



THE

“Bound to be a massive winner.”

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NEXT

PIP DRYSDALE

GIRL

Praise for *The Next Girl*

‘A relentless and high-concept deep dive into the psyche of a dangerous young woman who is both vulnerable, loveable and scary as hell. Revealing her secrets with beat-perfect timing, Billie knows her fault-lines and her failings, but she has the nature of a soldier, someone you’d want in the trenches beside you during war. Ask yourself: If you had the skills and the courage, would you go all-in to take down bad guys? Set to a spectacular playlist, music is the spine of a thriller so propulsive I had to physically put the book down and walk away to coax my heart rate back to normal. Pip Drysdale always delivers heroines I recognise as though I’ve found a long-lost sister and *The Next Girl* is one fierce sister. Original. Breathtaking. Dangerous. *The Next Girl* is compulsory reading from an author at the top of her game.’ **Loraine Peck, author of *The Second Son***

‘A wild rollercoaster of a ride where the twists keep coming and the stakes keep rising. It’s a complete adrenaline rush as Billie takes increasing risks to protect herself and other victims. This clever thriller questions power in relationships, technology and the justice system. It hooked me in and left me breathless. Set aside your weekend because you won’t be able to put it down.’ **Petronella McGovern, author of *The Liars***

‘Reading Pip Drysdale is like having cocktails with your savviest girlfriend – you know the one. Fierce, smart and packed with tension, *The Next Girl* grabbed me from the first page. Drysdale knows how to craft a badass heroine, and with *The Next Girl*, she turns her sharp eye on injustice, misogyny and surveillance.’ **Ashley Kalagian Blunt, author of *Dark Mode***

‘A twisty, suspenseful thriller with a heroine who makes doing bad things seem right.’ **Tim Ayliffe, author of *The Enemy Within***

The Next Girl playlist

For a Spotify playlist based on Billie's soundtrack to life, please follow the QR code below.



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**THE
NEXT
GIRL
PIP DRYSDALE**

Published by Simon & Schuster
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Readers are advised that this book contains sexual assault and violence.
Oh, and women who dare to break the rules.

For my dad. Thank you for teaching me to dream.

FRIDAY

6.19 AM

Have you ever had one of those mornings where, before you even open your eyes, you just know everything is shit? You don't know how, you don't know why, you just sense you're mid-apocalypse?

Well, that's me. Right now.

My left eye is throbbing, my mouth is sour, there's a summer storm running through my veins and the sheets... the sheets smell like cigarettes and... *uh-oh*: citrus?

Well, that right there is my first clue.

Because *my* laundry detergent smells of a mountain breeze. It says so on the box. There's even a picture.

My eyes crack open and my head throbs as I scan the low-lit room. There's a mirrored closet, an open window with a mauve fog outside, a flatscreen TV, a white bookcase filled with the thin spines of a comic book collection, and an ice hockey poster staring back at me from the wall.

And there's this noise...

It's low and whooshing, and it's coming in from outside. It sounds like... waves, like the ocean. But I live in New York City, so it can't be the ocean.

Whoosh...

Oh crap.

It absolutely, one hundred per cent, is the ocean. So where the hell am I?

The walls sway in and my pulse speeds up, and I pull the covers to my chest as I struggle for fragments of last night: *the bar... Heather... a yellow cab swerving...*

But the rest is empty; distorted. The crackly lead-in on a record.

Except... *Oh god.*

Did something bad happen last night?

A wave of nausea moves through me and everything gets hot. Really hot. My eyes prickle with tears. Because it feels like yes, maybe it did, but I can't tell if it was big-bad or little-bad... *Maybe it's just alcohol-induced anxiety...*

And then I feel it. Clue number two: a heaviness on the mattress behind me. And *shit, shit, shit*, is it awake?

I hold my breath and listen for movement, but all I can hear is the whoosh of waves coming in through the open window and the high-pitched call of some sort of seabird.

I can almost taste the salt and I just want to go home. But I have to look.

Slowly, I turn my head.

The room stutters as I take him in. Tufts of caramel hair peek out from a long cocoon of pale blue covers; he's at least six foot three. And all wrapped up like that, he looks benign enough, like a huge fluffy burrito. But why can't I remember his name? And what does his face look like? How drunk *was* I?

