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After the Silence

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My Lovely Wife

the
girls
are
all
so nice
here

Laurie Elizabeth Flynn

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The Girls Are All So Nice Here

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The Girls Are All So Nice Here / L. Flynn — «HarperCollins»,

‘Deliciously dark, full of simmering menace.’ KAREN HAMILTON ‘Twisted, compelling, devastating.’ SAMANTHA DOWNING ‘This is Mean Girls all grown up, with a very dark twist.’ ELLE CROFT ____ A darkly intoxicating novel of female friendship and obsession, perfect for fans of My Dark Vanessa, The Girls and The Virgin Suicides. ____ Nice girls can do bad things... When Ambrosia first arrives at prestigious college Wesleyan, she’s desperate to fit in. But Amb struggles to navigate the rules of this strange, elite world, filled with privileged ‘nice’ young women – until she meets the charismatic but troubled Sully, with whom she forms an obsessive friendship. Intoxicated by Sully’s charm and determined to impress her, Amb finds herself drawn deep into her new best friend’s dangerous manipulations. But if she wants to play Sully at her own game, Amb has no idea just how devastating the consequences will be... Deeply unsettling and compulsive, The Girls Are All So Nice Here is a gripping exploration of the brutal lengths girls will go to, to take what they think they are owed. ____

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Praise for *The Girls Are All So Nice Here*

‘Twisted, compelling, and so very dark. This devastating story about the friends we keep – and those we don’t – is surprising in the best possible way’ **Samantha Downing, *My Lovely Wife***

‘*The Girls Are All So Nice Here* is like *Mean Girls* meets *Luckiest Girl Alive*. Razor-sharp in its dissection of female friendship, this is a deliciously savage read’ **Louise O’Neill, *After the Silence***

‘Lays bare the darkness that pulses under the surface of toxic female friendships. Raw, visceral, unbearably tense, I raced through it with a knot in my stomach’ **Tammy Cohen, *Stop At Nothing***

‘A stand-out thriller with well-drawn and believable characters as well as a plot which keeps you turning the pages’ **Catherine Cooper, *The Chalet***

‘Smartly examines the darker complexities of friendship, ambition, and social dynamics in this propulsive thriller full of twists and surprises. I couldn’t stop reading until the shocking final twist!’ **Megan Miranda, *The Last House Guest***

‘I read open-mouthed as Amb navigated the complex social calculus of her worlds right up until that stinging kick of a final chapter left me breathless’ **Chandler Baker, *Whisper Network***

‘I LOVED it. It’s so deliciously dark, and I was completely hooked from the first page. And, of course, I’m still reeling from that ending!’ **Elle Croft, *The Guilty Wife***

‘Full of simmering menace, I totally fell under its compelling and addictive spell’ **Karen Hamilton, *The Perfect Girlfriend***

‘Dark and twisted, perfectly capturing the devastating cruelty teenage girls can inflict on one another when they themselves are fundamentally damaged’ **Nikki Smith, *All in Her Head***

‘Taut, compulsive and deliciously savage’ **Kia Abdullah, *Take It Back***

LAURIE ELIZABETH FLYNN was born in London, Ontario, Canada, where she resides currently with her husband, three children, and senior Chihuahua. She is the author of the young adult novels *Firsts*, *Last Girl Lied To* and *All Eyes On Her*. *The Girls Are All So Nice Here* is her debut adult novel.

the girls are all so nice here

Laurie Elizabeth Flynn



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

Copyright



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Dedication

For every girl who got what she wanted
at a cost she couldn't afford

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THEN

Together we ruled. Our realm unfurled, grassy campus and its tangle of parties. We marked the territory as our own, matchstick legs capped in sharp heels striking the ground, mouths witchy with lipstick and upturned with laughter. There were boys whose names I forgot, boys I might have passed by and not known were ever inside me. When I did pick out a king, the crown was too heavy for his head.

Then a fist closed around our world and knuckled out the light. We stood in front of the dorm with everyone else, taking in the same scene, a carnage that had started within us. Our ability to create waned in our instinct to ruin.

Her voice in my ear, never scared enough. *We have to stick to the same story.*

I wanted to run, but she wasn't done moving her pawns.

Our reign was short and bloody.

What came after it was worse.

Chapter 1

NOW

To: “Ambrosia Wellington” a.wellington@wesleyan.edu

From: “Wesleyan Alumni Committee” reunion.classof2007@gmail.com

Subject: Class of 2007 Reunion

Dear Ambrosia Wellington,

Mark Your Calendar!

The Wesleyan University Ten-Year Reunion for the Class of 2007 will take place May 25–28, 2017. Join us for a weekend of catching up with former classmates and attending exciting events, including the All-Campus Party and formal class dinners.

Online registration is available through May 1.

