauseous from the thick Reuben sandwich, pink and overstuffed as a wedding invitation, that I’d eaten for lunch.

“Patsy’s?” I tried to make it sound like I’d just come up with this idea, when in reality I’d been fantasizing about extracting a slice from a Patsy’s pie, strings of white cheese stretching, but not snapping, forcing me to pinch it between my fingers and pull, a bonus glob of mozzarella sliding off someone else’s slice. This weird dream had been playing on a loop since last Thursday, when we decided Sunday would be the day we finally

took care of the registry. (“People are asking, Tif.” “I know, *Mom*, we’re getting to it.” “The wedding is five months away!”)

“I’m not hungry”—Luke’s shoulders rose—“but if you really want to.” What a sport.

We continued to hold hands as we crossed Lexington Ave, dodging packs of strong-legged women in white walking shorts and supportive shoes, toting whatever treasures the Victoria’s Secret on Fifth Avenue contained that the one in Minnesota did not; a cavalry of Long Island girls, the straps of their gladiator sandals twisting up their honeyed calves like leather vines on a tree. They looked at Luke. They looked at me. They didn’t question it. I’d worked tirelessly to assemble a worthy rival, a Carolyn to his JFK Jr. We made a left, walking to Sixtieth Street before making another right. It was only 5:00 P.M. when we crossed Third Avenue, found the restaurant tables set and lonely. The fun New Yorkers were still brunching. I used to be one of them.

“Outside?” the hostess asked. We nodded and she plucked two menus from an empty table, motioning for us to follow her.

“Can I have a glass of Montepulciano?” The hostess raised her eyebrows indignantly and I could imagine what she was thinking—*that’s the waiter’s job*—but I just smiled sweetly at her: *See how nice I am? How unreasonable you’re being? You should be ashamed of yourself.*

She turned her sigh on Luke. “You?”

“Just water.” When she walked away, “I don’t know how you can drink red when it’s so hot out.”

I shrugged. “White just doesn’t go with pizza.” White was reserved for those nights when I felt light, pretty. When I had it in me to ignore the pasta portion of the menu. I once wrote some tip in *The Women’s Magazine*: “A study found that the act of physically closing your menu once you’ve decided what to order can make you feel more satisfied with your choice. So go with the pan-seared sole and snap that menu shut before you start eye-sexing the penne alla vodka.” LoLo, my boss, had underlined the words “eye-sexing” and written “Hilarious.” God, I hate pan-seared sole.

“So what else do we have left to do?” Luke leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head like he was about to do a sit-up, entirely innocent that those were fighting words. Venom pooled in my brown eyes and I hurried to bat it away.

“A lot.” I counted on my fingers. “All the stationery—so that’s the invitations, the menus, the programs, the place cards, all of that. I have to find a hair and makeup person, and figure out a bridesmaid dress for Nell and the girls. We also have to get back to the travel agent—I really don’t want to do Dubai. I know”—I held up my hands before Luke could say anything—“we can’t do the whole time in the Maldives. There’s only so much sun lying around on a beach you can do before you lose it. But can’t we do a few days in London or Paris after?”

Luke’s face was intent as he nodded. He had freckles on his nose year round, but by mid-May they spread to his temples, where they would remain until Thanksgiving. This was my fourth summer with Luke, and every year I watched as all that good, healthy outdoor activity—running, surfing, golfing, kite boarding—multiplied the golden flecks on his nose like cancer cells. He had me going for a while too, this obnoxious dedication to movement, to endorphins, to seizing the day. Not even a hangover could bleed this wholesome vigor. I used to set my alarm for 1:00 P.M. on Saturdays, which Luke thought was adorable. “You’re so small and you need so much sleep,” he would say as he nuzzled me awake in the afternoon. “Small,” another description of my body I detest. What do I have to do to get someone to call me “skinny”?

I came clean eventually. It’s not that I require an inordinate amount of sleep, it’s that I haven’t been sleeping when you think I’ve been sleeping. I could never imagine submitting myself to a state of unconsciousness at the same time everyone else goes under. I can only sleep—really sleep, not the thin-lipped rest I’ve learned to live on during the week—when sunlight explodes off the Freedom Tower and forces me to the other side of the bed.

when I can hear Luke pattering around the kitchen, making egg-white omelettes, the neighbors next door arguing over who took the trash out last. Banal, everyday reminders that life is so boring it can't possibly terrorize anyone. That dull fuzz in my ears, *that's* when I sleep.

"We should aim to do one thing every day," Luke concluded.

"Luke, I do three things every day." There was a snap in my voice that I meant to remove. I also didn't have the right to it. I *should* do three things every day, but instead I sit, paralyzed in front of my computer, beating myself up for not doing three things every day like I promised myself I would. I've determined this is more time-consuming and stressful than actually doing the three goddamn things a day, and, therefore, I'm entitled to my own little bit of fury.

I thought of the one thing I was actually on top of. "Do you even know how many back-and-forths I've had with the invitations person?" I'd burdened the stationer—a wisp of an Asian woman whose nervous disposition infuriated me—with so many questions: Does it look cheap to do letterpress for the invitation but not for the RSVP cards? Will anyone notice if we use a calligrapher for the addresses on the envelope but script for the invitation? I was terrified of making a decision that would expose me. I've been in New York for six years and it's been like an extended master's program in how to appear effortlessly moneyed—only now with that downtown edge. First semester, I learned that Jack Rogers sandals, so revered in college, screamed, "My small liberal arts school will always be the center of the universe!" I'd found a new axis, so into the trash went my gold, silver, and white pairs. Same with the mini Coach baguette (gross). Then it was on to the realization that Kleinfeld, which seemed so glamorous, a classic New York institution, was actually a tacky wedding gown factory frequented only by bridge and tunnelers (B & Ts—also learned what that meant). I opted for a small boutique in Meatpacking, the racks carefully curated with Marchesa, Reem Acra, and Carolina Herrera. And all those dimly lit, crowded clubs, manned by beefy doormen and red ropes, throbbing furiously with Tiësto and hips? That's not how self-respecting urbanites spend their Friday nights. No, instead we pay sixteen dollars for a plate of frisée, wash it down with vodka sodas at a dive bar in the East Village, all while wearing cheap-looking \$495 Rag & Bone booties.

I had six leisurely years to get to where I am now: fiancé in finance, first-name basis with the hostess at Locanda Verde, the latest Chloé hooked over my wrist (not Céline, but at least I knew better than to parade around a monstrous Louis Vuitton like it was the eighth wonder of the world). Plenty of time to hone my craft. But wedding planning, now that has a much steeper learning curve. You get engaged in November, and then you have one month to study your materials, to discover that the barn at Blue Hill—where you thought you would get married—has been *done*, and retooled old banks that charge a twenty-thousand-dollar location fee are now the tits. You have two months to pore over wedding magazines and blogs, to consult with your gay coworkers at *The Women's Magazine*, to discover that strapless wedding gowns are offensively middlebrow. Now you're three months into the whole thing, and you still have to find a photographer with nary a duck-face bride in his portfolio (harder than it sounds), bridesmaids' dresses that don't look anything like bridesmaids' dresses, plus a florist who can secure you anemones out of season because, peonies? What is this, amateur hour? Or a wrong move and everyone will see right through your tastefully tan spray tan to the trashy guidette who doesn't know to pass the salt and pepper together. I thought that by twenty-eight I could stop trying to prove myself and relax already. But this fight just gets bloodier with age.

"And you still haven't gotten me your addresses for the calligrapher," I said, even though secretly, I was relieved to have more time to torture the skittish stationer.

"I'm working on them," Luke sighed.

