

The background of the entire image is a photograph of yellow school lockers. The lockers are arranged in a row, with metal frames visible between them. The surface of the lockers is covered in numerous red blood splatters of various sizes, creating a chilling and violent atmosphere. At the top of each locker door, there is a white rectangular vent with horizontal slats.

L G THE A S I R T L

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A DANGEROUS GAME.

**WHAT WOULD YOU
DO TO SURVIVE?**

GOLDY MOLDAVSKY

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The Last Girl

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Scream meets Gossip Girl with a dash of One of Us is Lying! When new girl Rachel Chavez joins an elite high school in NYC, she's hoping to put a past tragedy behind her. A fresh start where nobody knows what happened to her, or what she did. But then Rachel stumbles across the Mary Shelley club. The purpose of the club is simple: to see who can come up with the best Fear Test, terrifying a chosen victim. Despite the twisted nature of the club, Rachel starts to feel at home – she's beginning to think she's found her place. But then a sinister masked figure appears. As Rachel realises that her past has caught up with her, it's time for the ultimate prank to play out...

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THE
LAST
GIRL

GOLDY MOLDAVSKY



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For my sister, Yasmin, my favorite person to watch scary movies with
Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.

– Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

Prologue

Chapter 1 One Year Later

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16 Trevor Driggs

Chapter 17

Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23 Sim Smith
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32 Lux Mccray
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38 Saundra Clairmont
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Acknowledgements

[PROLOGUE](#)

Rachel sat at her desk like a pretzel, ankles tucked beneath her, knees up and pressed against the hard edge of the wood. She stared at the wiki for Nellie Bly, the historical figure she was supposed to be writing a paper on, but all the words made her eyes glaze over. It wasn't that she wasn't interested in Nellie Bly; Rachel could get behind any badass journalist with a zippy name. But there were just too many distractions around.

Spotify blared the latest Taylor single, and no matter how many times Rachel put down her phone, determined to start reading about Nellie, it would chirp again with a new text from Amy and she had to pick it up. Like now.

i wonder what he's doing rn. we should go to his house and SPY

i'm not about to stalk, Rachel texted back, and put down her phone for real this time.

But even as she read Nellie's truly interesting bio, Rachel's mind kept wandering.

She wasn't going to spy but . . . what was Oscar doing right now? Was he out with friends, or playing video games, or studiously doing homework like she was supposed to be? Whatever he was up to, Rachel was sure he was definitely not thinking about her. He barely knew she existed. Well, except for the fact that they'd actually had, like, a legitimate conversation this morning. It didn't last more than three minutes, but it was real. And there were smiles. Mutual smileage was had.

Rachel grinned just thinking about it. And even though she was alone, she buried her dopey, blushing face in her hands.

A string of new messages furiously beeped from her phone and Rachel picked it up, Nellie Bly all but forgotten.

U likee him!!! Amy wrote.

U luv him!!!

U want to have his BEBEEES!!!!!!!

Rachel groaned and hurled the phone onto her bed, then shoved it under her pillow. She did not want to have Oscar's beebes, and she seriously never should've told Amy about her crush. Back to Nellie. Rachel sat up straight, readjusting the laptop, like getting the right screen angle was the trick.

As Rachel ignored her phone even harder, she caught sight of someone outside. Her desk sat flush against the window, where she could see the front lawn. It wasn't unusual to spot someone walking around, but it was past nine in the suburbs. Nobody was out past nine.

That wasn't what made Rachel pause, though. It was that this person had stopped in front of her house, still as a statue. He wore dark pants and a black parka, and although she couldn't see his face very well, it seemed unusually pale.

Goosebumps crawled up Rachel's arms, but she wasn't sure why. The logical part of her brain kept telling her that it was just a person on the street – a neighbor, maybe – nothing more.

A muffled dinging came from under her pillow. Rachel grabbed her phone, glancing down at Amy's latest text.

STALKERS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS GURRRRL

Out the window, the man had gone. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief.

As Taylor's voice faded and Rachel's phone finally stopped beeping, she decided to get back to work. But then she heard another noise. This time, it wasn't from any of her devices. It came from downstairs.

Heavy and deliberate, like a footstep.

But that was impossible. She was alone in the house. A new song threatened to start, but Rachel quickly muted the melody. She sat perfectly still, like a puppy anticipating the arrival of a stranger at the door. She waited a bit, ears straining as a long beat of quiet stretched out endlessly.

And then a noise blasted through the room. She startled, nearly falling off her chair at the shrill chirp of a new text. This time Amy had sent just a gif of a bearded Chris Evans breaking out in a hearty giggle. Rachel would've laughed too, but there was that nagging uneasiness that pulled at the hairs on her neck. Actually, given the circumstances, the longer she looked at the gif – an infinite loop of explosive, silent laughter – the more it creeped her out.

Right as Rachel was about to text back, she heard the noise again. This time, it was louder and she was sure it was a footstep. Someone had stepped on the creaky spot in the hardwood between the couch and the coffee table.

Rachel took a deep breath. 'Mom, is that you?'