If you’re planning to attend, a full list of area hotels can be found on Wesleyan’s local accommodations page. A limited amount of on-campus housing in our dorms is available. Most rooms are doubles—perfect for reaching out to your old roommate to relive some memories!

Sincerely,

Your Alumni Committee

I delete it instantly, just like I do the sale emails from Sephora and Michael Kors and the reminders from Fertility Friend that ovulation is right around the corner. Then I empty my recycling bin, because I know better than to think anything is ever really gone.

Two weeks later, a second email arrives. *We haven’t received your RSVP! We really hope you’re joining us.* It’s the written equivalent of a wagging finger. I delete that one, too, but not before scrolling down far enough to see her name, bolded, right under the list of Alumni Committee members. Flora Banning.

I forget about the two emails, because out of sight really is out of mind. It’s easy when each day is a variation of the same—taking the N from Astoria to Midtown; stopping at Key Food for groceries, reusable cloth bags cutting into my forearms. Happy hour shouldered in with hipsters at the Ditty, a second glass of wine, despite Adrian’s half-teasing *Maybe you shouldn’t*. But then I come home from work on Friday, shoulders sagging from the weight of the week, and there’s an envelope on the counter addressed to me.

“Hey, babe,” Adrian shouts from his position on the couch, tablet in hand, where he’s undoubtedly working on his fantasy football league instead of the perpetually unfinished novel he likes to talk about. “How was your day?”

“You left the door open again. Can you please start locking it like I asked?” One of the myriad things I nag Adrian about on a regular basis. *Lock the door. Close the cereal bag. Pick up your dirty laundry.* Sometimes I feel more like a parent than his wife.

“Relax. It’s a safe building. Hey, something came for you. I think we got invited to a wedding. Except somebody doesn’t know you got married and changed your name.” My new last name, a point of male pride that Adrian pretended wasn’t important to him. *I don’t care, but do you really want the kids to have two last names? And yours is so long*, he said during wedding planning, the first puncture in my newly engaged bliss. *The kids*, a brightening certainty on his horizon, my concessions for them expected and inevitable.

The envelope on the counter is addressed to Ambrosia Wellington, in neat calligraphy. Not Ambrosia Turner, the woman I became three years ago when I walked down a tree-shaded aisle at the Mountain Lakes House toward Adrian, his eyes already tear filled. I let him think *Turner* was for us, for *the kids*. He has no idea why I was so eager to get rid of *Wellington*.

Adrian turns around to watch me open it, expectant. He loves weddings, or rather, he loves the receptions, where he can get drunk and pose for pictures with people he's just met, instant best friends, and invite them to dinners and barbecues we all know will never happen.

"Well, who is it?" he says. "Let me guess. Bethany from work. Is she still dating that really tall guy? Mark. The lacrosse player."

Adrian and his friends, five and six years younger than me, still post engagement photos on Facebook and Instagram: girls with long hair and Chanel espadrilles, gel manicures to show off pear-shaped rocks, posing next to boys in plaid shirts. The PR girls who work under me at Brighton Dame are the same.

So basic, we used to call them, back when there was no way we would turn into them.

"Bethany's twenty-two," I murmur when I pull the card out. I ignore Adrian's response, because I'm fixated on what's inside. It's not a wedding invitation. Nobody is requesting my presence at Gramercy Park or telling me the dress code is black tie or mandating an *adults-only reception*.

It's more calligraphy, red and black against cream card stock. Wesleyan colors. The letters tilt slightly to the right, as if whoever wrote them was in a rush to get them out.

You need to come. We need to talk about what we did that night.

There's no signature, but there doesn't need to be. It can only be from one person. My face is hot and I can tell my neck is marbling red and white, the same way it always does when my anxiety flares up. I grip the countertop. She knows I deleted the emails. I shouldn't be surprised; she had a way of knowing everything.

Adrian's voice interrupts my spiraling thoughts. "The suspense is killing me. It better be an open bar."

"It's not a wedding." I stuff the card back into its envelope, then shove it in my purse. Later, I'll put it in the place I hide everything Adrian can never see.

He puts down his tablet and stands up. Of course he chooses now to grow an attention span. "You okay? You look like you're going to puke."

I could shred the card, but I know what would happen. Another one will come in its place. She was insistent then. She's probably even more so now.

"It's nothing. Why don't we go up to the roof and have a drink?" The rooftop patio with its slices of Manhattan skyline, a feature of our building we thought we would use but rarely ever do.

He nods, curiosity temporarily assuaged, and arches across the counter to kiss my cheek.