"They won't go out when we want them to go out if you don't get them to me this week. I've been asking for

a month.”

“I’ve been busy!”

“And you think I haven’t?”

Bickering. It’s so much uglier than a heated, dish-smashing fight, isn’t it? At least after that you have sex on the floor of the kitchen, shards bearing the braid of the Louvre pattern weaving an imprint on your back. No man feels very much compelled to rip your clothes off after you inform him, bitchily, that he left one lone tuft floating in the toilet.

I clenched my fists, flexed my fingers wide as though I could expel the rage like Spider-Man’s web. *Just say* “I’m sorry.” I offered up my most pathetic sigh as collateral. “I’m just really tired.”

An invisible hand passed over Luke’s face, wiped away his frustration with me. “Why don’t you just go to the doctor? You really should be on Ambien or something.”

I nodded, pretending to consider the idea, but sleeping pills are just button-shaped vulnerability. What I really needed were the first two years of my relationship back, that brief reprieve when, as I lay laced into Luke’s limbs, the night slipped away from me and I didn’t feel the need to chase after it. The few times I’d start awake I’d see that even as he slept, Luke’s mouth twisted up at the corners. Luke’s good-naturedness was like the bug spray we applied at his parents’ summer home in Nantucket, so powerful it warded off the dread, that feeling, that alarmingly calm omnipresence, that something bad was about to happen. But somewhere along the way—we were around the time we got engaged eight months ago if I’m really being honest—the sleeplessness returned. I started shoving Luke off me when he tried to wake me up to run over the Brooklyn Bridge on Saturday mornings, something we’d been doing almost every Saturday for the last three years. Luke isn’t some pathetic puppy in love—he sees the regression, but amazingly, it’s only committed him deeper to me. Like he’s up for the challenge of changing me back.

I’m no plucky heroine, claiming ignorance of her quiet beauty and quirky charm, but there was a time when I *did* wonder what Luke could see in me. I’m pretty—I have to work at it, but the raw materials are there. I’m forty years Luke’s junior, which isn’t as good as eight, but still, something. I also like to do “weird” things in bed. Even though Luke and I have very different definitions of “weird” (him: doggy style and hair pulling, me: electric shocks to my pussy with a ball gag in my mouth to stifle my screams), by his standards, we have a freaky, fulfilling sex life. So yes, I’m self-aware enough to recognize the things Luke sees in me, but there are midtown bars full of girls just like me, sweet natural blond Kates, who would get on all fours and swing their ponytails at Luke in a heartbeat. *Kate* probably grew up in a red-brick, white-shuttered home, a home that doesn’t deceive with tacky siding in the back, like mine did. But a *Kate* could never give Luke what I give him, and that’s the edge. Rusted and bacteria ridden, I’m the blade that nicks at the perfectly hemmed seams of Luke’s star quarterback life, threatening to shred it apart. And he likes that threat, the possibility of my danger. But he doesn’t really want to see what I can do, the ragged holes I can open. I’ve spent most of our relationship scratching the surface, experimenting with the pressure, how much is too much before I draw blood? I’m getting tired.

The darling hostess plunked a wineglass in front of me with sloppy purpose. Ruby liquid heaved over the edge, pooling around the base of the glass like it was a gunshot wound.

“Here you go!” she chirped, giving me what I’m sure was her nastiest smile, which wouldn’t even rate on my scale.

And like that, the curtain went up, the spotlights roasting: showtime. “Oh, no,” I gasped. I tapped my finger on the line between my two front teeth. “Big piece of spinach. Right here.”

The hostess slapped her hand over her mouth, her face heating from the neck up. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

and slunk away.

Luke's eyes were confused blue orbs in the lazy evening sun. "She didn't have anything in her teeth."

I took my time leaning over the table, slurped my wine from the rim to spare my white jeans. Never fuck with a rich white bitch and her white jeans. "Not in her teeth. Up her ass, on the other hand . . ."

Luke's laugh was the standing ovation. He shook his head, impressed. "You can be pretty vicious, you know?"



"The florist will charge you by the hour for next-day cleanup. You need to negotiate a flat rate on the contract Monday morning. Of-fucking-course I had to ride the elevator with Eleanor Tuckerman, née Podalski, fellow *Women's Magazine* editor, who, when she wasn't leeching my talent in her nine-to-five, assumed her acting role as authority on everything wedding and etiquette related. Eleanor was married a year ago and she continues to discuss the event with the kind of somber reverence you would 9/11, or the death of Steve Jobs. I imagine this will continue until she gets knocked up and goes on to birth our next national treasure.

"Are you serious?" I punctuated my words with a horrified little gasp. Eleanor is the features director for someone I report to, and four years older. I need her to like me, and it doesn't take much. All girls like this want is for you to widen your eyes at them, Bambi innocent, and beg them to impart their wisdom to you.

Eleanor nodded, gravely serious. "I'll e-mail you my contract, so you can see what to do." *And so you can see how much we dropped*, she didn't add, which was totally the point.

I gushed, "That would be such a help, Eleanor," and bared my recently whitened teeth. The elevator door chimed, dinging my freedom.

"Good morning to *you*, Miss FaNelli." Clifford batted his eyes flirtatiously. Eleanor got nothing. Clifford has been the receptionist at *The Women's Magazine* for twenty-one years and has various, absurd reasons for hating the majority of people who walk past him every day. Eleanor's crime is that she is awful, but also that one time an e-mail went out that there were cookies in the pantry. Clifford, who couldn't leave the phones unattended, forwarded it to Eleanor asking her to bring him one, plus a coffee with enough milk that it turned the color of camel. Eleanor happened to be in a meeting, and by the time she read the e-mail, the cookies were gone. She brought him his precious camel-colored coffee anyway, but Clifford turned his nose up at it and hasn't spoken more than five words to her since. "Fat cow probably ate the last one instead of giving it to me," he hissed to me after "the incident." Eleanor is just about the most anorexic person I know, and we fell to our knees we laughed so hard.

"Morning, Clifford." I gave him a little wave, my engagement ring winking under the farm of fluorescent lights.

"Look at that *skirt*." Clifford whistled, his eyes approving on the size two leather tube I'd stuffed myself into after yesterday's carb catastrophe. The compliment was as much for me as it was for Eleanor. Clifford loved to showboat what a peach he could be if only you never crossed him.

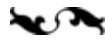
"Thank you, doll." I opened the door for Eleanor.

"Fucking queen," she muttered as she passed through, loud enough for Clifford to hear. She looked at me waiting to see what I would do. If I ignored her, it was a line drawn in the sand. Laugh, and it was a betrayal to Clifford.

I held up my hands. Made sure my voice carried the lie, "I adore you both."

When the door closed and Clifford could no longer hear us, I told Eleanor I was going downstairs in a bit to do an informational interview. Could I get her a snack or any magazines from the newsstand while I was there?

“A Kind bar and the new GQ if they have it,” Eleanor replied. She would pick at that thing all day. A nut for mid-morning snack, a dried cranberry for lunch. But she gave me a grateful smile, and that was the goal, course.



Most of my co-workers automatically delete those e-mails, subject line “Can I Take You to Coffee?” written by dutiful twenty-two-year-olds, at once terrified and woefully overconfident. They all grew up watching Lauren Conrad on *The Hills* and thought, *I want to work at a magazine when I grow up!* They’re always disappointed to find out that I have nothing to do with fashion (“Not even beauty?” one pouted, cradling her mother’s YSL bag in her lap like a newborn). I take pleasure in taunting them. “The only freebies I get in my job are the galley proofs of books three months before they publish. What are you reading right now?” The color draining from their faces always reveals the answer.