Her mom was supposed to be out in the city for a girls' night with her friends. But she had only left an hour before and she couldn't be back yet. Maybe she'd turned around, forgotten something.

Rachel clung to this thought even as her heart started pounding. But the back of her mind was telling her that she would've heard her mom's car pull into the driveway, heard her dump her ring

of keys loudly on the console table, heard her messily toe off her boots as she announced she was home, the way she always did.

Rachel put her phone down and made her way to her door, opening it slowly.

‘Mom?’ she called out again.

When no answer came, Rachel stepped out of her room and crept down the hall toward the stairs. Her socked feet padded lithely on the carpeted steps until she entered the living room.

Someone was there. It wasn’t her mom.

The man from outside was standing across the room, dressed all in black. Even his hands were gloved. As Rachel stared at his face, she realized now why it had looked so pale before. What she’d thought was flesh was actually a white mask.

Then Rachel caught sight of the other man. He stood by the TV, dressed just like the first. They stared back at her, their faces scarred and rubbery.

The brain does curious things when suddenly presented with something it cannot comprehend. Rachel’s very first thought – a flash – was to offer the men a glass of water, like she’d been taught to do for all guests. And then, just as quickly, she understood. These men were not guests.

Rachel’s first impulse was to call for help, but anything that wanted to come spilling out of her got jammed in her throat, frozen along with the rest of her. She felt like she was suddenly sinking in quicksand and any movement would only thrust her deeper into the muck.

Two things happened very quickly and all at once.

One of the men charged out the door, blasting through it like he was swept up by the wind. The second man moved too, but not for the door. He lunged toward Rachel, and just like that she broke free of her paralysis and ran. She thought only of the back door in the kitchen, picturing herself opening it, breaking through to the crisp backyard air, and escaping. In a moment, she didn’t have to picture it. She was in the kitchen, she was reaching for the door, fingertips an inch from the knob.

But then his hand was a vice around her arm. She was caught.

1

ONE YEAR LATER

I opened the door and Sandra was there, her smile and outfit sparkling.

‘Get dressed, Rachel, we’re going to a party.’

I’d only known the girl three weeks but here she was, showing up unannounced at my apartment like she’d been doing this for years.

‘Sorry, can’t.’ I was in my sweats and getting ready to relax with my favorite comfort movie of all time, *Night of the Living Dead*. Also, I hated parties. ‘My mom doesn’t want me going out on a school night.’

Like an apparition in a bathroom mirror, my mom appeared behind me. ‘Sunday’s not technically a school night, is it, Jamonada?’

Jamonada was a pet name my grandmother had given me. I’d tried to give it back but there were apparently no refunds, and anyway, my mom loved it. It was Spanish for ‘ham.’ Not like ‘That girl is so funny and precocious – she’s such a ham!’ Like literal lunch meat. And now Sandra had heard it, so there was that.

‘Hi, Ms. Chavez!’ Sandra said.

‘There’s school tomorrow,’ I muttered. ‘So, yeah, definitely considered a school night.’

‘But you didn’t have school today,’ my mom countered. ‘I’d say the jury’s still out.’

Sandra nodded emphatically while I stared at my mom like she hadn’t raised me for sixteen years. At first, I honestly could not figure out her angle. And then it hit me: My own mother was worried about my friendless-loner-patheticness.

‘But you want me rested and refreshed for school tomorrow, right, Mom?’ I did that clenched teeth thing people do when they want someone to take a hint.

My mom did that bright-smile thing people do when they ignore hints. ‘You had the whole weekend to rest and refresh, honey.’

We were at an impasse. I wanted to spend the night with the living dead and my mom wanted me to spend time with the actual living. Time to bring out the big guns.

‘Saundra, tell my mom where the party is.’ It was a risk. For all I knew Saundra wanted to take me to Gracie Mansion to hang out with the mayor, and with the circles she ran in, that wasn’t entirely implausible. But chances were good that the setting for this party would suck.

Saundra hesitated, but I pressed on. ‘Go on, tell her.’

‘An abandoned house in Williamsburg,’ Saundra said.

I swiveled back to my mom, glinting with triumph like a freshly polished trophy. ‘An abandoned house in Williamsburg. Hear that, Mom?’

It was a game of chicken now. My mom and I stared each other down, waiting to see who would give in first.

‘Have fun!’ Mom said.

Thwarted by my own mother. She’d had only two rules for me when we moved to New York City: 1) Keep my grades up, and 2) make friends. The fact that Saundra had shown up here should have been enough proof that I’d made friends. Well, one friend. Either way, I’d accomplished the impossible task of making a new friend as a junior at a new school. But to my mom, a party meant more possible friendships, so that meant I was being dragged to Williamsburg.

I got changed (I refused to take off my tie-dye pajama shirt, despite Saundra’s protests, but I dressed it up with cut-off shorts and a jacket) and we left.

‘We could walk,’ I suggested. We were in Greenpoint, just one neighborhood over, and the weather was nice.

Saundra snorted. ‘What, and get murdered?’