I smile at my husband in relief, taking in his mop of curly hair, his dimples, and his pretty green eyes. *So freaking sexy*, my best friend, Billie, said when I showed her his photo. He looked exactly like his online dating profile, which is probably why I went home with him after our first date, the two of us reduced to sloppy mouths and hands in the back of a cab barreling down Broadway. I later learned that while his picture didn't lie—not like a dozen other men before him, all of whom were at least twenty pounds heavier than advertised—his life story did. Yes, he went to Florida State, but he never graduated, instead dropping out in his third year to work on the same novel he has yet to complete a chapter of. Nowhere in his bio did it say he was a bartender, the only consistent job he has ever had.

But I overlooked that because he treats me well, because people are drawn to him, because *I* was drawn to him, to his steady warmth and self-assuredness. He didn't know the person I was in college but loved the new embodiment of me so simply that I figured I couldn't be as horrible as everyone thought. I never imagined I would end up with someone five years younger, but being older has had its benefits. Our age gap is small enough that we look good together but big enough that his instincts are softer, more malleable. When I pushed the idea of a proposal because I was creeping into my late twenties, he took the hint and picked out a ring. Not the one I wanted, but it was close enough.

Adrian tries to make conversation as we head up to the roof, but the voice in my head is louder. Hers. *We need to talk about what we did that night.*

There were two different nights, and I'm not sure which one she means. The one that started everything or the one that ended it. She never wanted to talk about either. Then again, she was the best at breaking her own rules.

Chapter 2

THEN

I would be spending freshman year in the Butterfields, living in a double room on the first floor. Butterfield C was shaped almost like a question mark, hugging a courtyard where I pictured myself sitting with a book, wind lifting my hair. I had emailed with my future roommate a few times, but we'd never actually met. Her parents were helping her break a mini-fridge out of its cardboard jail when I first saw her, along with a younger girl who must have been her sister. I had just seen my own parents off—my mom would probably weep all the way back to Pennington, my dad placating her with promises that I'd be back. My older sister, Toni, had left for college at Rutgers two years before, but she was close enough that she still came home most weekends, bulging laundry bag in tow.

"This is your time, sweetie," Mom had said before she closed the car door, her lips on my cheek. "Enjoy it. But stay out of trouble." As if trouble were labeled with a Do Not Disturb sign. As if a sign would have kept me out.

I wished my best friend, Billie, were with me, but Billie hadn't gotten into Wesleyan. She was spending the next four years at Miami University in Ohio, which was known more for partying than anything else. Our friendship was comfortable—a bond forged in our awkwardness when we started ninth grade and our shared willingness to do something about it. Billie knew who I was and who I wanted to be, and she loved both versions. I had already texted her since arriving on campus. *I hope people like me. Her buoyant they will!!!* brought some comfort.

My new roommate's hair was white blond and her dress was gingham, like something I had been forced to wear as a kid to the Memorial Day parade. She didn't look like the girls I had gone to high school with, all of us in the same uniform of miniskirts and Uggs buttressing legs slathered in self-tanner. But she was exceptionally pretty—freshly scrubbed, wholesome. Billie probably would have given her a nickname. It was our meager defense against the mean girls at Hopewell Valley Central High. We studied them, then peeled them like overripe fruit in marathon gossip sessions to lessen the sting of not being invited to their parties. *My roomie is Heidi*, I'd text Billie.

Her real name was just as bad.

"I guess you already know from our emails, but I'm Flora." She gripped me in a hug. "It's nice to finally meet in person. You look just how I pictured. These are my parents, and this is my sister, Poppy." Poppy gave me a shy wave, all bangs and big blue eyes.

"Ambrosia," I said, more to them than her. "Just call me Amb." Flora didn't look how I'd pictured—she was a lot prettier. I knew from our emails that she was involved with student council at her Connecticut private school. She didn't smoke or drink and wanted to become a child psychologist. She wore her niceness so openly. She was exactly the kind of friend my parents wanted me to make. What Billie would call a *try-hard*.

"Amb," Flora's mom said, fixing me with a frosty stare. "Where are you from?"

"Pennington," I said. "New Jersey."

"That's nice," she said, but I could tell by her pinched mouth that it wasn't, that I had already committed some kind of wrong. "You take care of Flora. She tends to trust everyone too easily."

"Mom," Flora said, her cheeks turning petal pink. "Stop."

Flora's mom looked like she wanted to say more but pressed her mouth into a line. I rolled her words around. I didn't know if I had been folded into her confidence or warned not to be a person her daughter couldn't trust.

"We're going to have such a fun year," Flora said when her family was gone—she had squeezed her sister the hardest, whispered something in her ear I couldn't hear. "My mom is actually still best friends with her roommate from freshman year."

I felt a blip of excitement. It *was* going to be a fun year. I had worked hard to get here, to make things happen. To chisel out a Technicolor future, panoramic in scope, with me as its star.

“Your accent is so cute,” Flora said as she tacked photos to her corkboard.