I reach for my breasts, my stomach, my thighs. Just to make sure everything is still there. My mind is a hurricane of: *Did we use a condom? I bet we didn't... now I'll have to take the morning-after pill... shit, he's probably given me chlamydia...*

Just so you know: I've been single for almost a year now, and this is not how I saw myself re-entering the dating pool. I have nothing against casual hook-ups in theory, but I know myself, and this whole disposable-soulmate culture we have collectively adopted is just not for me. I can't help it, I'm a Pisces and I've listened to a *lot* of old records. I want an indelible love like Tom Waits' *Martha*, or The Rolling Stones' *Wild Horses*, not a modern-day remix of Liz Phair's *Fuck and Run*.

And yet, here I am, beneath these strange sheets that smell like somebody else's laundry detergent, with my fingertips reaching between my legs – except... wait. I'm still wearing my tights, my underwear. I move my legs a bit; I don't feel raw the way I often do after sex. So maybe we didn't... But the room is rocking back and forth now and I'm thirsty, so thirsty, and there's this sharp pain pulsing right in the centre of my skull.

I turn back towards the window and just lie there for a bit, staring at the thin gauzy curtain as it moves with the breeze, thinking *well, the sun isn't up yet, so it*

can't be that late. And I must still be in New York somewhere... maybe in Jersey.
We couldn't have travelled further than that since last night.

If I leave now, maybe I can still get to work on time.

And then it happens.

I remember *why* I got so drunk in the first place, and everything spins a little faster.

Because: The Case.

Yesterday we lost the Jane Delaney case.

My ears ring and my chest aches and I want to give the memory right back like a shitty Secret Santa gift. A cactus. A candle. A bottle of sweet wine.

Because today I'm going to get fired.

THE CASE

I work as a paralegal for a civil firm on West 23rd Street. If you've seen TV shows like *Suits*, you probably think you know what that means, but honestly, it's nothing like that. It's more like Dolly Parton's *9 to 5* but with significantly longer working hours. Ninety per cent of my job is spent in an artificially lit room, researching and collating documents and witness statements for discovery and disclosure files, which are then signed off by the partner in charge and used to form a case. Mostly, we settle out of court, but sometimes – like in the case of *Dr Samuel Grange v Jane Delaney* – it's more complicated.

I'm going to try to tell this to you objectively, but honestly, that's really hard to do because, well, Dr Samuel Grange is an asshole. But here I go, giving you the cold hard facts like a pro.

They met at work. Jane was a young theatre nurse, new to the city. Dr Grange was a surgeon. She was adorable and he was from a wealthy and well-respected Upper East Side family; I know, I know, cue the theme song from *Sex in the City* – what could possibly go wrong? They hit it off immediately, had a nine-month relationship, and then one night, after finally ending it, Jane tearfully confided to a work friend that Dr Grange had been controlling, cruel and sexually abusive. Now she was scared he'd pull strings and get her fired. He was vindictive like that.

The friend in question, Hazel, worked in the HR department, so Jane figured she'd know if Grange had said anything. He hadn't. But Hazel was appalled – she immediately confided in her boss and Dr Grange was called in. He vehemently denied it all, of course, saying he was the one who'd ended it and Jane was just hurt and looking for revenge. He was pretty convincing – guys like Grange usually are.

And so Jane, ashamed and unable to prove anything, slunk away, quit her job, and spent the next week at home with the curtains drawn, lying in bed, praying

that the pain would stop. Then one night she got a text from Hazel.

Hey. I don't want to upset you but it's better you hear it from me. He's dating again. Hope you are okay.

Jane could barely function and Grange had already forgotten her. And now he was going to do the same thing to somebody else.

Jane typed back: *Of course. He's a sociopath. Textbook.*

And she meant it. She'd been reading an article about the differences between sociopaths and psychopaths, cross-referencing their characteristics against Grange's and all the things he'd done to her...

Hazel typed back: *Or just an entitled douche. Try to get some sleep. Chat soon.*

But of course Jane couldn't sleep. By 2 am she'd taken two diazepam to calm herself down and was scrolling tearily through Grange's Instagram, looking for this new woman and wondering if she could somehow warn her. Because Hazel was kind, but she was also wrong. He wasn't just 'an entitled douche', he was far worse than that.

Still, Jane blamed herself. She was ashamed of all the things he'd done to her, that she'd stayed anyway, and she hadn't wanted Hazel to see her as weak. Stupid. So she'd only told her the basics of what had happened. No wonder Hazel didn't understand how *Toxic* he really was...