‘It’s pretty safe around here.’

Saundra dismissed me and the borough of Brooklyn with a laugh and took out her phone. ‘Yeah. Sure.’

The Lyft arrived in less than three minutes.

We sat in the backseat, Saundra multitasking by taking a dozen selfies, updating all her social, and telling me who’d be at the party. This also happened to be our lunch routine, where she told me all the gossip about people I still barely recognized in the hallways.

Saundra had decided we would be friends as soon as I walked into Mr. Inzlo’s History class at Manchester Prep. When I sat down, Saundra had leaned over and asked if she could borrow a pencil – a total front, I knew, since I’d spied a pencil in the open front pocket of her lavender backpack.

At first, I’d wondered why Saundra wanted to be my friend, but I quickly realized that Saundra had started talking to me because she couldn’t handle the fact that there was somebody in her class who she knew nothing about. Because as I soon discovered, Saundra Clairmont’s defining characteristic was her burning compulsion to know absolutely everything about absolutely everyone.

So that day, I fed her some morsels about myself. Before Manchester, I went to public school on Long Island. I lived there with my mom until we decided to move to New York City.

Unlike the majority of the students, I was not rich or a legacy or technically a scholarship kid. I only got in because my mom was the ninth-and-tenth-grade American History teacher. So, yeah – my mom had a knack for getting me to go places I didn’t want to go.

But now, as Saundra and I sped toward Williamsburg, I’d gone from not wanting to go to this party to dreading it. The thought of seeing all those people, not a single one of whom would talk to me – made my throat tighten. Worst of all was knowing that I’d have to pretend. Pretend to be a part of their world, to be like them. I was about to tell Saundra that I wasn’t feeling that great, but then the Lyft pulled up to the place. Saundra bounced out of the car and I scrambled after her.

We walked up to the abandoned house, which looked straight out of a late-80s urban horror movie. All of the windows were boarded up with weathered, graffitied wood and there were multiple signs stuck to the door with tiny print that was surely warning us to stay away. It was crammed between a closed warehouse and an empty lot with a FOR SALE sign on its chain-link fence.

But there was one bright spot. A girl sat on the stoop, reading a book. Her fingers blocked the title, but the sharp corners of Stephen King's name peeked out on the cover. I liked Stephen King movies. Maybe I could strike up a conversation with this girl. Maybe this was my kind of party after all.

'Hey, Felicity!' Sandra said. Felicity looked up from the book, glaring from underneath micro bangs. She didn't return Sandra's greeting.

'Okay then, bye.' Sandra looped her arm through mine and pulled me up the steps. 'Leave it to Felicity Chu to bring a book to a party.'

The living room was packed with a couple dozen people laughing, joking, and sloshing drinks in their hands. The inside of the house wasn't much better than the outside. The wallpaper was moldy where it wasn't peeling, the floors were sticky linoleum, the only light came from heavy-duty construction lights, and you could practically smell the asbestos in the air. But nobody seemed to care.

I didn't know exactly what I had expected at rich-kid parties, but this wasn't it. I found it kind of ironic that they'd all left their cushy palaces to get their thrills in a house that was falling apart.

'Gonna grab a drink,' Sandra yelled over the music.

'I'll come with you.' But when I turned around, she was already gone, swallowed up by the crowd. The only thing worse than going to a party you don't want to be at is being at that party solo. I wasn't gonna hang around as the lonely buoy lost in a sea of friends. There was only one thing left to do: hide in the bathroom.

Walking up the stairs was like entering a portal. The sounds of bottles and bad pop music faded away, eclipsed by a dank darkness that thickened with every step. Usually, my anxiety went away once I walked away from a crowd and into a pocket of quiet. It was like breathing into a paper bag, a quick way to calm myself down. But not this time.

I stood at the top of the stairs, waiting until my eyes adjusted to the dark and I was able to make out shadowy shapes. I clicked my phone on for some light, enough to see the hallway was covered in a flowery wallpaper. As I felt my way down the hallway, though, the faded blooming petals turned creepy, like wrinkled, witchy faces.

My breath hitched at the sight of a door slightly ajar. The crack was so black it was impossible to tell what was inside that room, and holding my phone up to it didn't help. There could've been a person standing right there, watching me, and I wouldn't have known. This place was getting to me.

I should've turned around and left, but I was at a party. I wanted to be carefree and normal and stupid. Not someone jumping at every shadow. So, I pushed my fears aside and pushed the door open.

It was the bathroom after all. No one inside. The lights didn't work, and neither did the faucet, but it was quiet. I pulled out my phone and pulled up Instagram. Nothing good ever came from going to his page, but I couldn't stop myself. I knew it was bad for me, but I downed the poison anyway.

I clicked on the picture of him and his best friend in their soccer uniforms. My eyes traced the strands of his hair, his dark amber eyes, nearly shut with glee. And the dimples. His wide, dimpled smile was a sucker punch to the gut. Below the post were hundreds of comments from his friends. I'd read every one of them, multiple times. If I started to read them again now, I could lose hours.

