

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES



THE
PRINCESS
GAME

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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She knew this was the last evening she should ever see the prince, for whom she had forsaken her kindred and her home; she had given up her beautiful voice, and suffered unheard-of pain daily for him, while he knew nothing of it.

—“The Little Mermaid,” Hans Christian Andersen,
translated by H. P. Paull

The following audio files were recovered from Callum Pederson's iPhone and have been transcribed in full.

CALLUM

“Check, check, one, two, is this working? (playback) Check, check, one, two, is this working? Sweet. (Clears throat.) Detective Callum Pederson here, recording notes for Case B7-221, a.k.a. ‘Princess Killer.’ Lieutenant Chang suggested I switch to voice notes after misplacing my notebook—shit, I’m supposed to do time and date and all that. Dammit. (pause) Thursday, April 23. Left Chaminade High School at 4:45 p.m. after eight missed voice mails from Chang, telling me they’re bringing them down to the station. Now arriving at the Middletown precinct at 5:01 p.m. . . . Oh man. That’s definitely Eric Triton’s car. White Land Rover. And that’s Phillip Aurora’s blue Porsche, license plate BRUHHH. Adam Master’s here too. Whooo . . . this is gonna be a party. My heart rate’s like 180. Shouldn’t have chugged that Red Bull at halftime, but thought I was gonna play a full game before Chang went batshit and blew up my phone. (Clears throat.) Detective Pederson now parking at 5:04 p.m., about to enter the station for suspect questioning . . .”

ERIC

(Door opens.)

ERIC: Dude! They got you in here too?

PEDERSON: Um, depends on who “they” is . . .

ERIC: They put Phillip and Adam in the other rooms. Think I saw Naveen and Flynn too. It’s like they went rounding up Chaminade boys. But you know they’ve gone full-blown psycho when they suspect Callum Pederson as the Princess Killer.

(Door opens.)

ERIC: Mr. Chang? What are *you* doing here?

CHANG: Sit down, Eric. This is an interview with Eric Triton on Thursday, April 23, at 5:11 p.m. at the Middletown precinct on 16 Cedar. Pederson, you show him the pictures?

PEDERSON: Uh, I thought you had the file.

CHANG: Christ. What are you wearing?

PEDERSON: Had a game. Didn't think we were questioning them today. Just got here.

ERIC: *We?*

CHANG: A game, Pederson? We got four murdered girls, posed as fairy-tale princesses, and you're busy with a *lacrosse* game?

PEDERSON: You told me to keep cover at all times, like when you stuff your face with Ho Hos in the faculty lounge and flirt with Miss Seldy before eighth period—

CHANG: Score any goals?

PEDERSON: Three, actually.

CHANG: If only those dead girls were there to watch.

PEDERSON: Don't be a dick.

ERIC: Bro, Callum, what the hell is happening?

CHANG: I'll get the file. Get him to sit down, at least. *Bro.*

(Door opens and closes.)

ERIC: Callum! Why is my chemistry teacher here? He's acting like you and him—

PEDERSON: It's Detective Pederson.

ERIC: What?

PEDERSON: As long as you're here, it's Detective Pederson of the Middletown Police. Chang is my lieutenant. We've been undercover at Chaminade, investigating the Princess Killer. We'd like to ask you some questions. I suggest you sit down.

ERIC: You're a cop. *You.* Who played *Red Dead Redemption* till one a.m. at my house last night.

PEDERSON: That game is really addictive.

ERIC: Who pregamed with us before Spring Fling. Who painted his whole body gold with me and Phillip so we could be sports trophies for Spirit Day. Who texts back “hilarious” when Kristoff sends porn on the group chat.

PEDERSON: “Hilarious” seems to be the accepted response to everything.

ERIC: You, who puked in Cheryl Isenhour’s pool last weekend. You’re a cop.

PEDERSON: The spiked punch that they were saying was kombucha? I actually thought it *was* kombucha.

ERIC: How old are you?

PEDERSON: Twenty-one.

ERIC: Bullshit. Your voice hasn’t even changed. Nice prank, Callum. Who put you up to this? Phillip? Flynn? Is that why they’re here too? (*Laughs.*) Punked me good.

PEDERSON: I’m in training at the academy. Pulled me on the case as an undercover officer because I looked the part. This isn’t a prank. Girls are dead, and we have questions.

ERIC: Where’s your badge, then?

PEDERSON: In my backpack. My firearm too.

ERIC: What a load of shit.

(*Sounds of rustling.*)

ERIC: That’s your gun.

PEDERSON: And this is my badge.

ERIC: That loaded?

PEDERSON: I’ll tell you after you sit down.

ERIC: I want a lawyer.

PEDERSON: Did you murder all those girls?

ERIC: Fuck no.

PEDERSON: Then sit down and answer our questions and get out of here. Don’t make shit complicated. Chang hates lawyers almost as much as he hates you.

ERIC: I made *one* joke in class. Weeks ago. No one cares.

PEDERSON: Putting a Chinese food take-out order on the back of your chemistry test?

ERIC: Can't arrest me for a joke.

PEDERSON: But he *can* go off duty before your lawyer gets here, which means your ass stays in jail overnight.

(Eric sits; door opens.)

CHANG: Let's start with the first victim. Ariana Merced. Slumped over a wooden spinning wheel in an empty warehouse on Chalmers Street, a spindle through her throat. Here, I brought some snacks for you while you stare at photos of her body.

(Sound of food splattering.)

ERIC: What the fuck! On my Supreme shirt!

CHANG: "Kung pao chicken. Beef and brocc." Exactly what you ordered. Sorry it's late.

ADAM

CHANG: Official interview with Adam Master, 6:18 p.m. on Thursday, April 23, at the Middletown—

ADAM: I barely knew Ariana. If that's what you're asking about.

PEDERSON: You told me you had sex with her. Twice.

CHANG: What? That isn't in the file.

PEDERSON: It was in the notebook I lost. Forgot to add it to the file.

ADAM: I said I hooked up with her twice. And I told you that man-to-man.

PEDERSON: In the locker room with twenty guys around.

ADAM: So now you're the hookup police too. Can't talk about girls I've fucked, because there's *cops* in our locker room pretending to be midfielders on the lacrosse team.

PEDERSON: So you did have sex with her.

ADAM: Isn't there some pedophile law against that? Adults hanging with minors at *school*? Should have known you were a rat when you wrote that gay poem in Miss G.'s class.

PEDERSON: It wasn't a poem. It was a soliloquy for Hamlet from the grave. And that was the *assignment*.

CHANG: You forgot to file case notes on a suspect, but you had time to write a speech for a dead Shakespearean prince?

ADAM: Hold on. Callum said I don't need a lawyer. And now you're saying I'm a suspect? I'm gonna make a call—

CHANG: Did you text Ariana twenty-eight times after she blocked your number?

(Silence)

ADAM: She stopped talking to me. I wanted to know what was up. That's all. She wouldn't answer me and was ignoring me at school.

CHANG: Your last blocked message was sent two days before her murder.

ADAM: How did you see my texts? Don't you need a warrant for that? *(Laughs.)* This is horseshit. She was killed March 22, right? I was at Flynn's house, eating dinner with his folks. And you know that, otherwise you'd be arresting me.

PEDERSON: Was Ari spreading word that you were a bad hookup?

ADAM: I heard she was talking shit, yeah. But girls do that.

CHANG: You weren't offended?

ADAM: I know my skills. Why would she chill with me twice if I was so bad?

PEDERSON: Kelly Blake said you were rough with Ariana the first time.

ADAM: Was Kelly there? I was drunk. So was Ari. Barely remember it. Not a big deal. And like I said, she came back for more.