“Thanks,” I managed, but I wasn’t thankful. She didn’t mean it as an insult—*probably*—but she had made me self-conscious about something I hadn’t considered noticeable before. What I said was as important as how I said it. I couldn’t be an actress—and I’d come to Wesleyan for the theater program—if I couldn’t escape Jersey.

As we unpacked, our door stayed open, and people from our floor lingered there, making introductions. I smiled, returned hugs, nodded forcefully to future invitations to parties. But inside, I trembled. Some of the girls seemed to be friends already, with easy laughter and inside jokes from Upper East Side private schools. Two model-thin blondes were from Los Angeles, thumbing their phones, laughing about some prom after-party at a club where a classmate screwed two guys in the bathroom.

These weren’t the girls I had gone to Central with, ones with Starbucks cups attached to their hands, who punctuated their vocabularies with *like* and *whatever* and one-upped each other with discussions about who’d made out with who at some shitty party in someone’s basement, boys sitting around in sweatpants holding video game controllers. I had copied their hip-hugging jeans, parted my hair like them, saved a year of paychecks from my part-time job at the Stop & Shop to buy a small Louis Vuitton bag—the same multicolor monogrammed one that lived on the bony shoulders of celebrity it-girls.

At Wesleyan, I was ready to slip effortlessly into the person I imagined I could be. But I realized that first day that *effortless* might not be in the cards. The girls here seemed casually beautiful in a way that felt unachievable, dewy and shiny without being overtly flashy.

There weren’t just girls. Our floor was coed, something I had been happy about. The boys were a blur of darting eyes and white smiles. They probably weren’t going to pick me, not when there was a better selection to choose from, a veritable buffet, girls served up all-you-can-eat, with long limbs and understated clothes. And boys were always hungry. I briefly pictured my high school boyfriend Matt, before willing the image away. I didn’t want to taint my first day with the memory of what he’d done.

“You should come with us to get lunch,” Flora said. “I’m heading over with some of the other girls. I hope there’s something I can eat—did I tell you I’m vegan? I saw this documentary when I was twelve about how animals in slaughterhouses are treated, and I cut out all meat and dairy right away. It’s really not that hard, if you’re willing to learn.”

She didn’t sound self-righteous, just matter-of-fact. I already knew she was a vegan from our emails. But I didn’t care about Flora’s diet. I was fixated on her knowledge that lunch was happening, the reality that a plan had been made without me. I had been here less than a day and was already failing.

We all ended up in Summerfields, the dining hall that topped Butterfield C like a blocky hat, a big group of us pushing tables together. Pathetically, I wanted to call my mom and tell her I’d made a mistake. I texted Billie instead. *Help. The people here are so different.*

She wrote back immediately, like she always did. *Isn’t that the point?*

A girl sat down beside me with a greasy grilled cheese sandwich, bringing with her a whiff of too-sweet perfume. Her hair looked like a Posh Spice imitation gone wrong. “I’m Ella Walden,” she said. “I’m just down the hall from you guys. How cool is this place?”

Somehow the shape of Ella next to me brought instant relief. She was pasty and chubby and unfashionable, the proof I needed that not everybody at Wesleyan was innately cool. I watched her eat the sandwich, both jealous of it and judgmental that she would eat something so calorie laden in public when she obviously had a few pounds to lose. I hated eating in front of anyone.

A loud *fuck* made my attention jerk up—it came from a girl at the head of our table, with wide eyes inside a tunnel of black eyeliner, a blond ponytail, and an oversized button-down that showed

her lace bra. Her eyebrows, thick and dark, moved up and down animatedly as she talked, a stark contrast to the maniacally tweezed arches that marked the girls from my senior class. I tuned out Ella and studied those eyebrows, how they guarded her whole face, a face that instantly held everybody's attention.

"Then Buddy was like, 'Please don't leave, I'll do anything for you,'" she said, her voice throaty and deep. "And I said, 'That's the problem,' and left." Everybody laughed. I wondered if they all knew who Buddy was.

"You're pretty," she said to the stylish Asian girl next to her—Clara, I vaguely recalled, my memory already riddled with too many names. "You should definitely be single here." Her fingers trailed down Clara's arm. I wanted it to be my turn, for her to land on me.

And then, like she could read my mind, it was. "Who are you? Where are you from?" she said, spotlighting me with an intense green gaze.

"I'm Ambrosia. From Pennington. In New Jersey."

She opened her mouth to say something, but Ella spoke first. "Pennington! No way. I'm from Morristown. We're practically neighbors. We should look at yearbooks later. I bet we have friends in common."

I bit my lip hard, wishing I hadn't said *Pennington* and wishing Ella didn't exist. The girl at the head of the table wasn't even looking at me anymore. She had moved on to a boy beside her, sweeping an arm over his shoulder.