The Women’s Magazine has a long and storied history of mixing the highbrow with the lowbrow. Serious journalism appears here and there, along with occasional excerpts from moderately prestigious books, profiles of the select few female execs who managed to break the glass ceiling, and coverage of hot-button “women’s issues,” aka birth control and abortion, that softer terminology really grinding LoLo’s gears because, as she is fond of saying, “Men don’t want a baby every time they fuck either.” That said, this is not the reason one million nineteen-year-olds purchase *The Women’s Magazine* every month. And my byline is much more likely to appear next to “99 Ways to Butter His Baguette” than it is next to an interview with Valerie Jarrett. The editor in chief—a chic, asexual woman named LoLo, with a menacing presence I thrive on because it makes my job feel forever in jeopardy and therefore important—seems to be simultaneously disgusted by and in awe of me.

I’d been pigeonholed into the role of the sex writer at first, I think, because of how I look. (I’ve learned to camouflage my boobs, but it’s as though there is something inherently vulgar about me.) I ended up stuck in this role because I was actually good at it. Writing about sex is actually not an easy thing to do, and it was certainly not something most of the editors, regular subscribers to *The Atlantic*, would ever *deign* to do. Everyone here is falling all over themselves to flaunt how little they know about sex, as though knowing where your clitoris is and producing serious journalism are mutually exclusive. “What’s BDSM?” LoLo asked me once. Even though she knew the answer, she gasped gleefully as I explained the difference between a sub and a dom. I play her game though. LoLo knows it’s not a profile of the founder of EMILY’s List that keeps the magazine flying off newsstands every month, and she needs those sales numbers in her back pocket. There have been rumors over the last year that LoLo will usurp the editor of *The New York Times Magazine* when his contract runs out. “You’re the only person who can write about sex in a funny, intelligent way,” she told me once. “Just tough it out and I promise you, this time next year, you will never have to write about a blow job again.”

I carried around this little tease, precious to me as the shiny parasite attached to my finger, for months. The day Luke came home and announced he was in talks to transfer to the London office. There would be a significant bump to his bonus, which was already significantly fine. Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to live in London one day but not on someone else’s terms. Luke was taken aback when he saw the devastation curtain my face.

“You’re a writer,” he reminded me. “You can write anywhere. That’s the beauty of it.”

I did a loop around the kitchen as I pleaded my case. “I don’t want to be a freelance writer, Luke. Begging for assignments in another country. I want to be an editor here.” I pointed at the ground, here, where we are now. “It’s *New York Times Magazine*.” I cupped my hands around this opportunity, so close, and shook.

“Ani.” Luke clamped his hands around my wrists and brought them down to my sides. “I know you need to get this out of your system. Prove to everyone you can do more than write about sex or whatever. B

realistically, what? You'll work there a year, then you're going to be on my back about having a kid next, and you're not even going to want to go back to work after. Let's be rational here. Should I—should *we*—oh, I evoked the “we”—“really pass up this opportunity for a temporary whim?”

I know Luke thinks I skew Typical Kate when it comes to the kid thing. I wanted the ring and the black-tie optional wedding and the tower of a dress, I have a rich lady dermatologist on Fifth Avenue who will inject me with anything I want, and I frequently drag Luke to ABC Carpet & Home to see sets of turquoise lamps and vintage Beni Ourain rugs. “Wouldn't those look so great in the foyer?” I always suggest, prompting Luke to flinch over the price tag and feign a heart attack. I think he's relying on me to nag him into fatherhood, like all his other friends' wives have. He'll faux-complain about it over beers—“She's actually mapping out her cycle”—all of them groaning their faux-support. *Been there, man*. But deep down, they're pleased they had someone to push them into it, because they want it too, preferably a boy but hey, there's always baby number two if she fails to pop out the heir the first time around. Only guys never have to admit that. And a guy like Luke? He'd never expect he'd have to tap his watch and say, “Tick tock.”

Problem is, I'm not going to push. Kids make me exhausted.

God, the idea of being pregnant, of giving *birth*, sends me into such a state. Not a panic attack exactly, more like a spin, a particular condition that surfaced some fourteen years ago, where I suddenly feel as though I'm on a whirring merry-go-round that has just been unplugged mid-ride. It's like I'm gradually slowing to a stop, the silence between my heart's weakening beats stretching longer and longer, as I skate the last loops of my life. At those appointments, the doctors and nurses touching me—why are his fingers lingering there? Does he feel something? Is that a cancerous lump? The spin might never stop. I'm the type of raging, obnoxious hypochondriac that can make a doctor with even the kindest bedside manner snap. I dodged fate once and it's only a matter of time, I want to explain to them, make them understand my neurosis is justified. I've told Luke about the spin, and I tried to tell him how I don't think I could ever be pregnant, because I would just worry too much. He laughed and nuzzled his nose into my neck, purring, “You're so cute you would care that much about the baby.” I smiled back. Of course that's what I meant too.

I sighed and pressed the button for the lobby and waited for the elevator doors to part. My co-workers turn their noses up at meeting with these sad-sack girls the same way they turn their noses up at writing about the grundle, but I find it to be pure entertainment. Nine times out of ten, she's the prettiest girl in her sorority, the one with the best closet, the biggest collection of J Brand jeans. I'll never tire of seeing the shadow pass over her face when she sees my Derek Lam trousers slung low on my hips, the messy bun sprouting out of my neck. She'll tug at the waist of her tasteful A-line dress that suddenly seems so matronly, smooth down her over-straightened hair, and realize she played it all wrong. This girl would have tortured me ten years ago, and I flung out of bed on the mornings I get to exert my power over her now.

The girl I was meeting that morning was of particular interest to me. Spencer Hawkins—a name I would know for—was an alumna of my high school, The Bradley School, recently graduated from Trinity College (they are), and she “so admired” my “strength in the face of adversity.” Like I was fucking Rosa Parks or something. And let me tell you, she pushed the right button—I eat that shit *up*.

I spotted her right away when I stepped off the elevator—slouchy leather pants (if fake, good ones) perfectly balanced with a crisp white button-down and sharp silver heels, a Chanel purse dangling from her forearm. Not for her round beer face, I might have turned right around and pretended I didn't see her. I don't do well with competition.

“Ms. FaNelli?” she tried. God, I couldn't wait until I was a Harrison.

“Hi.” I shook her hand so hard the chain on her purse rattled. “We have two choices for coffee—the

newsstand sells Illy and the cafeteria sells Starbucks. Take your pick.”

“Whatever you like.” Good answer.

“I can’t stand Starbucks.” I wrinkled my nose at her as I turned on my heel. I heard her clicking frantically behind me.

“Good morning, Loretta!” The most sincere I ever am is when I’m speaking to the cashier at the newsstand. Loretta has severe burns all over her body—no one knows how—and she emits a strong, stale stench. When she was first hired last year, people complained—it was such a small space, and around food no less. It was just *unappetizing*. Of course it was noble of the company to employ her, but wouldn’t it be better if she, like, worked in the message center in the basement of the building? I actually overheard Eleanor whining about this to a coworker one day. Ever since Loretta started, the coffee is always fresh, the milk canisters always full—even the soft one!—and the latest issues of the magazines are artfully presented on the shelves. Loretta reads everything she touches, she skimps on air-conditioning and puts that money toward her travel fund, and she once pointed to a beautiful model in a magazine and said to me, “I thought this was you!” Her throat must have been burned to because her voice is thick as stew. She’d pushed the picture underneath my nose. “I saw her, and thought, *This is my friend.*” The word roped around my throat, and I just barely managed to contain the tears.