PEDERSON: Kelly told me Ariana was upset. She didn't want to go as far as you did. That's why she hooked up with you again. Kelly said it was her way of getting past it. Do it with you on her terms, then ice you out and tell people what a creep you were.

ADAM: Yeah? Tell Kelly she's a wench with cankles who no guy would touch if she paid him. Look, what's happening to these girls is screwed up. Whole school is freaked out because there's a serial killer on the loose, cutting people up, and you guys are wasting time with me and my friends. You don't think a whole lotta pervs had their eyes on Ariana?

CHANG: And you don't think twenty-eight is a whole lotta texts to a girl who's not responding?

ADAM: Ari played games. Acted like she was queen of the place. Like she could do whatever she wanted with no consequences. Teasing guys. Playing like she wanted it, then saying she didn't. Messed with my head. Figured if I kept texting, she'd come around. You know how girls are. Good luck finding who killed her. She pissed off everyone at school. Probably pissed off every guy in town.

CHANG: But you were the last one she pissed off.

ADAM: So I killed her *and* three other girls? Oh yeah, you got me. I axed Ari like Sleeping fucking Beauty. Welcome to story time, kids! Where would I get a *spinning* wheel? And when? Between meat loaf and ice cream at Flynn's house? And why do 'em like fairy-tale princesses?

CHANG: Princes.

ADAM: What?

CHANG: Chaminade's team name. The Chaminade Princes. Twisted joke to kill the girls as princesses, don't you think?

ADAM: About as funny as a chemistry teacher being a cop.

CALLUM

"April 24, 6:52 a.m. On the way to the precinct. This is Detective Callum Pederson, by the way. Should have said that

first. And it's Friday. Voice note for Case B7-22 . . . oh, whatever. Chang wants me to keep voice notes, so this is my voice note, and sorry if it isn't like proper formatting. My cover is officially blown after yesterday's suspect party. Told Chang we should have waited, just so we could get a few more days at school, but now the cat's out of the bag. Pretty ironic. When I was in high school at Brookside, slumming it with the rest of the poor folk, I would have killed for Chaminade kids to know who I was. Well, I got my wish. Someone already made a 'FuckCallumPederson' Insta, posting pictures of my face on farm animals humped by, um, larger farm animals. My phone is being hammered by anonymous death threats like 'Hope the killer gets u next,' along with thirty spam messages every hour for penile-enlargement devices. Plus, I got blocked from the Princes' group chat, which makes sense, obviously, but still sucks, because they're not seeing my side of this. Last week, I was Prince Cally Cal. Eric even put that in his phone. I was their boy. Flynn gave me my own towel 'cause I used his pool so much, and Phillip let me joyride his Porsche, and Adam and I had our own dap . . . and now . . . Yes, I know I'm technically 'investigating' them, and it must be a kick in the balls to have your bud suddenly checking you out for murder . . . I mean, I get it . . . I just thought we had a bond . . . What the hell am I saying? Get your shit together, Cally. How do I delete— (ringing sound) Shit. Rebecca."

PEDERSON: Hello?

REBECCA: Did my dad know?

PEDERSON: What?

REBECCA: Did my dad—the principal of the school that you have been attending as a “student”—know that you were a cop?

PEDERSON: Yeah. Rebecca, look—

(Click)

NAVEEN

CHANG: For the record, this is Wednesday, April 29, at 4:18 p.m. Lieutenant Joseph Chang and Detective Callum Pederson present. Thank you for bringing your son down to the precinct, Mr. Malhotra. I know last week was a little chaotic.

Mr.MALHOTRA: Chaotic! You trap half the lacrosse and basketball teams and interrogate them about dead girls without a lawyer! Pretending to be teacher and student so you can lurk around a school like goons? I knew it when I came to Parents' Night. All the other teachers give proper syllabuses and talk intelligently about what they're teaching. But not you! Shifty eyes, gibbering nonsense, with no syllabus, like a buffoon: "I'm going to follow the textbook!" I should have known you were a crook! And now you're dressed as a cop, telling me *my* son's the criminal! Ha! Eric and Adam and these other boys are too stupid to know their rights, but I do!

NAVEEN: Dad, calm down.

Mr.MALHOTRA: And now, maybe my son is as stupid as the others, because today he tells me he wants to come in and talk to you alone!

NAVEEN: About the girl you found yesterday.

PEDERSON: Kelly Blake. Fifth victim.

NAVEEN: I thought I could help.

Mr.MALHOTRA: He didn't even know this Kellari girl! And now the news is saying she was drowned in the lake with her voice box cut out. Five teenage girls killed! *Killed!* We know who does these things. Old men with dirty minds. And here you are fooling around with young boys! Look at Naveen. He's straight-A student, treasurer of Student Council, and won Most Improved for his basketball team. You think he's out killing girls when he's doing volunteer service at the animal shelter twice a week! And now you have him in the same room you bring drug dealers and thieves!

NAVEEN: Dad, can you wait outside?

Mr.MALHOTRA: And let them turn and twist you! The only Indian boy at his school! I've seen what they do to boys like

you. I watch it on Netflix! I'm staying here the whole time. I know your rights.

PEDERSON: He has the right to an attorney, not to his father.

NAVEEN: Dad, please. Ten minutes.

Mr.MALHOTRA: You think you can help. Like some Bengali detective! What a fool. How will you do in jail, huh? That's where they'll put you. You think anyone will help *you* then? I'm calling Prabhu to come on the next flight out. He's the top lawyer in all New York City. Fake teachers who are police! He'll have both your badges taken away!

(Door slams.)

PEDERSON: Told you to have a syllabus.

CHANG: Catching a murderer doesn't leave much time to make one.

NAVEEN: How'd you end up teaching chemistry . . . if you're a cop?

CHANG: I needed a way undercover, and your chemistry teacher was about to go out on maternity leave. Principal Walker said it was the only option. Lucky my son's in AP Chem at Mission Science. Been teaching me at nights. He graded your tests. I took it seriously. Did the best I could. You all learned, didn't you?

NAVEEN: My tutor said you didn't know what you were talking about.

(Silence)

CHANG: Kelly Blake was your lab mate in my class.

NAVEEN: Not by choice. She was awful at chemistry. I would have taken anyone else.

PEDERSON: Hold up—I asked you to be *my* lab mate, and you said no.

NAVEEN: A guy can't be lab mates with another guy.

PEDERSON: Why not?

NAVEEN: It's Prince code. Ask any jock like Eric or Adam or Flynn. Pair up with a girl, and she'll do all the work for you. Pair up with a guy, and you'd have to work, like, *together*. Suppose you screw up a titration, or you're lost on the assignment? You'd have to admit it, and that would be so . . . awkward. With a girl, you can relax. Not have to try and act cool.

CHANG: In my day, you acted cool for the girls, not the guys.

NAVEEN: You can be yourself with a girl.

PEDERSON: Huh. I figured you were all using lab to test out prom pairings or something.

NAVEEN: No offense to a girl who just got murdered, but Kelly wasn't who I'd take to prom. Only reason I got her as a lab mate was because no other guys wanted her, and I get last pick since I'm not, you know . . . white.

CHANG: So you're telling me that even though you're the smartest kid in class, the boys won't pair up with you because it'd be awkward, and the girls get assigned based on ethnic status, so in the end, the best student gets stuck with the worst.

NAVEEN: Welcome to Chaminade.

(Silence)

NAVEEN: I think Adam did it.

PEDERSON: What?

NAVEEN: Killed Ariana. It might have been him.

CHANG: No, it wasn't.

NAVEEN: He hated Kelly too.

PEDERSON: He didn't kill Ariana or Kelly. We have tails on Adam. During the time Kelly was killed, he was volunteering with Phillip, Eric, and Flynn at the church on Cristobal.