"That's my roommate. She has zero attention span," said the girl on my other side, a freckled brunette named Lauren whose room was next to ours. "We went to Spence together. She's insane."

I wanted to know what she meant by *insane*. "What's her name?" I asked, but my question went unanswered. Lauren was already talking to someone else about where to get decent weed on campus. The only person who wanted to talk to me was Ella. Between mouthfuls of food, she told me about her senior prom and her cat named Freddy as I feigned interest. It would have been easy to fall into a groove with her, to flesh out our similar backgrounds. But I didn't want to go back to where I came from.

When Lauren's *insane* roommate got up and left, followed by Clara and a couple of the guys, I swallowed my disappointment. I wanted to be part of that group. I stared at the can of Diet Coke in front of me as Gemma from Saint Ann's whined to Flora about her boyfriend at Yale and how much she missed him.

"I know it's hard," Flora said. "But he misses you too. Look at you. How could he not?"

It wasn't even what she said but how she said it. So genuinely *nice*. My spine prickled. Flora, in her babyish Mary Janes and high collar, was fitting in better than I did. She knew how to be herself—it seemed like everyone did. I only knew how to imitate other people.

Lauren surveyed Flora with interest. I was sure she would tear into her later with her roommate. But when the group broke apart, Flora gave her a hug. At first, Lauren stiffened, but Flora said something I couldn't hear—something that made Lauren's bored expression curve into a smile.

Later, when we were back in our room, I hung up dresses I realized were tacky and cheap as Flora unpacked photos of high school friends and her boyfriend, cheeks obscured by acne, even in grainy black and white.

"This is Kevin," she said, holding a photo close enough to kiss it. "He goes to Dartmouth. Second year."

"He's cute," I said, even though it was a horrible picture and he really wasn't.

"He's the best. I'm sure you'll meet him. He said he'd come to visit me all the time, when he can get away from school. It's not all that far. Less than three hours."

I imagined he had already cheated on her and she just didn't know it yet. Boys made us idiots. My mom seemed certain that I would find "someone special" at college, the same way Toni had met

her boyfriend at Rutgers: Scott, with his impeccable manners, *such a good guy*. But the idea of a storybook college romance just seemed unattainable.

“What about you?” Flora continued. “You have a boyfriend, right?”

I stared at the photos I had deemed good enough to occupy the space on my corkboard. There was one of me and Matt, his easy smile and the slug of his arm across my shoulders. I resented the fact that Flora assumed I had a boyfriend as some kind of certainty. I almost wanted to tell her the whole ugly story but decided against it.

“No,” I settled on. “There was a guy, but it’s complicated.”

“Complicated,” she echoed, as if she didn’t understand the word.

I had lost my virginity to Matt the summer before senior year. Billie had already given hers up and I wanted it gone, my stupid hymen, the arbitrary line drawn between girls who’d had a penis inside them and girls who hadn’t. But the decision to have sex was about more than that. At the time, I honestly thought Matt would be not only my first but my last. *It’s always going to be us*, he had said, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist at a school dance, my face hidden in his neck.

“You’re so lucky,” Billie used to whine. “He’s, like, too good to be real.”

But he was real, and he was mine. He was in my junior-year drama class and later claimed that he took the class just to ask me out—*I’ve seen all of your plays. You’re so talented*. I let myself thaw and trust him when he picked me up for our first date, brandishing flowers for me and a handshake for my dad. His fingers, when they veered under my clothes, were gentle, his voice questioning. The boys Billie and I had previously orbited around didn’t know we existed unless they were drunk and wanted something. I wasn’t used to being treated well because I didn’t even know what it felt like to be noticed.

I knew other girls wanted Matt, but he never even looked at them. He only saw me. After his basketball games, which Billie and I diligently attended in our Central colors, it was me he swept into a sweaty hug, me he kissed at parties in front of everyone. *Forever*, he liked to say when we were in his bed after school, fan whirring lazily overhead. *You’re my forever*.

I had no reason not to believe him.

“I ended things,” I told Flora, savoring the surge of power that accompanied the lie.

“Well, I’m sure there’s somebody better for you here.” She grabbed my hands. “Can I paint your nails like mine? Then we can match for the party tonight.” Hers were cardinal red and black, Wesleyan pride already.

I was embarrassed by my nails. They were never the same length, rarely ever painted, and when I did take the time to do them, I always picked the polish off. But Flora was reaching for a pink nail file, so I let her knead my fingers between hers and watched her work. When she was done, she helped me choose an outfit—a low-cut blue dress from Forever 21, wedge heels handed down from Toni.

“Are you sure I look okay?” I asked. I felt cheap and greasy, my hair too brassy, my skin fake-baked. Worst of all, I felt average.