But then I heard a voice. It was indistinguishable at first, but it had an angry cadence.

I was clearly not the only one upstairs. I quietly left the bathroom and followed the voice to the room next door. I realized there were actually two people speaking in hushed, insistent tones. An argument.

The door swung open and I had just enough time to get out of the way as Bram Wilding stormed out of the room. He didn't notice me. But when I turned back around, I knocked right into Lux

McCray. I'd never actually met either of them, but they were high school royalty, the kind of popular that you don't need to meet to already know everything about them. Lux and Bram were Manchester Prep's resident power couple.

My phone slipped out of my hand and bounced on the carpeted hallway floor. It illuminated Lux, finding her the way that light always seemed to, and highlighted the sharp angles of her face so that she looked like the heroine on a V.C. Andrews book cover. Her eyes rounded in surprise, but then narrowed.

'What the hell?' Lux demanded. 'Were you spying on us?'

'No?'

'I don't know what you think you heard –'

'I didn't hear anything.'

Her glare roved over me, from my Zappos slip-ons to my messy bun of thick brown hair, then lingered on my face. Maybe Lux was asking herself why I had so many freckles and couldn't I have found a beauty tutorial that would get rid of some of them?

I stared back at her. My natural freckles definitely looked like dirt compared to her fake ones. I could tell Lux's freckles were fake because they were too round, uniformly small, and perfectly spaced. The kind you drew on gingerly with a brow pencil. They skittered over the bridge of her nose, fanning out above the tops of her cheeks. A beautiful constellation.

I got a whiff of her perfume. Miss Dior. The preferred eau de parfum of future disgraced political wives. Her skin glowed, soft and toned, beneath the straps of her Brandy Melville tank and her hair was the color of whisked butter. She was the kind of blond and pretty that died early in horror movies.

But then Lux's gaze diverted to my phone on the floor. She picked it up and looked at the screen long enough to see not only the post but also the Instagram handle. 'Maybe watch where you're going instead of stalking Matthew Marshall.'

A heavy ball of anxiety burrowed in my chest, threatening to expand to the rest of my body. It happened quickly like that, the way fear took over sometimes. One minute I could be fine and the next I'd start feeling uneasy, jittery, my fingers and toes tingling in a bad way. She wasn't supposed to know Matthew's name. No one was. I pounced for my phone, and Lux looked shocked and offended, as though it was her phone. I managed to snatch it out of her hands.

'Freak,' she hissed, shouldering past me and disappearing down the dark hallway.

It was an instant reminder of what I was. Not normal. A freak. It was obvious to everyone, including Lux. Yeah, I was officially over this party.

I headed downstairs to find Sandra so we could get out of there, but the unnerving darkness and the weird encounter with Lux followed me like a tablecloth I'd accidentally tucked into my waistband. Nobody was supposed to know Matthew's name. I'd known it was a bad idea to come to this party. I'd known it.

My brain swarmed with dizzying thoughts and it felt like I was going down the stairs both too fast and too slow. I pushed my way through the crowd, my tunnel vision zeroing in on the front door.

I was outside in a second, swallowing the crisp night air. I needed to get my mind right, do literally anything else but think about what had just happened. I needed to do something stupid. Reckless.

My eyes hooked on to the only person outside. I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder. In times like these, I could be a character in a possession movie if I needed to: lose all control and let something else take over. I barely waited for him to turn around before I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled his face down to mine.

I hate the part of myself that did stuff like this. Reckless and wrong.

But it worked. As soon as our lips touched, all thoughts of Matthew Marshall and Lux and how stifling the house had felt were washed away. And in that moment, I didn't care. I could chalk it up

to high school party shenanigans. I could pretend I was drunk, be a wild girl, morals be damned. I was pretty sure this was what normal kids did at normal parties.

Soon I wasn't thinking about anything at all, and as my thoughts quieted, my senses took over. There was the sound of his breathing; sharp as he inhaled through his nose and then soft as he sighed. I took in the scent of his shampoo, something woody. Pine and lime. And then even those senses fell away and I was left with only two. There was just the feel of his lips, and the taste of them.

When we both pulled away, breathless, I finally got a look at who I'd been kissing.

At the sight of him, my mind – serenely blank just a moment before – blared loud with a big resigned fuck.

'Rachel?' Sandra called as she came down the stoop.

I couldn't tell if Bram Wilding was horrified or repulsed by what I'd just done, but he gave me the courtesy of staying stone-faced. So that was good to know. Bram, Lux's-boyfriend-who-I'd-just-basically-assaulted-because-I-was-a-criminally-inappropriate-freak-like-Lux-said-I-was, was courteous. He turned and walked away before Sandra could see him.

'Who was that?' Sandra asked when she reached me.

'Nobody.'

She quirked an eyebrow. 'I just saw you talking to somebody.'

'It was no one. A ghost.'

'It's funny you should say that,' Sandra said, the tips of her fingers twiddling together. 'Cause there's gonna be a séance!'

2

Sandra led me back through the house, her arm linked tightly through mine to prevent any attempt at escape. 'Why are we doing this?' I asked.