NAVEEN: Mount Zion. Adam was there? Makes sense. Phillip's dad is the deacon. Phil takes guys to help out at the church. Easy way to get your community service hours, and looks good on college applications. He never takes me, though. First

time I met Phillip's dad, he made lots of veiled comments about "radical Islam."

CHANG: You're Muslim?

NAVEEN: No.

CHANG: So that was what you wanted to tell us? That Adam killed Ariana?

NAVEEN: I just thought . . . You know. See something, say something.

CHANG: But you didn't see anything?

NAVEEN: He had issues with two of the girls. But like you said . . . guess it wasn't him. The other guys you keep bringing in are pointless. None of them could kill that many girls and get away with it. Adam's the only one that seemed plausible.

CHANG: Two alibis. Both ironclad.

NAVEEN: Well, then it's probably some old man, like my dad said. Explains why girls keep coming to school, even with a killer on the loose. It's the one place they feel safe.

PEDERSON: Thought you were buds with Adam.

NAVEEN: I am. Just trying to do the right thing. You know . . . be a good guy.

(Silence)

CHANG: Girls at school are dying, Naveen. Five so far. You don't seem rattled or freaked out. From where I sit, you don't feel any way about it at all.

NAVEEN: Don't know if I feel much of anything these days.

CHANG: What does that mean?

NAVEEN: Feelings aren't a thing. Not in Prince code. Ask Callum. He actually liked a girl at school, like for *real*, and Eric and Flynn basically forbid him from hanging out with us until he banged her. So yeah: show feelings, and they can only be used against you. Even with everything that's happening.

CHANG: Pederson, you liked a girl at school?

PEDERSON: Hold up—Naveen, what would you and Kelly talk about during lab?

NAVEEN: Shit talk, mostly. Kelly knew everyone's secrets. Isn't that why you hung around her? To dig up stuff on all of us? Kelly actually thought you were gay because you kept hounding her for dirt.

PEDERSON: Ohhh, *that's* why she tried to pair me up with Luke Stoeckel. But yeah, Kelly always had the 411.

CHANG: The 411? Did you just beam back to 1992?

NAVEEN: 411 doesn't even exist anymore.

PEDERSON: Chill. How did Kelly know everyone's secrets to begin with?

NAVEEN: All the "Princesses" felt safe talking to her. Since she wasn't a threat.

CHANG: Princesses?

NAVEEN: It's what we call hot girls at Chaminade. Just like the Chaminade "Princes" means the jocks. Every class has its Princesses. Ariana. Charlotte. Madelyn. Those were ours. Kelly wasn't a Princess, to say the least. But she was part of the Princess Game. Whoever killed her probably knew that.

CHANG: For the record, Charlotte Lawson was Victim Number Two. Impaled with glass slippers and bled out. Madelyn Mayberry, Victim Number Three. Suffocated in a glass box.

PEDERSON: The Princess Game means scoring with one of the Princesses.

NAVEEN: It means climbing the tower of in-betweens to *get* to one. Ari, Charlotte, and Madelyn were the hottest girls at school, but they weren't friends. It isn't like *Mean Girls*, where all the hot girls are in one clique. Each had her own domain. Especially at lunch. Ariana in the atrium, Charlotte in the courtyard, Madelyn in the cafeteria. And the point of the Princess Game is to scale through the leeches around them and make a Princess notice you. It's easier for guys like Phillip and Adam and Eric, because they're . . . them. But other guys have to deal with the girls in the way. We have names for them. The

“maidens,” like Tessa Tunney or Kendra Jordan, who act like bodyguards. Then there are the “stewards,” who brownnose and suck up, desperate to get to the inner circle. And way, way down are the “wenches” like Kelly Blake, trading in drama and secrets, doing everything they can to hang onto a Princess’s attention. And for guys like me, who aren’t like Eric or Phillip or a “Prince,” you have to start with the wenches and work your way up. Just like you have to start on the bench in basketball, hoping to one day get in the game.

CHANG: Doing well enough, aren’t you? Most Improved . . .

NAVEEN: Everyone knows that means you’re worst on the team.

CHANG: It didn’t mean that when I was young.

PEDERSON: Yes, it did. Anika Gelt. She was a “wench,” wasn’t she?

NAVEEN: Maybe? I’d better head out before my dad busts. Sorry I couldn’t help more.

(Chair slides.)

PEDERSON: Anika was Victim Number Four. Did you know her?

NAVEEN: Nah.

CHANG: Here’s the photo of her body. Someone faked a message from her prom date and sent her a cake that said “Eat Me.” Laced with cyanide. Pretty cowardly way to kill someone.

NAVEEN: Yeah. Didn’t really know her.

PEDERSON: You play *Red Dead* with the Princes?

NAVEEN: Sometimes.

PEDERSON: Your screen name is White Rabbit. Eric pointed it out on the scoreboard one night.

CHANG: White Rabbit is a character from *Alice in Wonderland*. In the story, Alice finds a cake that says “Eat Me.”

NAVEEN: So what?

CHANG: You asked Anika Gelt to prom, and she said no. Must have hurt to have been rejected by a “wench.”

NAVEEN: No, that’s not how it went.

PEDERSON: Thought you said you didn’t know her.

NAVEEN: She’s racist. Like a lot of other girls at school. Only into white guys.

PEDERSON: She’s going to prom with Raymond Green. The boy the killer pretended to send the cake from. Raymond isn’t white.

NAVEEN: I have to get to the shelter. Adoption day. Just thought I’d tell you about Adam.

CHANG: When can we follow up?

NAVEEN: Whenever. Might have to deal with my uncle Prabhu, though. But yeah, whenever you want.

(Door closes.)

CHANG: Hmm.

PEDERSON: He didn’t kill Anika. We have confirmed eyewitnesses that he was at the animal shelter the evening the cake was left at her door.

CHANG: When I was in high school, there was this kid. Pete Pauling. Total weirdo, always rambling about wizards and dragons and giving people bug-eyed stares. Used to eat eight pieces of pizza at lunch, slathered with peanut butter. Ninety percent of the school bullied the kid like no tomorrow. But not the prettiest girls. They protected him like their own brother.

PEDERSON: Because they felt sorry for him.

CHANG: No, because after school, he’d get them high on the weed he’d been smoking in order to survive the bullying from the rest of the kids. Circle of life. High school is an ecosystem of its own. Even when things don’t make sense.

PEDERSON: And you think Naveen doesn’t make sense.

CHANG: Humble, articulate, intelligent. Terrible athlete. Nothing in common with assholes like Eric and Adam and the

“Princes.” So why’s he hanging out with them?

PEDERSON: He wasn’t in the inner circle like I am. There’s a hierarchy to the Princes. Just like there is to the Princess Game.

CHANG: *You’re* in the inner circle.

PEDERSON: Yeah. I mean, I was. (*pause*) What?

CHANG: These boys aren’t your buddies, Pederson.

PEDERSON: I know that. I’m not an idiot. Want me to go harder? I’ll go harder. Don’t treat me like a baby, Chang. I’m trying to find the murderer, just like you. That’s why I got inside the Princes. That’s why I made friends with them.

CHANG: You sure that’s why? (*Chair slides.*) Besides, if you’re a Prince, then *everyone’s* a Prince.

PHILLIP

COUNSEL: The time is 4:22 p.m. on Friday, May 1. Just confirming on the record that Phillip Aurora is neither a suspect nor a person of interest in the Princess Killer case, and this is purely a routine interview for background information that might be useful in finding the perpetrator.

CHANG: He has alibis for the murders of Ariana Merced, Charlotte Lawson, and Kelly Blake, and given that the murders are serial in nature, yes, we can rule him out as the Princess Killer for now.

COUNSEL: Then you may proceed with your questions.

PEDERSON: Five girls dead, posed as fairy-tale princesses. Sleeping Beauty. Cinderella. Snow White. Alice in Wonderland. Little Mermaid. Who’s killing them?