I make it a point to bring these girls to the newsstand. “You were a staff writer for your college newspaper. I’ll cradle my chin in my hand, encourage them to tell me more about their exposé on the school mascot, the costume’s homophobic undertones, when I’ve already decided how much help to provide them based on how they treat Loretta.

“Good morning!” Loretta beamed at me. It was 11:00 A.M., and the newsstand was quiet. Loretta was reading *Psychology Today*. She lowered the magazine to reveal pink and brown and gray patchworked all over her face. “This rain,” she sighed, “as much as I hate it, I hope it rain all week so we have a beautiful weekend.”

“Ugh, I know.” Loretta loved to talk about the weather. In her country, the Dominican Republic, everyone danced in the streets when it rained. But not here, she said. Here the rain was filthy. “Loretta, this is Spencer.” I gestured toward my fresh kill, whose nose was already twitching. Not a strike against her necessarily, you can help how your body reacts when confronted with the stench of tragedy. I would know. “Spencer, Loretta.”

Loretta and Spencer exchanged pleasantries. These girls were always polite, it would never occur to them not to be, but there was usually something strained about their demeanor that tipped me off. Some didn’t even try to hide what assholes they were once it was just the two of us. “Ohmigod was that smell *her?*” one said to me clamping her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh and brushing her shoulder up against mine conspiratorially as though we were girlfriends who’d just shoplifted a pile of Victoria’s Secret thongs.

“There’s coffee, there’s tea, take your pick.” I plucked a coffee cup from the stack and pumped a dark stream while Spencer stood behind me, considering.

“The peppermint tea is very good,” Loretta said, wisely.

“Is it?” Spencer asked.

“Yes,” Loretta said. “Very refreshing.”

“You know”—Spencer hiked her classic quilted purse higher on her shoulder—“I’m not really a tea person. But it’s so hot out, and that sounds really good.”

We-hel-helllll. Maybe the esteemed Bradley School was finally living up to its mission statement: “The Bradley School is committed to educational excellence and dedicated to developing compassion, creativity, and respect in each of its students.”

I paid for our drinks. Spencer offered, but I insisted, like I always do, even though I have this recurring vision that my card is declined, this meager \$5.23 charge the thing that obliterates the whole dog and pony show.

stylish, successful, engaged, and all by twenty-eight years old, no less. The Amex bill went straight to Luke, which I felt funny about but not funny enough to put a stop to it. I make seventy thousand dollars a year. I lived in Kansas City I'd be Paris fucking Hilton. Money will never be a problem because of Luke, but even so there is a childhood fear of the word "declined," of Mom's bumbling excuses offered up to the cashier, her disappointed hands shaking as she forced the card back into a wallet packed fat with its maxed-out accomplices.

Spencer took a sip of her drink. "This is delicious."

Loretta sparkled. "What I tell you?"

We found a table in the empty cafeteria. Gray, rainy light crowned us from the skylights above, and I noticed that Spencer had three distinct lines across her tan forehead, so fine they could have been hairs.

"I really appreciate your meeting with me today," she began.

"Of course." I sipped my coffee. "I know how hard it can be to crack this industry."

Spencer nodded ferociously. "It's so hard. All my friends, they're doing the finance thing. They've had jobs lined up since before we graduated." She fiddled with her tea string. "I've been at this since April and I'm really starting to wonder if I should just try my hand somewhere else. Just so I have a job, it's getting embarrassing." She laughed. "And then I can actually move here and I can keep looking on the side." She looked at me questioningly. "Do you think that's a smart thing to do? I worry if my résumé shows I'm working in another industry I won't be seriously considered in magazine publishing, but then I'm also worried that if I don't get just any job, the job hunt could stretch on for so long that they're going to be more concerned that I have zero real life work experience." Spencer sighed, frustrated by this imaginary dilemma. "What do you think?"

I was just shocked she didn't already live in the city, in an apartment on Ninety-first and First, rent and utilities all taken care of by Daddy. "Where have you interned?" I asked.

Spencer glanced at her lap, sheepishly. "I haven't. I mean, I have, but at a literary agency. I want to be a writer, which sounds so stupid and aspirational, like, 'I want to be an astronaut!' but I had no idea how to make that happen and a professor suggested I work on the business side of things to get a sense of the industry. I didn't even realize like, hey, magazines, which I love, and I love *The Women's Magazine*, I used to sneak my mom's when I was little"—this is such a common anecdote, I never know if I should believe it or if it's just become the thing people say. "Anyway, I never realized, someone is *writing* that stuff. Then I started researching the industry and this, what you do, is what I know I'm meant to do." When she finished, she was breathing hard. So much passion, this one. But it had pleased me. Most girls just wanted a job that let them play with clothes and mingle with celebrities and stroll into the Boom Boom Room because their names were permanently on the list. Those were some nice perks of the job, but they had always been secondary to seeing "By Ani FaNelli" in print. The next day I received my copy back with a note: "Hilarious" or "You have the perfect voice." I'd brought that page home and Luke had hung it on the refrigerator like I'd gotten an A on a paper.

"Well, you know that as you rise up the ranks as an editor, you will write less and edit more." This was something an editor had told me once in an interview, and it had unnerved me. Who would want to write less and edit more? Now, after working in the industry for six years, I get it. *The Women's Magazine* has limited opportunities in terms of real reported pieces and there were only so many times I could advise readers to broach a difficult topic with their boyfriend while sitting next to him, rather than across from him. "Experts say men are more receptive when they don't feel as though they're being challenged head-on . . . literally." Still, there was something about telling people where you worked, their eyes lighting up in recognition, that I needed right now.

"But I see your byline all the time," Spencer said.

"Well, when you stop seeing it you'll know I'm running the place."

Spencer rolled her teacup between her palms, shyly. “You know, when I first saw your name on the masthead, I wasn’t sure if that was you, *you*. Because of your name. But then I saw you on the *Today* show and even though your name is a little different and *you* look so different—not that you weren’t always pretty”—a deep flush began to crawl into her cheeks here—“I knew it was you.”

I didn’t say anything. She was going to have to ask.

“Did you do that because of what happened?” The question quieted her voice.

Here’s the little song and dance I give to anyone who asks this question: “Partly. A professor in college suggested I do that so that I would be judged on my own merits and not by what people may know of me. Then I always shrug modestly. “Not like most people really remember my name; what they remember is Bradley.” Now, here’s the truth: I started to realize there was something wrong with my name on the first day of high school. Surrounded by Chaunceys and Griers, the many simple, elegant Kates, not a single last name that ended in a vowel, TifAni FaNelli stood out like the hillbilly relative who shows up at Thanksgiving and drinks all the expensive whiskey. I never would have realized this if I hadn’t gone to The Bradley School. Then again, if I had never gone to Bradley, if I had stayed on my side of the tracks in Pennsylvania, I can promise you right now I’d be parked outside of a kindergarten classroom in my leased BMW, drumming my French-manicured nails on the steering wheel. Bradley was like an abusive foster mother—she saved me from the system but only so she could have her twisted, meth-fueled way with me. No doubt my name raised some college administrators’ eyebrows when they saw it on my application. I’m sure they half-rose from their seats, calling out to their secretaries, “Sue, is this *the* TifAni FaNelli from the”—stopping abruptly when they saw I attended The Bradley School and answering their own question.