'It's a séance,' Sandra and I both said at the same time, though our tones were polar opposites.

'What could possibly go wrong?' Sandra asked.

'You've obviously never watched Night of the Demons.'

Sandra stopped walking and turned to face me. She gently put her hands on my shoulders and looked at me very seriously. 'Rachel? No one gets your references.'

I sighed. That was fair.

'It'll be fun,' Sandra said. 'And anyway, this is how you make your mark at Manchester. This is how you get to know the heavy hitters.' She dropped her hands and squeezed my elbow. 'This is how you find your people.'

Who knew that all I needed to do to find my people was conjure up some dead spirits? There was already a group forming a circle on the living room floor. By now the party had quieted down, leaving about fifteen of us still there. Unfortunately, one of them was Lux. My stomach knotted up as she glared at me. I was already on her bad side – I prayed she would never find out I'd just kissed her boyfriend.

Someone had shut off the construction lights, so the only light came from the center of the circle, where some kid was lighting thick block candles set on the floor. When the room was sufficiently eerie with flickering candlelight and everyone was sitting in place, the guy stood up. 'My father owns this place, so this séance better not mess anything up.'

'Your father bought this place so he could demolish it and build luxury condos,' someone reminded him. 'Let's raise hell!'

There was a smattering of laughter, but I must've missed the joke. One girl raised her hand. She looked different out of her school uniform, but I recognized her instantly because she was always assertively raising her hand in Earth Science. Just like she was now. 'What kind of séance will this be?'

'A past-life séance,' Thayer Turner suggested. His father was the state's attorney general and as Sandra had informed me, the Turners were practically the next Obamas.

'What's a past-life séance?' Raisey-hand asked.

‘It’s when you look in a mirror and you see what your past life was,’ I said.

Thayer turned to look at me. In fact, everyone turned to look at me. It was probably the most words any of them had heard me say since I’d infiltrated their school. I’d been joking when I mentioned the séance in *Night of the Demons*, but as I looked back at their ghoulishly lit faces, it was starting to feel more like a prediction.

‘Yeah,’ Thayer said slowly, taking an extra beat longer to examine me. ‘New Girl’s right. Lucky for us I saw a mirror in the hall closet!’

‘What were you doing back in the closet?’ someone said. I shot the guy a dirty look. There was a sniveling jeeriness to his tone, which Thayer hadn’t missed. His shoulders squared as he headed for the hallway.

‘Ha ha, funny, Devon,’ he called back.

When Thayer came back into the room, he was holding a full-length mirror. He leaned it against the fireplace. The glass was murky with age and decay, and everyone scooted around it to get a better look at themselves.

‘It might take a minute,’ Thayer said. ‘You have to concentrate.’

If this were anything like the movie, a bony demon would appear any minute now. But there was only a group of bored teenagers tilting their faces to show off their best angles.

Of course I knew that there wasn’t going to be a demon popping out at us, or even that we’d see our past lives, but still, I was starting to feel the familiar prickling sensation at the back of my neck. I didn’t believe in past lives, but I had a past. What if I looked in this mirror and they were all able to see who I really was?

‘Nothing’s happening,’ Raisey complained.

‘Well, I guess you don’t have a past life,’ Thayer said.

‘To go along with your nonexistent love life,’ snickered Devon, the asshole. People laughed again, and I began to wonder if I wasn’t in fact seeing a bunch of demons in the mirror after all.

‘Settle down, children,’ Thayer said. ‘Why don’t we forget the past-life thing and try to communicate with actual spirits?’

‘Like our great-grandparents?’ someone said.

‘Like the people who lived in this house,’ Thayer said.

‘I thought it was abandoned,’ Devon said.

‘Well, someone had to live here first to abandon it, smartass.’ Thayer leaned forward. It was a subtle move, but it quieted everyone down and made them lean forward, too. ‘There was a couple who lived here, Frank and Greta. Typical hipsters – I’m talking vegan cashew cheese and terrible style. All’s well in Hipsterville until one day Greta starts to hear a buzzing.’

‘Buzzing?’ somebody asked.

‘Like when a fly whizzes by your ear,’ Thayer said. ‘At first it was just once in a while, like maybe a bug got in through the kitchen window and couldn’t get out. But then it was more constant. Insistent. Greta realized the noise was loudest whenever Frank was home. Anytime they’d be together, she’d hear it. The buzzing. She asked if he was making the noise on purpose. Frank said he couldn’t hear anything. But Greta kept hearing the buzzing and eventually she couldn’t take it anymore. Greta broke down and begged him to please stop buzzing and Frank looked her straight in the eye and said he didn’t know what she was talking about.’

‘But Greta didn’t trust him. The buzzing was too loud. She didn’t believe he couldn’t hear it. And as Greta began to spiral, she no longer just thought he was lying about the buzzing. She thought he was the buzzing. Greta became convinced that Frank was wearing a skin suit – that underneath it, he was just a million flies, buzzing and swarming and out to get her.’