PHILLIP: How should I know?

PEDERSON: You hooked up with all five.

PHILLIP: I did not hook up with Kelly Blake.

PEDERSON: She said you did. As long as she promised not to tell.

PHILLIP: And you believed her?

CHANG: It's in her texts to you. April 21. A week before she was killed. "*Thanks for the great time. Still thinking about the way you smell. I promise I won't tell. Your secret's safe with me.*"

PHILLIP: (*Snorts.*)

CHANG: What's that about, then?

PHILLIP: She's Naveen's lab partner. Came to watch his basketball practices, because he never got to play during games. Or at least, that's why she said she came to watch. Real reason was so she could sneak into the locker room afterward and annoy me and all the other boys she was hot for. Tried to ban her, but one time she brought Madelyn Mayberry, who made out with Kristoff in front of all of us on a dare—and ever since, we let Kelly keep barging in, hoping she'd bring another one of the Princesses. Never did. So yeah . . . I probably accidentally gave her a smile or a nod or something in the locker room, and she turned it into whatever that message said.

CHANG: "*Still thinking about the way you smell.*" That's from an accidental nod?

PHILLIP: How should I know? It's a locker room. For all I know, she was stealing our jockstraps. Kelly was nasty.

CHANG: You hook up with a lot of girls?

PHILLIP: That any of your business?

CHANG: All the girls you hook up with seem to end up dead.

PHILLIP: Well, there's a lot more who haven't.

CHANG: What's your dad think about you getting around?

PHILLIP: My dad?

CHANG: He's a church deacon.

PHILLIP: Yeah, and he brags to his friends about how much play I get. And don't bring up my dad again or this "interview" is over.

COUNSEL: I'd say it's over already.

PEDERSON: Huh. Weird.

PHILLIP: What?

PEDERSON: The day she sent that text message . . . you didn't have basketball practice.

CHANG: Schedule says he did.

PEDERSON: Yeah, but the gym lights short-circuited, and coach had to cancel practice.

CHANG: How would you know?

PEDERSON: Long story.

COUNSEL: I'd like the answer on the record.

CHANG: So would I.

PEDERSON: I was hanging with someone in there. *(pause)* You know . . . 'cause it was dark.

CHANG: *Who?*

PEDERSON: Rebecca Walker.

CHANG: Principal Walker's daughter. *(Snorts.)* Yeah right.

PEDERSON: Point is, there was no practice.

PHILLIP: You finally scored with Becs? In the *gym*? Dude. Wait till Flynn hears.

PEDERSON: No—I mean—don't say anything.

CHANG: Hold on. Let me get this straight. We went undercover investigating students, and you were "hanging" with the daughter of the principal, who *let us into* his school?

PEDERSON: She's eighteen! And she liked me! Said I'm the only good guy at Chaminade.

CHANG: And you couldn't say no?

PEDERSON: To an awesome girl? I never got any play in high school.

CHANG: You're not *in* high school!

PEDERSON: I got confused!

CHANG: Jesus Christ.

PEDERSON: Like I was *saying*, Phillip didn't have basketball practice, so Kelly couldn't have seen him there. Her text message had to have been about something else.

COUNSEL: If I'd known we were coming to a clown show instead of a questioning, I would have told my client to stay home. Look, Phillip isn't a suspect. What are we doing here? How is any of this relevant to finding the Princess Killer?

CHANG: How is this *relevant*? Pederson's right. We have a text message from a dead girl saying Phillip has a "secret" that only *she* knows, and Phillip's explanation for it is a lie.

PHILLIP: You think a guy like me would hook up with Kelly Blake?

CHANG: Because a Prince wouldn't, right? *The Prince of Chaminade*. Voted Best Looking three years and counting.

PHILLIP: You said it. I don't need action from wenches.

PEDERSON: Can I see your phone?

PHILLIP: Why?

PEDERSON: To see what you replied to Kelly's text.

COUNSEL: Funny guy. Get a warrant.

PHILLIP: Here. (*sound of phone on table*) I don't care.

CHANG: A dolphin emoji. That's what you sent back to her text.

PHILLIP: When dealing with girls, best response is a random emoji. They don't know what to say back.

PEDERSON: (*Paper shuffles.*) Huh.

COUNSEL: Now what?

PEDERSON: That day, the gym went dark. Sergeant reviewed footage from the camera positioned toward the south parking lot. It's mounted on top of the rear door to the gym, so it can track everyone coming in or out. At 3:22 p.m., right as practice starts, the lights short-circuit in the gym. Basketball team exits, including Phillip, along with the school chorus that

rehearses in the basement. Then at 3:31 p.m., the camera catches Phillip going back into the gym alone.

PHILLIP: Forgot my bag.

PEDERSON: Then at 3:34 p.m., Luke Stoeckel enters the gym. He doesn't come back out until 4:42 p.m., *with* Phillip . . . and then it looks like they both run into Kelly Blake in the parking lot. Luke gets in his car, but Phillip keeps talking to Kelly, pretty animatedly. Then she and Phillip go into the dark gym and don't leave until . . . 5:12 p.m.

CHANG: Luke Stoeckel . . . Pederson, that's the guy Kelly was trying to set you up with?

PEDERSON: Wish I *was* into dudes. Stoeckel's a catch. Well, not at Chaminade, though. Principal's files say he's had his locker vandalized, his car spray-painted, and he got beat up by Eric and Adam at Homecoming for "harassing" Phillip. Oh, and another fun fact: Luke used to be a parishioner at Phillip's church before Phillip's dad had him and his parents barred from services.

CHANG: And *that's* the guy Phillip was hanging out with in the gym?

PEDERSON: Pretty weird to hang in the dark with a dude who "harassed" you.

PHILLIP: Okay, genius. Luke's in chorus. Like you said, they use the basement of the gym to rehearse. Probably crossed paths for a second when he finished rehearsal and I finished practice. So the camera must be from a different day. Otherwise you and Rebecca Walker would have seen us. You two were dogging *in* the gym, remember?

PEDERSON: It was dark, *remember?* And we weren't "dogging." Plus, we heard someone come in.

COUNSEL: Again, questioning the relevance of any of—

PEDERSON: Sounds like Kelly caught Phil and Luke together. And then she and Phil . . . talked it out.

PHILLIP: I don't "talk things out" with Kelly Blake. And I'm not friends with Luke. Ask him. He'll laugh in your face. And

don't call me Phil. You and I aren't friends either.

COUNSEL: I'm stopping this here. All you're doing is using circumstantial evidence to cast aspersions against my client. When was Kelly Blake killed?

CHANG: Coroner says April 28. Sometime between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m.

COUNSEL: Phillip, Flynn, Adam, and Eric were volunteering at Mount Zion Church. Got there at five o'clock and didn't leave until ten o'clock, at which point they went to GameStop to wait in line for the *Modern Warfare* release at midnight. We provided eyewitness confirmation from people at the church and the GameStop manager, as well as receipts for their purchases of the game and pizza from Tigerlily's next door, plus a paper trail accounting for Phillip's alibis for several of the other murders. This is the last time we submit to questions without a warrant, understood?

PEDERSON: Can't argue with that.

PHILLIP: Are we done, then?

CHANG: One last question.

PHILLIP: Go for it.

CHANG: Are you glad Kelly's gone?

COUNSEL: Don't answer that. Good luck, gentlemen.

PHILLIP: Actually . . . it's funny. Even with her friends dead, Kelly wasn't scared of the Princess Killer like other girls. Still was up to her usual tricks. Maybe because she was more Witch than Princess. Guess she got her fairy-tale ending anyway.

PEDERSON: What do you mean?

PHILLIP: You know, Cally Cal . . . Witches never win.

(Door closes.)

CHANG: What the hell was that?