“You’re beautiful,” Flora reassured me. “That dress makes your eyes pop.” Her words provided the smallest bit of warmth.

The party that night was in Butterfield A, in a double belonging to girls with fake IDs, which I soon learned most people already had. I spent most of the night with my back against a wall drinking vodka Sprite from a paper cup, watching girls take their turns retreating to a corner to dip their heads over a locker mirror, where I glimpsed neat lines of cocaine. I was too afraid to try it, and nobody offered anyway. The only drug I had tried in high school was weed, and all it did was calcify my paranoia that people were talking about me into a too-tight exoskeleton.

I saw Gemma from lunch flitting around the room in jeans and a white T-shirt that offset her peachy tan, simple but stunning. I suddenly felt ridiculous, sausaged into my dress, my makeup heavy-handed. Gemma’s eyes met mine just for a second before landing on my colorful little LV. Eyebrows raised, she turned away from me toward Clara and her nondescript brown bag. My purse

was a misstep. The girls here didn't flaunt their labels like status symbols. What had reigned at Central was all wrong now.

Flora left early after sipping from the same water bottle all night. "Kevin is calling me at ten. Want me to come back and get you after?"

"I'll be fine, but thanks," I said. I didn't want to be the drunk girl she cleaned up after.

Lauren and her roommate showed up when Flora left—fashionably late, except only Lauren was fashionable. Her roommate, the *insane* one, was wearing boxers and a ribbed tank top, no bra, as if she had just woken up. I downed another drink as she beelined for the cocaine, then started dancing in the middle of the room, grabbing a boy by his shirt. I saw the way she pulled back just a bit when he tried to kiss her, and noticed how she tilted her head, pushing her hair back to show her neck, grinding her hips into his crotch. His face grew more pained as hers got more playful, and the shriek of her hyena laugh was the loudest sound in the room.

I watched him go from wanting her to *needing* her. It was a transaction, her sucking power from him like a vampire. It was performance art. She had done this before, owned boys. When she finally let him kiss her, it was because she had already drained from him whatever she needed.

She pulled away from his urgent mouth long enough to look directly at me and wink. I smiled, then immediately hated myself for it. She had noticed me staring and would tell everyone how creepy I was.

I fixed my eyes on the ground just in time for someone to spill a drink on my purse. "Sorry," the guy said without even looking up at me. I felt myself deflate.

I unzipped the dripping purse and slipped my phone out. Then I left the purse on the floor, slumped beside the wall. I wouldn't need it anymore. Billie would be horrified, but Billie wasn't here and wouldn't understand.

When I stood back up, I realized how drunk I was. I shuffled over to Lauren and Gemma, hoping to gain entry to their conversation, but they either didn't notice me or didn't want to. I bobbed to an invisible beat and pretended not to care.

"She already fucked his friend," Lauren said. "It's some kind of game."

A shiver ran up my arms. I didn't know the rules, but I wanted to play too. A scan of the room told me what I already knew. Lauren's roommate was gone.

Whoever was in charge of housing assignments had gotten it all wrong, because that girl should have been my roommate. Whoever had matched me with Flora instead would be to blame when Butterfield C became Dorm Doom.

Chapter 3

NOW

To: “Ambrosia Wellington” a.wellington@wesleyan.edu

From: “Wesleyan Alumni Committee” reunion.classof2007@gmail.com

Subject: Class of 2007 Reunion

Dear Ambrosia Wellington,

Your ten-year reunion is less than a month away! There’s probably somebody you’ve been meaning to connect with—now is the perfect time to reach out. If you haven’t joined our Class of 2007 Facebook group, we encourage you to hop online and log in. You might be surprised by who you find.

Sincerely,

Your Alumni Committee

I don’t tell anybody about the reunion. Not my mom when she calls to ask if Adrian and I are coming up for Pennington Day, or Toni when she texts me photos of Layla, my two-year-old niece. Not even Billie, whom I message about everything—Billie, who knows more about me than anyone else in my life. She would encourage me to go. But she doesn’t understand. Her past hasn’t yielded casualties.

Hadley and Heather, the only girls from Wesleyan I keep in touch with, ask me in our group chat if I’m going, and I tell them I have something else planned for that weekend. *Boo*, Hadley says. *Justin will be sad without Adrian to talk to*. I check the mail in our building every day to snatch any potential notes before Adrian has a chance to see them. Adrian doesn’t ask many questions, but when he gets curious, his need for answers rivals that of a six-year-old. *Why. Why. Why*. It’s not even the insistence that I hate most. It’s his simplicity, the very quality that I was once drawn to. His belief that there’s a solution to every problem.