Some people (Devon) snorted, but they still listened, waiting for Thayer to continue the story. I leaned in. I wanted him to continue, too.

‘Frank tried to reason with Greta, of course, but Greta couldn’t stand to be near him, what with all that buzzing. Some mornings, as he ate his cereal, she’d see a fly crawl over his ear lobe and he wouldn’t even be bothered. At night she couldn’t sleep because Frank slept with his mouth open and anytime she closed her eyes, she imagined the flies pouring out.’

Thayer opened his mouth, letting his jaw drop low, stretching it as far as it would go. No flies came swarming out, of course, but he held on to the pose, staring us down. I could feel Sandra squirm next to me. When he clamped his mouth shut with a click, a few of us startled.

‘Greta couldn’t stand it anymore,’ he continued. ‘One day she took a meat cleaver and swung it right into Frank’s neck.’

Sandra gasped dramatically.

‘She was trying to free the flies. But she just ended up killing Frank. And when Greta saw that there weren’t any flies, she offed herself next. And the scariest part of the whole thing is that Frank and Greta were’ – Thayer made his eyes go wide and lowered his voice to a whisper – ‘registered Republicans.’

I snorted, but nobody else seemed to find it funny.

‘Okay, that was a joke, but the rest is totally true!’ Thayer went on. ‘It was a week before anyone even discovered their bodies. Neighbors heard buzzing at all hours of the day and it just kept getting louder and louder. Someone finally called the police, and when they broke down the door guess what they found?’ The pause was dramatic. ‘Flies. Hundreds of thousands of them, crawling all over the house – and the bodies.’

‘You’re full of it,’ said one girl, but beside her, a guy swatted his neck and shivered.

‘So what, are we gonna, like, try to talk to the people that died here?’ Lux asked. ‘Don’t we need a Ouija board or something?’

Another girl, Sienna Something, cleared her throat. ‘I’ve been part of séances before. I know what to do.’ She made a show of sitting ramrod straight and locking hands with the people on either side of her.

I didn’t know whether I was supposed to be impressed or disturbed, because séances, plural? But I didn’t have time to dwell as the girl next to me grabbed my hand.

‘Go on, then,’ Thayer coaxed, amused. ‘What do we do next?’

‘We have to concentrate on nothing but also open our minds and souls to all the possibilities that the universe presents to us,’ Sienna said, sounding like a YouTube wellness guru. She raised her chin toward the broken chandelier in the center of the ceiling and took a deep breath. ‘Greta, we come to you with love and concern in our hearts. Your death was untimely and, like, totally brutal and stuff, and that sucks. And we’re aware that you had that small issue of killing Frank or whatever, but I also believe in giving women the benefit of the doubt and I know he was probably buzzing all day under his breath to tick you off. We’re here for you and we love you. If you can hear us, send us a sign.’

My mind and soul were open and all that, but a deep crease formed between my eyebrows. The only thing I knew about Greta was that she was one hundred percent a made-up person in a made-up story. But I seemed to be the only one to take issue with this.

Around me, everyone closed their eyes, the only sounds in the room the quiet strains of people trying to stay still or hold their breath. Definitely no signs from Greta. And yet we waited for what felt like way too long a time. I thought about sneaking out, but I didn’t want to be the one to break the spell. I was pretty sure that wasn’t what Sandra had meant by finding my people. But thankfully, I didn’t have to do anything because someone spoke up for all of us. ‘Okay, this is obviously –’

A thud in the ceiling interrupted him, and more than a few heads snapped up at the noise. It was loud and strong enough to make the chandelier crystals chime like this was a breezy day on a North Carolina wraparound porch and not an abandoned house in Williamsburg.

‘Is there someone upstairs?’ somebody hissed.

‘It’s Gretaaaaa,’ Thayer said, his voice vibrating spookily.

‘Greta, is that you?’ Sienna asked. ‘Tap once for yes and twice for no.’

Everyone waited again, listening closely for more sounds. After a moment, another thud. ‘Greta,’ Sienna said. ‘Are you okay?’

Another moment, another thud. And then, just in time to make Sienna’s smile flicker off, a final thud. Two taps.

‘She’s not okay,’ Sandra whispered.

There was a moment of restless silence as we all snuck glances at each other, looking to see who was scared and who believed.

‘Greta, how can we help you?’ Sienna asked.

‘That isn’t a “yes” or “no” question, how’s she supposed to answer us?’ Lux said, rolling her eyes.

Then a new noise came from above. Not another thud, but more of a rumbling, like a bowling ball being hurled across the floor. Dust fell from the popcorn ceiling. Then all at once other things started to happen. It wasn’t just the ceiling now, it was the walls too, knocking, pounding, as if the house were coming alive. The candles went out and I heard a piercing crash. The mirror had fallen, spraying us with glass.

Screams broke out, loud enough to match the growing cacophony of the crumbling house. Sandra’s scream was shriller than everyone else’s and she yanked my hand suddenly, pulling me up so fast that my feet slipped as I scrambled to stand. The sounds of people rushing around in the dark mixed with the thunderous roar still coming from the ceiling and walls. And then the noise morphed into something else.