PEDERSON: He's just being a douche. We need to talk to Luke. Who else is on our list? Kristoff, Flynn . . . Flynn's lawyer is stonewalling.

CHANG: No, I mean Rebecca Walker. You weren't going to tell me?

PEDERSON: Look, it's not a big deal.

CHANG: To you or to her? And what happens when her dad finds out? If you messed with my kid, I'd cut your nuts off.

PEDERSON: Rebecca and I promised not to tell anyone.

CHANG: Was this before or after she knew she was dating a cop?

PEDERSON: "Dating" is a strong word. We were hanging out.

CHANG: Not from what Naveen said. He said there were real feelings involved.

PEDERSON: Calm down. She's chill. It's over, anyway. What? Why you looking at me like that?

CHANG: The way you talk about her. "Not a big deal." "Hanging out." "She's chill." You sound like one of them.

(Silence)

PEDERSON: I'm calling Flynn's lawyer. He can't hide forever.

CALLUM

"Monday, May 4, 12:03 p.m. Driving to Chaminade to question Luke and Kristoff. Chang and I got word from the chief: no more bringing kids down to the precinct until we're ready to make an arrest. We were front-page heroes when we started hunting whoever's killing their girls; now that we're after their boys, they want to run us out of town. Feds threatening to come in too. Can barely open my phone without a thousand more death threats and spam messages and virus links. My house got hit last night too. Chang says it was pig's blood that they sprayed on the walls: 'PIG BITCH.' Fuck them. I'm not backing down. There's a murderer at this school. Killed five girls. What's next? Rapunzel—strangled with her own hair? Red Riding Hood—her stomach sewn full of stones? Beauty and the Beast—don't even want to think about what that'll look like . . . Been reading Grimms' Fairy Tales at

night. Messing with my dreams. We're close. One of these Princes is the real Pig Bitch."

LUKE

CHANG: What's your relationship with Phillip?

LUKE: That's why you pulled me out of a test to the principal's office? To ask about Phillip?

CHANG: What's your relationship with him?

LUKE: None.

PEDERSON: You're not friends?

LUKE: No.

CHANG: We have surveillance footage from a couple weeks ago. You two were in a dark gym for an hour before you left together.

LUKE: Don't remember that. Must be a different day. Our security guards are pretty lazy. Probably tagged the footage wrong.

PEDERSON: Did Phillip prep you to talk to us?

LUKE: Phillip and I don't talk.

PEDERSON: Your student file says you got beat up for harassing him at Homecoming.

LUKE: I deserved it.

PEDERSON: *Deserved* it?

LUKE: Drank a bottle of vodka, probably got on his jock a bit. You know, barking up the wrong tree. Like Kelly was trying to set you up with me.

PEDERSON: So you *do* talk to Phillip. In fact, you were hitting on him, and he wasn't responsive. That's what you're saying.

LUKE: Can't remember. I was really wasted. Maybe I shouldn't say that to a cop. Then again, I didn't know you were a cop when we were drinking at the same parties.

(Silence)

CHANG: Mount Zion Church explicitly rejects homosexuality and other cardinal sins. Says it right on their website. Even offers links to conversion-therapy services. How did you feel about you and your parents being thrown out of the church by Phillip's dad?

LUKE: We're back in now.

CHANG: Since when?

LUKE: Like a couple weeks.

CHANG: So around the time Kelly came to know about you and Phillip . . . Maybe Phillip was afraid his secret would come out. He had to get rid of Kelly. And keep you quiet. Bet he got his boys to stop bullying you too.

LUKE: Honestly, don't know what you're talking about.

CHANG: So what changed, then? Why would a homophobic church bring you back?

LUKE: Better to have me in the fold than out of it, I guess. If you don't mind, I'm going back to class. We got a test in Calc, and unlike you, he's a real teacher.

(Door opens.)

REBECCA: Oh, hey, Luke . . . Oh, sorry. Thought my dad was here.

PEDERSON: Principal Walker gave us his office to do a few last interviews.

LUKE: I'm gonna go.

(Door closes.)

PEDERSON: Rebecca—

REBECCA: My dad must really believe you'll find the killer. Otherwise he wouldn't let you both back on campus. Best of luck with it. I'm gonna catch up with Luke.

CHANG: Rebecca, mind answering a few questions for us real quick?

REBECCA: Um . . .

PEDERSON: Leave her, Chang. We're good.

REBECCA: Actually, I have time. As long as I get to ask a question first.

CHANG: Sure.

REBECCA: Callum, did you tell anyone what happened between us? In the gym, I mean.

PEDERSON: No. Did you?

REBECCA: No. We made a promise.

PEDERSON: We made a promise.

(Silence)

REBECCA: What questions do you want to ask me?

CHANG: What happened in the gym with Callum?

PEDERSON: Dude!

CHANG: Okay, okay, relax . . . This is an interview with Rebecca Walker, Monday, May 4, 12:58 p.m., in Principal Walker's office at Chaminade High School. Lieutenant Chang and Detective Pederson present. Rebecca, what can you tell me about the Princess Game? Where do you stand in it?

REBECCA: Nowhere. I know it for what it is. It isn't about the "Princesses" in the slightest. It's the Princes who are playing games. It's always been about them.

CHANG: What do you mean?

REBECCA: The boys assign a hierarchy to the girls, scoring them on their looks. But it's the boys who have the real hierarchy. Being a man means hooking up with the hottest girl they can, telling their friends about it, and tossing them out like trash. Get drunk, hook up, brag about it, humiliate the girl, then try for someone hotter. That's the real game. And the girls were starting to figure it out. Maybe that's why they're ending up dead. Someone out there is warning what happens to girls who don't play by the rules.

CHANG: Who was figuring it out?

REBECCA: All the girls. That's why Ariana started telling people what a creep Adam was. And why Charlotte cheated on

Eric with Flynn, because she knew Eric was passing private pictures of her around the locker room. And why Anika Gelt went with Raymond Green to prom, when she heard Naveen was calling her a racist for rejecting him. Girls were starting to turn the tables. For once, I had hope that things were finally changing. That *we* could win the game. But at this school, the Princes always win. *(pause)* Even the ones you think are different.

CHANG: Different? How?

REBECCA: Imagine a new boy who comes in. Honest, vulnerable, real. One who doesn't know the rules. And out of all the girls at school, somehow he takes a liking to you. He treats you well. He cares about you. You sneak out to old movies at the Lantern. You make s'mores in the woods at night. You send each other playlists, and his has Joni Mitchell on it. He lets things go slow, without pressure, and you feel at home with him. But then he starts hanging out with the Princes. Eric. Flynn. Phillip. Adam. And all the others. They start pressuring him to hook up with you. Flynn, especially. Telling him to seal the deal and prove he's one of them. He tries to ignore them, but he can't. His manhood is on the line. Every boy wants to be a Prince—even this one who thinks he's a "good guy." Suddenly, he's putting a little more pressure on you. Maybe he doesn't even know he's doing it. Pushing you to do what you weren't ready for. But you care about him. You know who he really is. So you pretend you're okay with it. You let him take you further . . . one day in the school gym, when it's dark. And it goes badly. Not for you. For *him*. You try to make him feel better. You tell him it's okay. But then he just ignores you. Throws you away like the Princes taught him to. Could be worse, of course. He could lie and tell the whole school he banged you in the gym. Then he'd be a real Prince. But as long as he doesn't lie, you hold out hope that maybe deep down, he's still the guy you once knew.

(Silence)

PEDERSON: He *is* still the guy you once knew. And he would never lie.

CHANG: *(Mutters.)* Christ.

REBECCA: Please tell my dad I'm looking for him.

PEDERSON: Rebecca?

REBECCA: Yes, Detective Pederson?