I didn’t dare push my luck and apply to any Ivy Leagues, but plenty of their hangers-on would have me, so me they wept as they read my essay, bursting with purple prose and histrionic declarations of all I had learned about this vicious life even though I had only just begun it. Oh, it was a tearjerker, I made sure of it. So in the end, my name and the school that taught me to hate it got me into Wesleyan, where I met my best friend, Nell, the most beautiful WASP whose stinger pierced everyone but me, and she was the one, not some sage professor who suggested I drop the Tif and go by Ani, pronouncing it “Ahhh-nee,” because “Annie” was simply too pedestrian for someone as world-weary as I was. Changing my name had nothing to do with hiding my past and everything to do with becoming the person no one ever thought I deserved to be: Ani Harrison.

Spencer scooted her chair closer to the table, taking advantage of this intimate moment. “I hate when people ask me where I went to high school.”

That wasn’t a sentiment I could agree with. There were times I loved saying where I went to high school. I loved the opportunity to prove how far I’d come. So I shrugged, my face stone, letting her know we weren’t bound to be buddies just because we had an alma mater in common. “I don’t mind. I feel like it’s a part of what makes me me.”

Spencer suddenly realized she was leaning in too close, that this was a point on which we couldn’t see eye to eye, and it had been presumptuous of her to think we could. She drew back in her chair, giving me my space. “Of course. I would probably feel the same way if I were you.”

“I’m participating in the documentary,” I volunteered, to show her just how much I didn’t mind it.

Spencer nodded slowly. “I wanted to ask you. But of course they would want you.”

I checked the TAG Heuer on my wrist. Luke had been promising me the Cartier for the last year. “I will say that you should definitely try and get an internship, even if it doesn’t pay.”

“How would I afford rent?” Spencer asked.

I eyed the Chanel bag hooked over the back of her chair. On second glance, I saw that the seams were

starting to unravel. Old money, this one, tied up in trusts. Good family name, decent-size house in Wayne, and not a penny to spare the panhandler on the subway.

“Waitress or bartend at night. Or, commute in every day.”

“From Philly?” Not so much a question as a reminder of where she would have to come from, as though I was crazy to suggest it. My chest sizzled with irritation.

“We’ve had interns here who have commuted from DC,” I said. I took a slow sip of my coffee then cocked my head at her. “Isn’t it only two hours or so on the train?”

“I guess,” Spencer said, looking unconvinced. Her dismissal disappointed me. Things had been going fairly well up until this point.

Giving her the opportunity to redeem herself, I reached up to adjust the delicate gold chain around my neck. I couldn’t believe I’d left out the most important piece.

“Are you engaged?” Spencer’s eyes went cartoon character wide on my pride and joy: a fat, brilliant emerald planet, flanked by two winking diamonds, the band simple platinum. It had been Luke’s grandmother’s—pardon me, his Mammy’s—and when he gave it to me he’d offered me the option to reset the stones on a diamond band. “Mom’s jewelry guy said that’s the look a lot of girls go for now. It’s more modern I guess.”

And that’s exactly why I didn’t want to have it reset. No, I would wear it just the way dear sweet Mammy had worn it: at once restrained and ornate. A very clear message: This is an heirloom. We don’t just have money, we *come* from money.

I stretched my fingers out, taking in the hardware as if I’d forgotten it was there. “Ugh, I know. I’m officially old.”

“That is the most stunning ring I’ve ever seen,” Spencer declared. “When are you getting married?”

“October sixteenth!” I beamed at her. Had Eleanor been there to witness this blushing bride nonsense, she would have tilted her head and smiled her “Aren’t you cute?” smile. Then gone on to remind me that even though October wasn’t necessarily a rainy month, weather could be unpredictable. Did I have a backup plan in case it did rain? *She’d* had a tent on standby and even though she didn’t have to use it, the reservation cost her ten thousand dollars. Eleanor is bursting with neat little factoids like that.

I pushed my chair back. “I have to get back to work.”

Spencer was out of her chair in half a second. She stuck her hand out. “Thank you so much, TifAni, I mean”—she covered her mouth and her whole body tittered with a geisha giggle—“*Ani*. Sorry.”

Sometimes I feel like a windup doll, like I have to reach behind and turn my golden key to produce a greeting, a laugh, whatever the socially acceptable reaction should be. I managed a tight farewell smile for Spencer. She wouldn’t mistake my name again, not once the documentary aired, not once the camera narrowed in on my aching, honest face, gently dissolving any last confusion about who I am and what I did.

CHAPTER 2

I spent the summer between eighth and ninth grades listening to Mom rave about the Main Line. She said it was “*very* hoity-toity” and that I was really going to experience how the other half lives by going to high school there. I had never heard the word “hoity-toity” before but inferred what it meant based on the saucy dip Mom’s voice. It was that same throaty purr that the Bloomingdale’s saleswoman used to convince her to buy a cashmere scarf she couldn’t afford: “It looks *rich* on you.” “Rich.” The magic word. Dad did not agree when she came home later and rubbed it against his face.

I’d attended an all-girls Catholic school since kindergarten, in a town that was devoid of any Main Line aristocracy on account of the fact that it was shy of the border by about fifteen miles. I didn’t grow up in the slums or anything, my surroundings were just morbidly middle class, with plenty of gaudy neighbors who mistakenly considered themselves upper. I had no idea that was the case at the time, had no idea money could show its age, and that old and worn was always superior. I thought wealth was shiny red BMWs (leased) and five-bedroom McMansions (mortgaged three times). Not that we were even fake rich enough to live in the five-bedroom travesties.

My real education started on the morning of September 2, 2001, my first day of freshman year at The Bradley School in Bryn Mawr, PA. I have marijuana (or “grass,” if you want to embarrass me like my father) to thank for landing me at the mouth of the old mansion that served as the English and Humanities wing of Bradley, swiping my sweaty palms on my orange Abercrombie & Fitch cargo pants. If I’d just said no to drugs I’d have been storming the quad of Mt. St. Theresa’s upper school, my scratchy blue kilt catching between my thighs, tawny from a summer spent marinating in Hawaiian Tropic oil, day one of my mediocre young adult life that would never pan out to be anything more than a Facebook cliché. My existence defined in successive photo albums documenting my engagement weekend in Atlantic City, vanilla church wedding, and artfully arranged naked newborn.

What happened was this: My friends and I decided it was time to try pot at the beginning of eighth grade, the four of us climbing onto my best friend Leah’s roof from her bedroom window, passing a soggy joint between our Bonne Bell-slicked lips. The terrifying awareness it brought to every limb—even my toenails!—was so acute I started to hyperventilate and cry.

“Something isn’t right,” I half-gasped, half-laughed to Leah, who tried to calm me down but ultimately succumbed to a maniacal fit of laughter.

Leah’s mother came to investigate the commotion. She called Mom at midnight and said in a dramatic whisper, “The girls got into something.”

I’d had a Marilyn Monroe body since the fifth grade, and the parents had no problem believing I was the mastermind of our Catholic schoolgirl drug ring. I just looked like trouble. In one week, I went from being the queen bee of our small, forty-girl class to an annoying little fly trying to avoid being squashed. Even the girl who stuck French fries up her nose before eating them wouldn’t stoop so low as to sit with me at lunch.

Word traveled to the administration. Mom and Dad were called in for a meeting with the principal, an og

of a woman named Sister John, who suggested I seek an alternative school to continue my education. Mom harrumphed the whole car ride home, finally arriving at the conclusion that she would send me to one of the exclusive private schools on the Main Line, which would give me a better shot of getting into an Ivy League which would give me a better shot of marrying into some real money. "That'll show them," she announced triumphantly, her hands choking the steering wheel like it was Sister John's wrestler's neck. I'd waited a beat before daring to ask, "Are there boys on the Main Line?"