Something much closer.

A swarm.

A buzzing.

As though a hundred thousand flies were crawling all over us.

The screaming started in earnest then, particularly from one person. ‘Get them off me!’ she screeched. ‘Get them off me!’

The bright fluorescence of the construction lights flickered back to life and illuminated a totally transformed room. There were people bottlenecking at the doorway, yelling and frantic to get out. But mainly we all stared at Lux, who was in a full-blown panic. She was wildly pulling at her beautiful blond strands, crying hysterically for someone to help get the flies out of her hair.

But there weren’t any flies. The light ushered in a stillness, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the only other person who wasn’t freaking out. Not one strand of his loose, curly hair was out of place. His thick-framed glasses were not askew. I watched as he clicked a portable speaker and slipped it into his pants pocket. And just like that the buzzing came to a halt.

I clamped my lips shut. I tried not to let it out. The rest of the people in the room swore and caught their breaths, but something else was bubbling up inside me. Finally, I had to let it go.

I laughed. Hard. I laughed so loudly that soon, people turned to look at me like I was the weirdest thing in the supposedly haunted abandoned house.

Lux’s eyes locked onto mine. She was breathing hard, her fists full of blond clumps, like sad bouquets. I thought for a moment she’d pulled out her own hair, but then I noticed the clips at the edges. Hair extensions.

‘You did this to me!’ Lux pointed at me as if I had been the one to snatch her bald.

I shook my head, and though I was trying to be serious, little laughs continued to slip out.

‘This was your stupid prank!’

I looked around, trying to spot the guy with the portable speaker, but he hadn’t stuck around to see Lux chew me out. Everyone else was riveted, though.

An angry, guttural sound came from Lux’s throat and she threw her extensions on the floor. ‘Laugh it up now because you’re done at this school.’ And with that she stomped out of the house.

I had stopped laughing by now. When I turned to Sandra, her face was frozen in a grimace. I waited for her to say something. Like all the encouraging things she'd told me when she said this party would be 'totally fun' and that I'd 'find my people.' But all she said was, 'This is not good.'

3

I could feel how not good my situation was the minute I walked into school the next morning. Manchester Prep was a private high school, and you could tell how exclusive it was by its location alone. Manhattan. Upper East Side. Basically on Museum Mile. It was four stories high, with the kind of intricate gothic details carved into its façade that attracted tourists and their cameras. It was pretty on the outside, but cramped within.

We wore uniforms. Oxford shirts and gray blazers with the school crest. The boys wore slacks and the girls wore pleated gray skirts that were meant to chastely kiss the knees but more often than not grazed the thighs. I'd made the mistake of ordering my uniform online instead of having it fitted like everybody else, so my hemline scraped along my shins. The uniform was starchy and chafed and bit into the soft parts of my waist, and the whole thing was a big metaphor for how much I did not fit in here.

A part of it was the money thing. As in they had it, I didn't. You'd think it wouldn't make that big a difference when we all wore the same clothes, studied the same things, but as soon as they opened their mouths you could tell we belonged to two different worlds. They loved to talk about their things: how expensive they were and how many of them they had. They had unlimited credit cards and wore Cartier jewelry, and for some reason that I will never understand, they all had the exact same Celine Nano designer bag. I once saw one of my classmates try to buy a Twix bar at a deli on Second Avenue using a hundred-dollar bill.

So yeah. There was me and there was them and the chasm between us was the size of Manhattan.

But now, as I took the same route I always did to get to my locker, I felt like I didn't fit in for a completely different reason. People were looking at me. Like, really stopping to look. Some sneered; others leaned into their friends to whisper, their eyes never leaving me.

I didn't have to hear them to know what they were saying. That's the girl who crossed Lux.

I'd worked so hard to not call attention to myself at this school, to blend in, that when all eyes were on me, I felt it as acutely as a sudden change in temperature. Everything went cold. Even the people in the alumni portraits that trimmed the high-ceilinged walls seemed to be watching me. They were mostly angry-looking dudes from back when Manchester was exclusively angry-looking dudes. The school became co-ed in the 80s, and my locker was directly beneath the Technicolor portraits of two female alums with fanned hair. One had become an astronaut and the other a B-list sitcom actress. Both seemed way too interested in my being a newly anointed social pariah.

I didn't see Lux, but I felt her presence all around, like a ghost haunting me. I felt it most strongly in my Women in Literature class when I saw Bram at his seat. Our gazes locked for an infinite moment in which I was yanked back to the kiss. I felt my face redden and I wondered if he'd told Lux about it and if I should expect my already-ruined life at Manchester to get exponentially worse. But then he looked away and so did I, and we both went back to pretending that I didn't exist.

I tried my best to stop thinking about Bram, but unfortunately, he was Sandra's favorite conversation topic.

'Were there any guys in your old high school who were as gorgeous as Bram Wilding?' Sandra asked as we sat down in the cafeteria.