PEDERSON: (*softly*) Why didn't you tell me how you felt? Why didn't you speak up?

REBECCA: Ask Madelyn Mayberry what happens to girls who speak up.

KRISTOFF

PEDERSON: What happened with you and Madelyn Mayberry? No bullshit, or we'll haul you down to the station.

KRISTOFF: Sloooooow down, cowboy. Comin' in hot! Hear that's your specialty, though.

CHANG: Both of you, cool it. It is Monday, May 4, 1:18 p.m. This interview is taking place with Kristoff Arendelle in Principal Walker's office at Chaminade High School.

PEDERSON: Kristoff, you kissed Madelyn because of a locker room dare.

KRISTOFF: False. She kissed *me*. She insisted we do it with my mascot head on, but I was like no way, fair princess, you gotta taste these fat, chapped lips in front of all these boys.

CHANG: This was after basketball practice?

KRISTOFF: I run mascot for spring sports, so me and the cheerleaders usually rehearse on the sidelines with the teams once a week. Behold "Prince Chaminade," who looks like a cross between Jack Sparrow and Liberace, and somehow that's supposed to intimidate teams like the Titans or the Wildcats? God, that costume smells like ass. I usually shower after practice with the boys, because wear that foam head for an hour and you come out smelling like necrophilia. Plus, hang around those Princes long enough, and you end up catching a little wench tail on the back end.

CHANG: The girls the "Princes" reject.

KRISTOFF: Stewards and wenches gotta scavenge somewhere, right? They nickname me “Incel,” and even then, I still get more play than most of those pretty boys. I just don’t brag about it like they do, ’cause I don’t want to spoil a girl’s reputation. But Madelyn . . . well, she doggone went and spoiled her reputation all by herself.

PEDERSON: So this dare.

KRISTOFF: Madelyn Mayberry is like the Virgin Queen of Flyover Land. Dresses in pink and wears butterfly berets and eats Greek yogurt at lunch. Ariana and Charlotte were down to bone, but Madelyn’s hot in that Mormon-girl way, which is why half the dudes in school wanted to climb that tower, even if they all crashed and burned. Only evidence that Madelyn had any libido at all was when she let Phillip feel her up during Eric’s birthday party. Phillip told everyone about it, of course. That’s the point. And then suddenly Madelyn’s on this rampage, saying that if our team name’s the Princes, then guys need to treat chicks better, and before you know it, she’s asking for mandatory Chivalry Training—she was really into Chaminade’s fairy-tale lingo—like we’re some kinda ground zero for #MeToo. Says boys and girls need to be held to the same standards, because if chicks treated dudes the way we treat them, then all hell would break loose. Which is true, but that’s evolution, man. Don’t hate the players; hate the genes. No one listened to her, but she’s editor of the school paper, so she decides to eavesdrop on the locker room after practice and expose just how filthy our mouths are when we talk about girls. Kelly Blake sneaks her in, but Kelly’s big ass trips, and we end up catching them both. Then Phillip tells Maddy that he’s going to report her for spying in the guys’ locker room—which by her own “equal rights” logic should result in being expelled, since if a guy did that in the girls’ locker room, he’d be put in a hole. Only way Phillip won’t report her and ruin her life is a game of truth or dare—and he dares her to kiss the ugliest boy in the room. She instantly looks at me. Stares right at me like I’m a hobgoblin about to eat her. Phil never said my name. She could have made the case for any other dude. Hell, Maddy could have picked Phil for being ugly “inside.” But not after she looked at me like that. Ugly to Maddy meant

unshowered, rank-smelling, pizza-faced Kristoff, with a jiggly belly and hair on his shoulders. Still remember those wide, revolted blue eyes. She'd rather die than kiss me. But didn't have a choice, did she? Her fate was sealed. Had to be five seconds long, and the boys counted it out, two seconds for every one.

PEDERSON: Were you insulted? By the way she looked at you?

KRISTOFF: Hell no. Still got to kiss her, didn't I? *And* she had to pass me in the hall every day after. That same disgusted look on her face, like she was reliving every second. Like I was the worst moment in her life. *That's* victory to me.

CHANG: Until she ends up in a glass coffin.

KRISTOFF: Anyone could have done it, honestly. You know how Snow White had to clean up after her damn dirty dwarfs? Maddy was trying to clean up all of mankind.

CHANG: "Incel." Why is that your nickname?

KRISTOFF: 'Cause I look like a Reddit troll.

PEDERSON: Had nothing do with the essay you wrote last year for Crowder's class?

KRISTOFF: Excuse me, we were learning about "polemics." The assignment was to write a manifesto. Valerie Solanas wrote the SCUM Manifesto in 1967, about ridding the world of men. I argued the same about women. Solanas's manifesto is considered a classic. Mine got me suspended. Double standard, wouldn't you say?

PEDERSON: You have a tattoo on your back.

KRISTOFF: Would you like me to disrobe and show you?

CHANG: What's it of?

KRISTOFF: You know what it is, otherwise you wouldn't be tag-teaming to ask me.

PEDERSON: It's Dopey. One of Snow White's dwarfs.

KRISTOFF: A lazy, pointless oaf, and yet the only dwarf people remember. A role model if I've ever seen one. Hmm . . . History with Madelyn. Writes about getting rid of women. Has

a Snow White tattoo. Fits the profile, doesn't it? Only one problem: When was Maddy killed?

CHANG: April 15.

KRISTOFF: Exactly. And I was in Hamelin at State Swim Champs, running Prince Chaminade for the girls' team. So I ain't your killer, am I? But that's where you're going wrong. Worrying about profiles and motives instead of looking at the real story. Five dead princesses. No prince to save them. Fairy tales end with a moral, don't they? Well, these dead girls are trying to teach us one. You just got to figure out what it is. Then you'll find who's responsible.

PEDERSON: And you have no idea who would have something against Madelyn?

KRISTOFF: You're as good at listening as you are at sleuthin'. *(pause)* Look, hell if I know. Probably all the dudes she wouldn't fuck. But I got closer than any of 'em, didn't I? Glass box. What a way to go. Kinda fitting if you think about it.

PEDERSON: Fitting . . . ?

KRISTOFF: Flopping around inside, looking out scared at whoever put her there. Probably the same look she had when she knew she had to kiss me.

CALLUM

“Wednesday, May 6, 3:58 p.m. Jogging around Cheshire Park, trying to settle my brain down, but it's just making it worse, so figured I'd talk it out. Fucking voice notes turned Dear Diary. I don't care. Got no one else to talk to. No Rebecca. No boys. Chang's being pissy. Mom still thinks I'm at the academy; if I tell her what I'm up to, she won't sleep at night. Or she'll stop letting me send her money and ask Dad for help instead. I'd rather put my head in an oven. Boys are probably at lacrosse practice right now. Damn. I miss it. When I was at practice, I'd forget about everything else. Eye on the ball. Run, run, run. Now when I run, all I think about is dead girls and how those girls used to be alive, in my classes, at my games, at the parties I went to, and now they're dead . . . and I'm the one

they're counting on to find the killer. A killer who's so close, I can taste it, and yet nothing adds up. Not the alibis, not the motives. No matter how hard I look, the answer just vanishes right before my eyes, like I'm the blind spot, like I'm the one who's— (Phone dings.) Shit. Chang's texting. (Footsteps stop.) Says Flynn's ready to talk. Lawyer called; Flynn has a statement to give. Says to get to the precinct as fast as I can. Two weeks Flynn hides from us, and now suddenly a 'statement' . . . That rat bastard. That small-balled coward. Coming to confess or trade info for immunity. I knew it was him. He cracked . . . He finally cracked . . . (Footsteps pick up.)”