No more notes arrive, and I honestly think I got away with it. Then the past finds me in the last place I expect it. At the Skylark, where Adrian occasionally meets me after I’m done with work, making his rare pilgrimage away from the soft shell of Astoria and its craft beer. The Skylark is my favorite Midtown bar, my own glittering nest on top of New York. We’re sipping our drinks—a martini for me, *just one*, Adrian likes to say, *just in case*—when Tara Rollins appears at our table. Tara from Wesleyan, who was assistant editor for the *Argus* and now works in book publishing.

“Ambrosia!” she squeals. I haven’t seen her since Heather’s bachelorette party—a boozy weekend on the beach in Sag Harbor where Tara tearfully admitted to cheating on her husband with a fellow editor—but here she is, and already, Adrian is standing up and pumping her hand with embarrassing vigor.

“Look at you. You look great! Please tell me you’re going. It wouldn’t be the same without you.” As if we were ever anything beyond party acquaintances.

“Going where?” Adrian says.

Tara laughs. “The reunion, of course. You’re coming too, aren’t you? My husband wouldn’t miss it.”

I gulp my drink, smile intact as vodka burns my throat. *Your husband misses a lot*.

“Reunion?” Adrian makes the word an open wound. I stare at his tanned forearms, the brush of dark hair creeping up to the sleeves of his plaid shirt. “I didn’t know—”

“I just haven’t had a chance to talk to you yet,” I say, sparing him the humiliation. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I don’t actually want to go.”

Tara knows why but plays dumb. “Of course you want to go. *Everyone* will be there.”

“It’s our anniversary weekend,” I explain. “We’ll be doing something special to celebrate. Three years.” Now is one of those times I wish I had a bigger ring to flash.

“No way,” Adrian says. “We can’t miss your reunion. We can do our anniversary anytime. It’s just pizza on the patio anyway.” He smiles up at Tara, all little-boy charm, as if she’s going to be impressed with our low-key date night.

“Exactly,” Tara says. They start talking like I’m not even there. It takes less than a minute for Adrian to mention his novel and less than two for Tara to mention Butterfield C. Anger surges through me. I want to protect Adrian, not just from the truth but from Tara’s inevitable judgment of him, of us.

“I got pretty wild back then,” she says with a laugh. My eyes search the room for a waiter who can bring me a second martini. “But of course, not as wild as Amb.”

“You must have the wrong girl,” he says, reaching for my wrist. “This one kept her head down and studied.”

I can’t look at Tara because I know what I’ll see there. *She kept her head down, all right.* She’s a time bomb, and I need to get rid of her before she detonates.

“Fine,” I say, fingers closing so tightly around my glass that I picture it shattering. “We’ll go.”

It’s only once I say those words out loud that the truth hits me.

I do need to go. Not for Tara, not for anyone else, but for *her*. Because maybe she knows something that will absolve us. I keep picturing her wherever she is, taking the time to write such careful calligraphy—so unlike her; she was always in a rush. But she summoned me for a reason, and I need to know what it is.

I said *We’ll go*, but I didn’t mean *we*. I rack my brain, scour the Internet for reasons to leave Adrian behind. Maybe this will help our marriage. I can face the past, shed my dead skin, and come back with some of the gratitude I used to feel for my husband instead.

I find a weekend writing workshop offered at NYU, excitedly presenting it to him as a great opportunity to take his *craft* seriously. “Consider it my anniversary gift. Just imagine how much writing you’ll get done,” I gush. He’s almost ready to enroll when he notices the date.

“Not this time,” he says. “There’ll be another one. Hey, should I get a suit for your reunion?”

A message comes in from Hadley. *Are you guys signing up to stay in the dorms?*

I imagine it. Adrian beside me, holding hands on Foss Hill. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad. We see Hadley and Heather and their husbands every couple months for dinner and drinks, and the boys retreat so deep into their conversations about sports and action movies that they forget we’re even there. Hadley and Heather know that I haven’t told Adrian about Dorm Doom—at my engagement party, I said I didn’t want to taint what Adrian and I had with all those awful rumors, and they gave me sympathetic hugs and promises of *It’s not our business, we’d never say anything*. I could get through a weekend at Wesleyan. *We* could.

I let the idea marinate, cautiously. Adrian brings it up again when we’re out for dinner with Billie and her husband, Ryan, in Brooklyn. We’ve been making that hour-long commute from Astoria with decreasing frequency, and they never come to us because of *the kids*. He grabs my hand when we sit down, a small gesture that makes us a team, the way married people are supposed to be.

“Amb’s reunion is going to be sweet,” he says through a mouthful of steak after our main courses arrive. “Ten years. Makes me wish I had graduated.”

“Reunion?” Billie says. I take a swig of wine, the second glass Adrian didn’t want me to order. I can feel her eyes on me, the hurt there that I didn’t tell her myself. “Wait. For Wesleyan? And you’re going?”