Later that week, Mom came and picked me up early from Mt. St. Theresa's, driving us forty-five minutes to The Bradley School, a coed, private, nondenominational institution located in the bowels of the lush, ivy-covered Main Line. The admissions director made sure to mention, *twice*, that J. D. Salinger's first wife had attended The Bradley School in the early 1900s, back when it was an all-girls boarding school. I stored that fun fact away and trotted it out for interviews with prospective employers and parents-in-law. "Oh yes, I attended The Bradley School—did you know J. D. Salinger's first wife went there?" It's okay to be insufferable as long as you're aware that you're being insufferable. At least that's how I justified it to myself.

After the tour, I had to take the entrance exam. I was seated at the head of a regal table in a formal, cavernous dining room located in a wing off the cafeteria. The bronze plate above the doorframe declared it THE BRENNER BAULKIN ROOM. I couldn't understand how anyone in the English-speaking world could be named Brenner.

I don't remember much of the exam, except the part where I had to write a description of an object without ever explicitly identifying the object. I went with my cat, and ended the passage with her diving off our back porch to her bloodied, mangled death. Bradley's boner for J. D. Salinger made me think they had a thing for tortured writers, and I was right. A few weeks later, we got word that my financial aid was approved and that I would be matriculating with The Bradley Class of 2005.

"Are you nervous, sweetheart?" Mom asked.

"No," I lied out the window. I didn't understand why she had made such a fuss about the Main Line. To my fourteen-year-old eyes, the houses didn't look nearly as impressive as the pink stucco monstrosity Leah lived in. Taste, I had yet to learn, was the delicate balance between expensive and unassuming.

"You're going to do great." Mom squeezed my knee, the goop on her lips catching white sunlight when she smiled.

A row of girls, four deep, marched by our BMW, their backpacks firmly secured to their slight shoulders with both straps, thick ponytails bobbing like blond plumes on Spartan helmets.

"Mom, I know." I rolled my eyes, more for myself than at her. I was dangerously close to crying, to curling up in her arms while she ran her long pointy nails up and down my forearm until I had goose bumps. "Tickle my arm!" I used to beg when I was little, snuggling up to her on the couch.

"You're going to be late!" She planted a kiss on my cheek that left a sticky coating of lip gloss. In return, she got a sullen, new teenager "Good-bye." That morning, thirty-five steps from the front door of school, I was still only in rehearsals for the role.

First period was homeroom, and like a huge dork I was excited by this. My middle school didn't have bells and different teachers for different classes. There were forty girls per grade, divided into two classrooms, and in the classroom you were taught math, social studies, science, religion, and English by the same teacher all year long, and if you were lucky, you got the one who wasn't the nun (I was never lucky). The idea of a school where a bell rang every forty-one minutes, prompting you on to the next classroom, with a new teacher, and a new concentration of students, made me feel like I was a guest star on *Saved by the Bell* or something.

But the most exciting part of that first morning was English. Honors English, another distinction my school never made, in which I had secured a spot thanks to that brilliant 150-word description of my cat's tragic

demise. I couldn't wait to take notes in the bright green pen I'd bought at the school store. Mt. St. Theresa made us write in pencil like babies, but Bradley didn't care what you wrote in. Didn't care if you took notes at all as long as you kept your grades up. Bradley's school colors were green and white, and I bought a pen the same shade as the basketball jerseys to display my new allegiance.

Honors English was a small class, only twelve students, and instead of desks, we got to sit at three long tables, pushed together to form the shape of a bracket. The teacher, Mr. Larson, was someone Mom would dismiss as "hefty," but those twenty extra pounds had resulted in a kind, full face: squinty eyes, a slight arch to his upper lip that made him look like he was remembering some hilarious crack one of his buddies had made to him the night before over lukewarm Bud Lights. He wore faded pastel button-downs and had the kind of floppy, light brown hair that assured us it wasn't too long ago that he was a prep school kid just like us and he'd totally got it. My fourteen-year-old loins approved. All the fourteen-year-old loins approved.

Mr. Larson sat a lot, usually with his legs stretched out in front of him, frequently reaching one hand behind his head and resting his skull against it, while asking, "And why do you think Holden identifies with the catcher in the rye?"

That first day Mr. Larson made us all go around the room and say one cool thing that we'd done that summer. I felt confident Mr. Larson had designed this exercise for my benefit—most of the other kids, "Lifers," had been funneled from the Bradley middle school, and had probably spent the summer hanging out together. But no one knew what the new kid had been up to, and even though it just tanning on my back porch, watching soap operas through the window like a sweaty, friendless loser, they didn't need to know that. When it was my turn, I told everyone I'd gone to the Pearl Jam concert on August 23, which hadn't happened but also wasn't a fabrication I'd created out of thin air. Leah's mom had reserved tickets for us back before the whole pot fiasco before she finally had definitive proof that I was the bad influence she'd long suspected I was. But there was a whole ocean between Leah and these new people, and I had some new friends to impress, so I lied and I'm glad I did. My one cool thing I did that summer invited several approving nods and even an actual "Cool" from some guy named Tanner, which I was surprised to learn was not just a goal I set for my skin that summer but also a name.

After that game was over, Mr. Larson wanted to talk about *The Catcher in the Rye*, which had been assigned as summer reading. I sat up straighter in my seat. I'd torn through the book in two days on my back porch, my thumbs leaving humid half-moon imprints on every page. Mom asked me what I thought about it, and when I told her I thought it was hilarious, she cocked her head at me and said, "Tif, he has a serious mental breakdown." This revelation shocked me so much that I reread the book, deeply concerned that this crucial element of the story had escaped me. For a moment I worried that I wasn't the literary whiz I fancied myself, but then I reminded myself how Mt. St. Theresa's eschewed literature in favor of grammar (less sex and sin in grammar), and so it wasn't really my fault that my observations weren't as sharp as they could be. I'd get there.

The boy closest to the marker board groaned. His name was Arthur, and that summer the coolest thing he'd done was take a tour of the *New York Times* office, which, based on the reactions of the classroom, wasn't as cool as seeing Pearl Jam in concert but also not as bad as seeing *The Phantom of the Opera* at the Kimmel Center. Even I understood it's not impressive unless it's on Broadway.

"You enjoyed it that much, did you?" Mr. Larson quipped, and the classroom tittered.

Arthur was close to three hundred pounds, and acne framed his face like parentheses. His hair was so greasy that when he pushed his hands through it, it stayed, an oily arc from his hairline to the crown of his head. "Could Holden be any less self-aware? Here he is, calling everyone a phony, when he's the biggest phony of them all."

"You bring up an interesting point," Mr. Larson said encouragingly. "Is Holden a reliable narrator?"

The bell rang before anyone could answer, and over Mr. Larson's instructions to read the first two chapters of *Into Thin Air*, which we would discuss later in the week, everyone swept notebooks and pencils into their book bags before storming out in a rush of Steve Madden clogs and peach-fuzz-covered legs. I didn't understand how everyone got out the door so quickly. It was the first time I noticed it, but once I did, I noticed it for the rest of my life: I was slow. What comes effortlessly to others doesn't for me.

When I realized I was alone with Mr. Larson my cheeks blushed underneath the Cover Girl Mom said I needed and I assumed the other girls would be wearing. They weren't.

"You're joining us from St. Theresa's, am I right?" Mr. Larson hunched over his desk, shuffled through some papers.

"Mt. St. Theresa's." I finally managed to zip my book bag.

Mr. Larson looked up from his desk, and the crease in his lip deepened. "Right. Well, the book report you did was very good. Very thorough."

Even though I would lie in bed later, replaying this moment over and over until I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists to keep from spontaneously combusting, all I wanted to do was get out of there. I've never known the right thing to say, and my face probably looked like my Irish aunt's when she has too much red wine and starts stroking my hair and telling me how much she wishes she had a daughter. "Thanks."