FLYNN

CHANG: Wednesday, May 6, 5:06 p.m. at the Middletown precinct. Lieutenant Chang and Detective Pederson, both present with Flynn Fitzherbert—

PEDERSON: Why'd you kill them? Because Charlotte told Eric you hooked up with her? Because all the Princesses knew you slept with your best friend's girl?

FLYNN: As my lawyer told you, I have a statement to read.

(Silence)

CHANG: Go ahead.

FLYNN: Five of my classmates are dead. *Five*. And now some people are saying I did it.

Slashed all these girls. Alright. So here's my confession.

I know who the Princess Killer is. Or at least, I think I know who it is. Been sending tips over to the precinct, trying to get them to investigate.

But no one cares what I think.

Instead, two undercover policemen come into my school and invade our safe space, trying to bait and trap students like me. On what grounds? First, the Middletown Police claim that Chaminade High had a culture of “toxic masculinity” that made me and my friends the prime suspects for the murders.

Guys who are just trying to manage homework and sports practices and somehow carve out enough time to scarf down dinner, let alone start murdering our friends. But common sense doesn't matter. Not when they've made up their minds. From the start, the Princess Killer had to be a Chaminade "Prince." Case closed. They turned down the FBI's help. They never brought in state investigators. Instead, they send in two of their own: an aging lieutenant who'd been trapped behind a desk for decades and a twenty-one-year-old greenie who hadn't even made it out of police academy. This is who our own law enforcement entrusted with finding a sociopathic killer on the loose. Even more, neither of these cops has the slightest experience with homicide, serial killer cases, undercover operations, or field detective work, and I'd bet they haven't even compiled a proper profile for the suspect yet, given that they're still interrogating me and my friends day after day, instead of hunting the real murderer, who's out there laughing at them, planning his next kill. To axe five girls and get away with it requires deliberation and planning and resources and time that no single boy my age could ever pull off alone. The idea that Chaminade is the root of all evil—that one of us is responsible—is so laughable that it makes you ask: Who could possibly come to such a stupid conclusion?

Good question. Let's meet the two "cops" who were tasked with finding the killer. First, there's Joseph Chang, who not only led this farce, but did it while masquerading as a chemistry teacher—a subject for which he had no background and confessed to a friend during his questioning that Chang's own son was the one grading our tests and helping tutor his father on the side. So not only do we have an incompetent cop investigating us, but an incompetent teacher teaching us at school. Two for one. We all lose, including the next girl who turns up dead. Then there's Callum Pederson, a poor man's Timothée Chalamet and poetry-writing sad boy, who seems to be on this case less because he has any actual value and more because he wanted a second chance at not being a high-school loser. Former Brookside Nobody now thinks he's gonna be a Chaminade Prince. The instant Callum arrives, he's mysteriously added to the lacrosse team, and buddies up to me and my friends like the worst version of a male wench, acting

like we're bros just because he says so. We all saw through him for the lame suck-up he was, but we put up with him as best we could. We may be "toxic males," but at least we're polite. We invited him to our houses, to our parties. He met our parents, ate our food, played video games in our rooms. But deep down, we knew he was an impostor. A sheep in wolf's clothing. We didn't know he was a cop, of course. But we knew he wasn't one of us. He wasn't a Prince, even if he spent his whole life wanting to be. It's why I don't tell him who I really think is killing the girls. Or that I've started to investigate things on my own. To clear me and my friends' names. I've started asking all the questions the detectives aren't.

And no wonder! Because while I'm looking for the killer, "Detective" Pederson's too busy going to house parties and making a play for the principal's daughter, which sounds like statutory if I've ever heard of it (someone call a cop!). But even in his second try at his glory years, little Pederson bumbles it. In fact, he screws up with her so bad that they both promise not to tell anyone what happened. But then Pederson breaks this promise by spilling the beans to Phillip and his lawyer, and soon everyone finds out . . . so now Rebecca Walker is telling *her* side of the story. You see, Principal Walker's daughter really liked Callum. She wanted to take things slow. But Callum pressures her to hook up with him in the school gym. He's desperate to bang her. To prove he's one of us. It's his only shot at redemption for his wasted life—but he's so worked up that a girl is actually into him that he creams his pants before they even get to second base. Then, while he's pretending this is the first time he's ever shot his wad at first touch, and Rebecca's pretending to believe him, Cal hears footsteps in the gym, freaks out that someone might see them, and jumps up, elbowing Rebecca Walker square in the eye. So now the girl he tried to smash has a grade-A shiner, but he doesn't even bother to help her. Instead, Cally Cal leaves her high and dry and books it out of the gym, covering his stained skinny jeans. Never apologizes either. He ignores Rebecca from that day forward, even when she walks by him in the hall with a black eye.

That's toxic masculinity, friends.

A boy who never grew up, preying on our girls. Play-acting the cop who's supposed to find who's killing them.

We all know how this will end. More Chaminade students hauled in. More time wasted. More tips and real suspects ignored. Until finally someone figures out that the real criminals are the ones in charge of catching them. They're the ones letting a killer go free. And until we start looking at *them* the way they're looking at us . . . more girls will die. So now it's our turn to speak up. To start asking them the questions: Why haven't they found the killer? Why were they so quick to target us from the beginning? What do *they* have to hide?

Thank you, Principal Walker, for letting me read this statement at this afternoon's assembly. I know it must be hard for you, hearing what your students—and your own daughter—had to go through these past few months. I know that you only wanted to do right by letting these cops go stealth in our school. But we've all learned the truth about them. In fairy tales, there is good and there is evil. And now we know which side is which.

(Silence)

PEDERSON: You . . . read that to the whole school?

FLYNN: At this afternoon's assembly. And I posted it online. Three thousand reshares so far. *(Chair slides.)* When all this is over, you should come play *Red Dead* with me and the boys sometime, Officer Pederson. It'll be like old times.

(Door closes.)

CHANG: *(quietly)* I told you, Pederson. I told you . . .

PEDERSON: I tried to call Rebecca. I tried to smooth things over. She wouldn't answer.

CHANG: How many times did you call her without an answer? Twenty-eight? That's what Adam did to Ariana, right? Isn't that what Princes are supposed to do? Demand an answer. Get an answer. Keep calling, Cally Cal. Keep calling. *(Chair scrapes.)*

PEDERSON: What's that supposed to mean? Chang? Where you going?

REBECCA

Voice mail from CALLUM PEDERSON—Tuesday, May 19, 10:01 a.m.

“Rebecca . . . it’s Callum. I know you’re not going to pick up. But I needed to say this out loud. For you and me. So you know how I really feel. I’m sorry, Rebecca. I’m sorry for being a fuckup and an asshole and like all the other guys, when you thought I was different. I care about you, and that’s why this hurts so bad. You’re the first girl I’ve ever felt like I could be myself with. More than that. You’re the first person I could be awkward and weird and vulnerable with, all the things guys aren’t allowed to be. And instead of making me feel ashamed for it, you made me feel wanted. What else can a person ask except to meet someone who lets them be more themselves. I’ve never had that in my life. I always felt I was playing a part to fit in. Trying to be like the other guys. Trying to be the kind of prince that gets the girl of his dreams. But you didn’t want that kind of prince. You wanted me. That’s probably why I couldn’t stop staring into your eyes, like you weren’t real. Like you were like some kind of fairy princess that I didn’t deserve. Because I don’t deserve you. You’re too good for me. You’re honest and real in all the ways I can’t be for you. And I just hope . . . I hope that when enough time goes by, you realize how perfect and beautiful and amazing you are, inside and out, and how nothing I did should make you doubt that. I know you thought I wasn’t like the other boys. I thought I was special too. But I’m not. I’m not the good guy. Your real prince is out there somewhere. You deserve a happy ending far, far away from me. Maybe one day I can learn from you how to find mine. Okay. Bye, Rebecca.”