I put down my sandwich. My stomach suddenly hurt but Sandra didn't notice my loss of appetite. She ate distractedly, her gaze locked on the center of the room. It was the prime real estate of the school's upper echelon. Sandra watched Bram and his friends like they were doing something truly remarkable instead of the same eating and chatting as the rest of us plebes.

Thanks to Sandra, I learned everything I never wanted to know about Bram. He was the product of Andrew and Delilah Wilding, a publishing magnate of Scottish descent, and a former

model from Cairo, respectively. But I knew something about Bram that Sandra couldn't know. Like what his lips felt like.

'All the guys in my old high school were ogres,' I said. Sandra was doing me a solid by not talking about the elephant in the room (my sudden notoriety and social ostracism), but I desperately needed to change the subject. 'Could we talk about literally anything else?'

'Okay, we can talk about the party, which I am legit still not over. We got to find out that Lux's legendary locks are actually extensions?' Sandra looked up and sighed. 'You pray to the scandal gods, but you just never think you'll get a response, you know?'

'You didn't think it was a mean prank?' I asked.

'Oh, don't tell me you believe those rumors.'

'What rumors?'

Sandra's eyes lit up. If there was one thing she liked to talk about more than Bram Wilding, it was rumors. 'I forgot you're new and you don't know all of Manchester's dirty secrets.' She swept her plate to the side, as though she needed to make space for the enormity of what she was about to say.

'People think there's some big prankster in school pulling the strings behind everybody's biggest humiliations. Like one time, Erica Belcott got locked in the basement pool at the Y and when they found her, she was curled up in the fetal position on the diving board. She said someone had been flicking the lights on and off. Another time Jonathan Calden woke up in a dumpster behind a Red Lobster without knowing how he got there. And there was that one time when Julia Mahoney swore somebody was leaving her creepy notes written in red lipstick all over the place, and when she found a tube of lipstick in her backpack in AP Chem, she freaked out and knocked over the Bunsen and nearly set the class on fire.

'Hence, the prankster theory. People think it's all connected, that one person is behind it all. They'll say, "That asshole got me." But it's like, uh, no, Jonathan, how about some personal responsibility? Waking up in a dumpster is your own fault for going to the Red Lobster in Times Square.'

Usually when Sandra dropped a bunch of names on me I zoned out like it was white noise. But a mysterious menace on the loose, screwing with people's lives? 'Tell me more.'

'It's been going on forever,' Sandra said. 'I heard about the "prankster" before I even started high school. But it's just one of those urban legends.'

My mind went to the boy I'd seen when the lights came back up at the abandoned house. The one who'd discreetly shut off his portable speaker while everyone was distracted. I'd found out his name – Freddie Martinez. A look around the cafeteria and I spotted him, the sight of the loose curls cresting over his forehead unmistakable. He sat surrounded by a group of friends.

'Who are those guys?' I asked Sandra.

'Ugh. The Tisch Boys. They're in the Film Club together. They're all going to the Tisch School at NYU to study movies – sorry, film,' said Sandra. 'And one of them is actually a Tisch. Careful – they might try to recruit you on account of their club not having a single girl in its membership. It's a huge optics issue. Once, Pruitt Pusivic was trying to flirt with me and for a minute I was into it but then it hit me, like, Wait, do you really like me or are you just trying to get me to join Film Club? It really gave me trust issues.'

'Oh.'

'Exactly,' Sandra said. 'They think they're cool, but they're just pretentious nerds.'

I didn't think Freddie looked all that nerdy, though. Yeah, there was the thick glasses frame, but I kind of liked them. Plus, he had the relaxed posture and easy smile of someone with a healthy amount of confidence. And there was that jawline. Sharp enough to light a match on. His clothes were kind of messy – the uniform oxford shirt wasn't ironed like the other boys', and his shoes were scuffed and in need of polishing – but I got the feeling all of that was on purpose. A look he cultivated.

'And what about that guy?' I said, jutting my chin in Freddie's direction.

‘Freddie Martinez?’ Sandra asked. ‘Why?’

‘Just curious.’

The look on her face said there were much more interesting people to gossip about at this school, but Sandra was always happy to show off her encyclopedic knowledge of the student body, even if it was only Freddie Martinez. She took a deep breath and launched into a list of Freddie facts.

I learned that he and I had something in common: in a school of one-percenters, we fell somewhere in the ninety-nine. He was a scholarship kid. His mom was a caterer who he helped out on the weekends, but he also sold cheat sheets and term papers. And apparently, for the right price he’d even take your standardized tests for you. Around here that was a lucrative side gig.

‘Basically, he’ll do anything for a buck, which is so tacky, but I guess it comes in handy if you suck at algebra or something.’ Sandra took a breath. ‘There’s also rumors he deals drugs, but personally I find those rumors so racist.’

It was a good thing she wasn’t spreading them, then.

Freddie was deep in conversation with the guy sitting next to him. I wondered if the two of them had come up with the prank, or if it had been just Freddie. I wondered if Sandra was wrong. Maybe there was someone messing with the students of Manchester Prep.

That would be awful.

It would also be the most interesting thing to have happened since I’d arrived.

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