Mr. Larson smiled and his eyes disappeared. "Happy to have you in my class."

"Uh-huh, see you tomorrow!" I started to give a wave and changed my mind halfway through. I probably looked like I had some kind of Tourette's tic. I'd learned about Tourette's on a sick day, watching an episode of the *Sally Jessy Raphael* show.

Mr. Larson gave me a small wave back.

There was a broken desk a few steps outside of Mr. Larson's classroom, and Arthur had his book bag propped up on it. He was rummaging around in there but looked up as I approached.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi."

"My glasses," he said by way of explanation.

"Oh." I slid my hands underneath the straps of my book bag and gripped tightly.

"Do you have lunch now?" he asked.

I nodded. But I'd planned on spending it in the library. I couldn't imagine anything worse than that moment after paying for my food, looking around the room at the expanse of nameless faces and being forced to sit down where I wasn't wanted because you weren't allowed to bring food outside the cafeteria. There was so much to talk about on the first day of school, no one wanted to waste that precious gossip time by taking on the responsibility of making the new girl feel included. I got it, I would have been just as disinterested. I knew things would shift to the familiar eventually, that the curly redhead with soft blue veins in her forehead would become the girl with the highest IQ in class, who would apply early decision to Harvard and have the distinction of being the first Bradley student from the class of 2005 to be accepted. (Out of a class of seventy-one students there would be nine overall. *Main Line Magazine* hadn't determined Bradley an "exemplary" college preparatory option for nothing.) That the short, stocky soccer player with actual pecs would become the guy who had gotten a blow job from Lindsay "Biz" Hanes in his best friend's basement last summer while his best friend watched. These faces and identities would eventually come together for me, and I would eventually become someone to everyone else too, with anecdotal lore to explain why I sat with who I sat with, why my allegiance resided where they did. But until then, I preferred to maintain my dignity by getting a head start on my Spanish homework in the library.

“I’ll walk with you,” Arthur offered.

He slung his lumpy backpack over one shoulder and led the way, his swollen, pale calves brushing against each other as he plodded down the stairs. I knew what it was like to have your body betray you—I was on fourteen and I already looked like a college student who needed to lose the freshman fifteen. Teenage boys were stupid though, and because I had relatively skinny arms and legs and a chest that looked pornographic in my neck tees, they thought I had the perfect body. This despite the fact that underneath the clothes was a genetic mess that not even a prom dress-induced bout of anorexia could fix—a stomach that was rippled with fat, a belly button that winked like an Asian eye. It was the summer the tankini came into style, and never had I been more grateful for a piece of clothing in my life.

“Are you, like, in love with Mr. Larson like every other girl here?” Arthur grinned and pushed his glasses, which he’d found, higher on his shiny nose.

“My teachers were nuns before this. Can you blame me?”

“A Catholic girl,” Arthur said, solemnly. They didn’t get a whole lot of my kind around here. “Where?”

“Mt. St. Theresa Academy? I waited for his reaction, which I didn’t anticipate would be favorable. When his expression remained blank I added, “In Malvern?” Malvern was technically considered the start of the Main Line, but it was like the lowest tier of troops, shielding the generals and the captains in the cushy heart of the camp. The plebeians toeing its border prickled most storied Main Liners—Malvern wasn’t *really* a member of their dynasty.

Arthur made a face. “Malvern? That’s far. Is that where you live?”

And so started the years of explaining—no, I don’t actually live there. I live in Chester Springs, which is even farther out, crawling with commoners, and while there are beautiful old houses that would certainly be met with approval, I didn’t live in any of them.

“How far away is that?” Arthur asked after I finished my spiel.

“Like half an hour.” It was forty-five minutes, fifty some days, but this was another lie I learned to tell.

Arthur and I arrived at the entrance to the cafeteria and he gestured for me to go in first. “After you.”



I didn’t know who to be afraid of yet, so even though the cafeteria was packed and brimming with an energy that could have been interpreted as threatening, I was oblivious. I watched Arthur wave to someone and follow him when he said, “Come on.”

The cafeteria was the confluence where the old mansion and the new school met. The lunch tables were made of wood, a worn shade of espresso, chipped to reveal their sandy skeletons in places. The dark, matching floor ended at a large entryway, which opened up into a newly constructed atrium with skylights, terrazzo gleaming underfoot, and floor-to-ceiling windows that watched the quad, middle schoolers roaming the grass like cattle. The food was contained in a U-shaped room that welcomed students from the old mansion with a deli bar and spat you out into the new atrium, shortly past the bony arms of recovering anorexics reaching into the salad bar for broccoli and fat-free Italian dressing.

I followed Arthur, who stopped at a table by an antique fireplace. It looked like it hadn’t been used for years but its soot-stained mouth suggested that the former inhabitants had appreciated it. Arthur dumped his book bag into a chair across from a girl with big brown eyes set so far apart they were practically in her sideburns. Kids called her the Shark behind her back, but her unusual eyes were actually her best feature and the thing her husband would eventually love the most about her. She was wearing bulky khakis and a white cotton sweatshirt that gathered underneath her large breasts in a wrinkled pouch. She was flanked by another girl, chin in hand.

hands, her long brown hair spilling over her shoulders and pooling on the table around her elbows. She was pale ~~I was shocked by her short skirt, that she would put her white legs on display so brazenly.~~ Mom would have strapped me into a tanning bed before allowing me to go out with skin as blanché as that. It didn't seem to be working against her, though. The guy next to her wore a soccer jersey that seemed mandatory next to his wholesome good looks, and his hand rested on a quadrant of her lower back that only a boyfriend would touch.

"Yo," Arthur said. "This is TifAni. She went to Catholic school. Be nice to her, she's had it bad enough."

"Hi, TifAni!" the Shark said, brightly. She dragged a plastic spoon around the curves of an empty pudding cup, trying to scoop up any last remnants of chocolate goo.

"Hi."

Arthur pointed at the Shark. "Beth." Then the pale girl. "Sarah." Then her boyfriend. "Teddy."

An a cappella of hellos. I held up my hand and said hi again.

"Come on." Arthur tugged my sleeve. I hooked the strap of my book bag over the edge of a chair and approached the line forming at the deli. When it was Arthur's turn, he ordered a whopper of a sandwich, with roast beef and turkey, three different kinds of cheese, no tomatoes, just lettuce, and enough mayo that his lunch made a squishy sound every time he bit into it. I asked for cheese, mustard, and tomato on a spinach wrap (on the days when we thought a wrap had fewer calories than bread). Arthur tossed two bags of chips onto his tray, but I noticed that most of the girls weren't using, so I didn't either. I carried my wrap and my diet Snapple to the register and waited in line to pay.

"I like your pants." The compliment turned me around. A girl who was at once extremely bizarre looking and attractive nodded at my orange cargo pants, which I already couldn't wait to never wear again. She had strawberry blond hair that was so uniform in color it couldn't be natural, large brown eyes somehow devoid of eyelashes, and skin the color of a girl who had a pool in her backyard and no summer job. In her hot pink button-down and schoolgirl-style plaid skirt that most certainly broke the fingertips rule, she was dressed in a way that defied the androgynous prep style that seemed to be so dominant among Bradley girls, but she carried herself with the air of someone who ran the show.

"Thanks." I beamed.

"Are you new?" she asked. Her voice was husky, like the voiceovers in those commercials urging you to call 1-900-GIRLS now.

Off my nod she said, "I'm Hilary."

"I'm TifAni."