CALLUM

CHANG: For the record, this is the exit interview of Callum Pederson, conducted by Lieutenant Joseph Chang on Tuesday,

May 19, at 4:32 p.m. I worked with the chief to get you a decent severance. *(pause)* Don't give me that face, Callum. I did what I could.

PEDERSON: Heard there's a sixth girl found this morning. Who?

CHANG: Not our case anymore, Callum. FBI has a suspect.

PEDERSON: Then tell me how he killed her.

CHANG: Let it go.

PEDERSON: How? Rapunzel? Red Riding Hood?

CHANG: For your own sake, Callum.

PEDERSON: *HOW?*

CHANG: Pinned with a donkey tail. Her nose replaced with a long stick. The words "Who's Next" carved into it. Alright?

PEDERSON: Fuck. I can't sleep. It's like the answer is right there, slipping around in my head, and I can't grab hold of it.

CHANG: Leave it. Move on.

PEDERSON: Who's the suspect?

CHANG: Older guy. Fifties. Flynn gave us a tip that paid off. What are you going to do now?

PEDERSON: I've been bunking with my mom. Doing shifts at the diner with her. Might stop. Too many parents of students coming in, giving me looks. Not sure what else to do. Always thought I'd be a cop. How about you?

CHANG: Put back on desk duty. Feels like home.

(Silence)

PEDERSON: Hung out with Eric, Adam, and Flynn on Saturday.

CHANG: Really?

PEDERSON: Eric asked if I'd sub in for a league scrimmage. Wanted to say no, but . . . I felt guilty somehow. Now that there's a suspect. Like I was still holding on to something, even after they'd all moved on. I mean, they should be the ones who hate me. *(pause)* You said Flynn tipped you off on the suspect?

CHANG: Callum—

PEDERSON: Who's the guy?

CHANG: Drifter who's been living under the bridge. Been harassing girls for months.

PEDERSON: *That's* the Princess Killer? That's the murderer meticulously luring teenage girls and re-creating famous fairy tales?

CHANG: You're young. Best thing you can do is get on with your life.

PEDERSON: Who do you think did it?

CHANG: About your severance and benefits—

PEDERSON: They had the motives. The Princes. But then they had alibis too.

CHANG: Which is why none of them was the killer.

PEDERSON: Like Adam. Ariana was spreading word that he was a bad hookup. That embarrassed him. Killed his rep with other girls. Plus, she was blocking his texts day after day, ignoring him at school. He didn't show the slightest remorse about her death.

CHANG: He didn't do it, Callum. We have *proof* he didn't do it.

PEDERSON: And Naveen—he might be a good guy, but Anika Gelt rejects him for prom. A “wench.” The lowest of the low on Chaminade's scale. That stings Naveen hard. He tells everyone she's racist. That's how he gets over it. But then she takes a black guy to prom. A black guy the killer fakes a note from to send a poisoned cake to Anika . . . It all points at Naveen.

CHANG: He didn't do it either.

PEDERSON: And Phillip too. Kelly Blake figured out that he and Luke Stoeckel were hooking up. She texts him that she knows his secret . . . Maybe Phillip even hooks up with her, too, just to put her off. But Phillip's still nervous. All this time, he's gone to such great lengths to act the prince, making a play for half the girls in school. Suppose Phillip's dad finds out?

The deacon of a gay-hating church? But then Kelly ends up dead . . . It has to be Phillip. Same story with Kristoff, who had that ugly history with Madelyn, a girl who made him feel like garbage, no matter how cool Kristoff plays it . . . Of course he'd want her dead. And Eric—Charlotte Lawson cheated on him after he betrayed her trust.

CHANG: None of them did it, Pederson.

PEDERSON: Which is why a catcalling drifter's taking the fall.

CHANG: Callum. I'm begging you. Let it go.

PEDERSON: They acted as if none of it ever happened. When I was at school, there was always a distance between us. But it was different on Saturday. The scrimmage was a shit game, but Eric let me score the last goal, right when he could have had it. He said something after: "Princes save each other." Like I was part of their club. Like I was finally one of them. The guys even asked me to a party last night, but I said no. It's strange. I wanted to say yes so bad. To be one of them. Maybe I should have said yes. Maybe this is the world giving me another chance. To be a real man. To have real friends. Princes who save each other. That's not so bad, is it?

CHANG: If only these girls had Princes to save them. Alright, let's get this paperwork over with.

PEDERSON: Kristoff said something like that. About the girls. Remember?

CHANG: No idea. FBI has the tapes.

PEDERSON: I do too. Backed them up on my phone.

CHANG: Which is completely illegal, and now I'll have to impound it.

PEDERSON: *(Tapping sounds)* Here. Right here. Listen: "*Five dead princesses. No prince to save them. Fairy tales end with a moral, don't they? Well, these girls are trying to teach us one. You just got to figure out what it is. Then you'll find who's responsible.*" No prince to save them. That's what he said. "No prince to save them." What's the moral of the story, then? There's no prince to save them, because—

CHANG: “Princes save each other.”

PEDERSON: Princes save each other.

(Silence)

CHANG: Impossible. What you’re saying is impossible.

PEDERSON: Then why are you thinking it too? They each had motives. And they each had alibis. Flynn even said it in his statement: the idea that “one of them” was the killer was laughable. But it wasn’t one of them. It was never one of them. It was *all* of them.

CHANG: Callum . . .

PEDERSON: Hiding each murder by having a friend do it instead. Loyalty put to the test. Kill a Princess for another Prince. To *be* a Prince. The ultimate club.

CHANG: No one would pay that price.

PEDERSON: That was the game, Chang! The way it was at school! Score with the Princesses. Not for the sake of the girl. For the sake of the *guys*! Proving yourself to them. Being a man. And the girls were starting to fight back. The Princes were going to lose the game. They were going to lose everything! Unless the Princes did something . . . That’s why they started. Every girl who dared to cross a Prince, taught a lesson. Every girl who stepped out of line, punished. That’s why they hung out together, to give themselves alibis. That’s why Naveen pointed the finger at Adam, knowing Adam couldn’t have done it. To make himself look like a “good guy” helping us out, when he was just another Prince. And now I’m one of those Princes. Just like I always wanted to be. I’m part of their game . . . Don’t you see? Eric said it himself. “Princes save each other.” And now I’m a Prince. Only I’m not, because there’s no way I could ever . . . *(softly)* Chang?

CHANG: *(Gasps.)* No . . . no no no . . .

PEDERSON: Wait . . . wait, Chang . . . no!

CHANG: I told you to let it go, Callum. I told you—

PEDERSON: She’s the body, isn’t she . . . She’s the one they found . . .

CHANG: Oh God, Callum!

PEDERSON: Adam kills Charlotte for Eric. Naveen kills Ariana for Adam. Phillip kills Anika for Naveen. Kristoff kills Kelly for Phillip. Flynn kills Madelyn for Kristoff. And now someone kills . . .

CHANG: Rebecca . . .

PEDERSON: For me.

CHANG: We'll go to the chief! We'll go to the feds!

PEDERSON: (*Rasps.*) The party last night. I told them I wouldn't go . . . I don't have an alibi, Chang . . . If I pin it on them, they'll pin it on me . . . They'll call *me* the liar . . . Pinocchio. That's how they killed her . . .

CHANG: To keep you quiet. To warn you.

PEDERSON: No . . . More than that. They killed *for* me, Chang. But that's not the real Princess Game. The real game is what I'm willing to do for them. What *every* boy is willing to do for them. To be one of them. To be a Prince. They're not warning me. They're asking me . . . "*Who's next?*"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Soman Chainani is the *New York Times* bestselling author of The School for Good and Evil series, which has sold nearly three million copies, has been translated into thirty languages, and will soon be a film from Netflix. A screenwriter and director, Chainani was also named one of *Out* magazine's *Out100*.