“Yes,” I say quickly. “I thought I told you about it.”

“You didn’t,” Billie says. “You must have forgotten.”

She knows I didn’t forget. I picture the blue glow of Billie’s face at the Hamilton Manor when we were drunk at Central’s senior prom, her cold hand wiping tears from my cheeks. *Matt’s here. With her. Don’t look. Fuck them, it will always be us.*

I grapple for something else to talk about. “Your last post was so cute. The girls are starting to look so much like you.”

Her pinched expression relaxes, but I'm not off the hook. She'll message me later tonight, wanting me to *spill*, like I'm a drink teetering on the edge. "Oh, yeah. I had to bribe Sawyer with cookie dough to get her to sit still. I'm mother of the year, didn't you know?"

Billie hasn't technically worked since Ryan got promoted to some kind of private banking job in the Financial District and she had Beckett. But she calls herself an "influencer." Her online persona—a blog called GurlMom that turned into an Instagram account with a following of nearly thirty thousand—is nothing like her real self. She's a paragon of the #2under2 contingent, moms who wear their babies like clingy purses over skintight yoga pants. They worship Billie and the state of blush-pink staged flawlessness she embodies.

I don't have Instagram for that reason. Because I don't want to cultivate a #nofilter life, a pastiche of fake smiles. I learned at Wesleyan that people don't envy the girls who are the smartest and prettiest. They envy the ones who are smart and pretty without trying. Unlike Billie's, my attempt at effortlessness played out live. There was no delete button, no way to undo.

"I remember my five-year reunion," says Ryan. I hate him for bringing the conversation back around. "We stayed in the dorms and got shitfaced. I was planning to hook up with this girl I used to be obsessed with, except I barely recognized her under the bad plastic surgery."

"My dorm room was awesome," Adrian says. "It used to feel like a palace to me."

The palace of pussy and weed. Adrian fully copped to being a slut in college. He even told me his wake-up call was when chlamydia sent him running to the campus nurse, fearful his dick would fall off from overuse. It's one of his many anecdotes, which never failed to entertain me when we were dating, even when I suspected some weren't entirely true. Adrian is a bartender. He's used to listening to other people's stories. It's only natural that he tries to pass some of them off as his own.

"The dorms were full when I called," I say. "I already booked us a hotel." Not one of the ones recommended in the email, but one farther away from the school, outside of Middletown, a more expensive Uber ride.

"Bummer," Adrian says at the same time Billie says, defensively, "Can you blame her for not wanting to stay there?"

"What do you mean?" Adrian asks after a silence that lasts too long.

"Amb's roommate—" Billie starts.

I cut her off. "My old roommates are going, too. Hadley and Heather. It'll be great. Is anyone getting dessert?"

Billie purses her lips. She is very aware that I haven't told Adrian about my other roommate, so I don't know where she's trying to take the conversation. Her forehead would be furrowed if it weren't for her recent Botox injections.

I'm afraid of what Billie will bring up next, but then her cell phone chirps and her attention is diverted. "Fuck. It's my mom. She says Beckett's refusing to sleep." She drains the last of her wine. "I guess that's our cue to leave." Ryan waves the waiter over, scribbling in the air with his index finger and thumb pressed together.

The waiter is mercifully fast. Billie's on the phone with Beckett, telling her, "Mommy and Daddy will be home soon, go to bed for Nana, sweetie." I chug the rest of my drink, and that's when I see her. It's not actually her, though. It never is. Deep down, I know this, and yet I keep seeing her, in different places.

In a summer dress with tights, a slick of lipstick when she wants to feel fancy. She watches me on my commute to work, fish-belly-white hands pressed against smudged train windows, getting off with me at Bryant Park. She's holding an iced coffee in the lobby of my office building, watching me take the elevator to the twenty-fourth floor, where the hive of Brighton Dame buzzes, where I complete my transformation to basic PR bitch. Her glare, the moment our eyes meet, splits my skull. The question she wants to ask. *Why?*

The therapist my parents made me see the summer after freshman year told me something I never forgot. “You went through a trauma,” she said, a string of words she was paid generously to dole out. “You wish there was more you could have done. But maybe you’re scared to let things go because you aren’t sure what to hold on to otherwise.”

Secretly I was impressed that she had dug all that insight out of my silences and nods. The truth wasn’t that I held on to things. It was that I clutched them in a death grip.

I wish I had done a lot more, I told her. It was what she expected to hear. The reality is that I wish I had done so much less.

“Amb,” Billie says, smoothing the lace skirt puckering around her thighs. “Call me later. We should talk.”

When we hug goodbye, the girl is coming out of the ladies’ room, still staring at me, silently judgmental. She hates my lipstick. She doesn’t think red is my color. And she’s right. It’s forever hers.

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