"Yo, Hilary!" The booming voice came from the center of the most esteemed table in the cafeteria, crowded by boys with hair on their legs—real hair, coarse and dark like my father's—and obedient girls to laugh when they accused each other of being any one of the following: pussy, 'tard, cocksucker.

"Yo, Dean!" Hilary met his call.

"Grab me some Swedish fish," he demanded. Without a tray, Hilary's hands were full. She tucked her Diet Coke underneath her chin and cradled a bag of pretzels in the crook of her elbow.

"I got it!" I was up at the register and I grabbed the sack of candy before she did, paying for it along with my wrap and drink over her protests.

"I won't forget that," she said, hooking her pinkie around the fish, somehow able to carry all of her purchases with just her hands now.

I caught up with Arthur, lingering a few feet away from the cash register. The encounter, Hilary's curiosity about me, had left my face flushed. Sometimes, a momentary truce in girlhood is much more precious than a guy you really like asking you out, sticking around even after he got the milk for free.

“I see you’ve met one half of the HOs.”

I looked back at Hilary tossing the bag of Swedish fish onto Dean’s lunch tray. Guys could use lunch tray

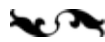
“Is she slutty?”

“It’s an acronym for Hilary and her best friend, Olivia. That one”—he nodded to a girl with curly brown hair laughing appreciatively as the Hairy Legs constructed a fortress out of empty French fry boats—“came up with it for their names. I don’t think they even know what an acronym is.” Arthur sighed, pleased by their ignorance. “Which just makes the whole thing even more brilliant.”

I may not have realized that Holden Caulfield was having a mental breakdown at first, but so help me God I knew what an acronym was.

“Are they really HOs?” I’d never heard of a girl willingly co-opting a word like that before. I’d been called slut once, the natural jump everyone makes when you have adult breasts by the time you’re twelve, and I wept on Mom’s lap for an hour.

“They wish they were.” The skin crinkled on the bridge of Arthur’s slick nose. “But they wouldn’t know what to do with a dick if it punched them in the face.”



After lunch I had Chemistry, one of my least favorite subjects but exciting nonetheless because the HOs were both in my class. That excitement quickly faded when the teacher told us to pair up for an experiment that would prove that Chemistry can be cool. I looked desperately to my right, but my neighbor was already twisting in his seat, signaling to someone he wanted to be his partner. It was the same situation on the left. Happy twosomes meandered to the back of the room, and this migration revealed a fellow straggler, a boy with light brown hair and eyes that were visibly blue even from across the room. He gave me a nod and raised his eyebrows, a silent request to be his partner even though that was the only option. I nodded back and we made our way to the stations behind the rows of desks.

“Oh good,” Mrs. Chambers said when she noticed the two of us standing next to each other, still a little unsure, “Liam and TifAni, take that last table by the window.”

“Like we had any other choice,” Liam muttered softly, so Mrs. Chambers wouldn’t hear. “Thanks for looking out for the new people.”

It took me a second to realize that he was also lumping himself into the “new people” category. I glanced at him. “You’re new here?”

He shrugged, as though he assumed it was obvious.

“I am too!” I whispered excitedly. I couldn’t believe my luck I’d ended up with him. New people are contractually obligated to look out for each other.

“I know.” He lifted one side of his mouth into a half smile and the afternoon light caught a dimple in his cheek. Frozen like that, he could have been a poster you tear out of *Tiger Beat*. “You’re too pretty to be the last one picked.”

I squeezed my thighs together, trying to smother the heat.

Mrs. Chambers started in on a lecture about safety that didn’t interest anyone until she mentioned that if we weren’t careful, we’d walk out of here with our hair and eyebrows singed right off. I looked over my shoulder at her, realizing when I did that Hilary was watching me with her large, lashless eyes, as though she had already suffered the fate that so concerned Mrs. Chambers. I had a split second to make a decision—look away and pretend I hadn’t caught her, or smile and have some kind of nonverbal exchange that could further endear me to her. The instinct that had garnered my fleeting popularity at Mt. St. Theresa’s kicked in and I chose the latter.

To my delight, Hilary smiled back and nudged Olivia, whispering something to her as she leaned in close. ~~Olivia smiled too and signaled to me. "He's hot," Olivia mouthed, stretching her lips widely around the word "hot" and giving the slightest of nods to Liam. I quickly glanced at him to make sure he wasn't looking at me. Olivia mouthed back, "I know."~~

My God, was I pleased with myself by the time the bell rang at 3:23 P.M. Only my first day, and I'd established a flirtation with the hot new guy, laid claim to him in a way that only our mutual newness could allow, and I'd bonded with the HOs. I felt like sending a flowery Hallmark card to that beast Sister John: "Dear Sister John, I'm doing so well at my new school and I found someone who I would like to take my virginity from. I only have you to thank!"

CHAPTER 3

Twenty-five, twenty-six—lift your chins!—twenty-eight—two more, make them your best!—twenty-nine, thirty.” I rocked back and rested my butt on my heels, stretching my arms out in front of me in a bid to elongate them after “running toward the burn,” the prodigal promise that I paid \$325 a month to hear. I probably would have that longer, leaner body, too, if only I wasn’t so desperate to get food into my mouth by the time I got home that sometimes I don’t even take off my coat before I start pillaging the kitchen.

“Take your weights back to the bin and set up at the bar for calf raises.” This is always the part of class that gives me the most anxiety—because I need to deposit my weights and get to my favorite spot at the bar quickly but politely, when all I want to do is elbow the slow movers out of my way. “I’m going to be on TV and I’m not here for my health, bitches!” I settle for the accidental bump, the one I typically reserve for the Singers. You know those people, just so fucking happy to be alive, bouncing down the street, buds in their ears and faces repulsive with pleasure as they belt out the lyrics to some noxious Motown classic. I’ve gotten bold, bumping them with my enormous bag as I pass by, savoring their outraged “Hey!” behind me. No one gets to be that happy.

I’m a little gentler in class. I wouldn’t want to alter the image the instructors have of me, one carefully crafted to impress and endear: the sweet but slightly standoffish girl who will always take the most advanced option on the thigh work portion of class, no matter how intensely her legs tremble.

Fortunately, by the time I dropped my weights in the bins and turned around, I saw that my favorite spot was wide open. I looped my towel around the bar, placed my water bottle on the ground, and bobbed up and down on the balls of my feet, all the while pulling my stomach back toward my spine and pinching my shoulder blades together.

The instructor said, “Nice form, Ani.”

For an hour, I tucked, sucked in, squeezed, lifted, and pulsed. By final stretch, my limbs felt like the pad of noodles I’m always craving, and I debated scrapping the two-mile run back to my apartment. But as I stood to return my mat to the cubbyhole in the front of the room, I caught a glimpse of myself in the front mirror, specifically of the roll bulging over the back of my tank top, and reconsidered.

In the locker room after class, some girl who had phoned in all three of the abdominal sets said to me, “Your abs were so good!”

“Sorry?” I had heard her, of course.

“During abs. That last position, I tried to let go of my legs and I couldn’t hold myself up for even one count.”

“Well, it’s the place I need it most so I push myself as hard as possible.” I patted my tummy, swollen against my extra-small Stella McCartney for Adidas yoga pants. Ever since wedding planning began, my binges had returned to their high-school-level intensity. For the last few years, I’d been able to contain them to Sunday and the occasional Wednesday night. Overexercising and restricting myself the rest of the week kept my weight steady at 120 pounds (willowy when you’re five ten, squat when you’re five three). My goal for the wedding was 110, and, most important, the documentary, was 105, and knowing what I was going to have to do—and soon—

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