And in that moment, Jane was tired of staying quiet. She wanted to tell the whole world exactly who Grange was. *All* of it. But she was also scared. What if nobody believed her... *again*? There was only one thing she could think of to do: tell Hazel *everything*. She could test the waters, and if Hazel believed her, maybe *then* she'd take further action. But she needed to do it now, before she lost her nerve.

Except, how?

It was way too long for text, but she only had Hazel's work email address, and even through the diazepam haze that seemed risky. What if someone else had access to it? The only way she could think of to contact her was through LinkedIn. Hazel used it daily for work, so Jane knew she'd see it as soon as she started her day.

So Jane pulled up that article she'd been reading – 'Sociopaths, psychopaths and the differences between them' – clicked *share to LinkedIn*, chose *send as*

private message and typed *Everything I didn't tell you about Samuel Grange*. And then below that line, she typed a bullet point list of all the things Grange had done to her.

And then she pressed *send*, snapped her laptop closed and went to bed.

She slept late.

So it wasn't until almost 11 am that she saw the texts on her phone and realised what she'd done.

She'd clicked the wrong button. She'd chosen *share in a post* by mistake. That article and everything she'd written beneath it were now sitting on her LinkedIn wall, not in a private message.

How the fuck had she made such a mistake?

She logged in immediately, her brain still foggy from the drugs and her hands shaking as she deleted the post.

Maybe nobody else had seen?

But *everybody* had seen. And of course, Grange knew all about it too.

Dr Grange retaliated in two ways:

- 1) by posting a blanket 'letter to my friends' on social media, naming Jane Delaney, detailing what she had done and thanking everyone for their support while he fought these 'vicious lies'
- 2) by suing Jane Delaney for defamation.

Which makes sense. I mean, put yourself in Dr Grange's shoes: he didn't need the money, but she'd publicly tarnished him. He had to take solid action to preserve his reputation, to show everyone how deeply incensed he was and shut her up for good. The fact that he was also essentially living out paragraph three from the article Jane had posted – pursuing revenge because he felt he'd been personally harmed – was clearly lost on him. She had to pay, and he didn't care what it did to her or anyone else in the process. You know, like a total psycho.

It was obvious from the beginning that a judge would side with him: his reputation was pristine. He was picture perfect, had no prior record of bad behaviour and followed every rule. Jane Delaney, on the other hand, had never mentioned the abuse before the demise of their relationship, had never filed a police report, had no evidence and, thanks to her LinkedIn post, was sure to be

described as 'reckless'. Courts don't like 'reckless'; they don't like 'emotional' either. Nope, a nice smooth sociopath who doesn't leave loose ends is far more to their taste. So Jane was the kind of victim who was easy to sweep under the rug. No mess, no fuss.

But here's the thing: I found her crying in the bathrooms once and there was something in her eyes, in the way she buckled over the sink, something that couldn't be faked. Maybe the truth just vibrates differently. Or maybe it's that when you've lost all hope yourself, you recognise that loss in another.

Either way, I believed her.

But our case was cellophane thin and we were running out of time. Hendy (my boss) was pushing to settle, but Jane didn't want to because she thought a judge might actually believe her. And I knew I had to do something. Anything. I couldn't just watch her lose. So I took a risk. I found a woman Dr Grange had dated a few years back and contacted her.

And that, my friend, is where it all went wrong.

6.27 AM

The first thing you need to know about me, before we go on, is that I want you to love me. Of course I do; we all want to be loved. But what matters to me way more is that you *know* me. Mainly because I find it hard to let people in. And that gets lonely.

So let's get the basic stuff out of the way: Hi, my name is Billie Spencer-Tate. I'm twenty-four years old. I was born in New York City. My favourite TV shows are *True Blood*, *Sex in the City* and *Gossip Girl* (because deep down I'm a romantic). My favourite movies are *Legally Blonde* (obviously) and *Jennifer's Body* (because the longer I live, the more I understand Jennifer). My favourite books are *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* because toxic masculinity is real whether we like it or not, so it's best to understand it from the inside out. And I love-love-love old music. It's not that I don't love current tracks too, of course I do – especially Taylor and Lana – but there's something comforting about songs where you know what happens next. Life has too many surprises as it is. So my favourites are all from the sixties to the very early noughties, but anything pre-2015 makes the cut because that's the year my mother died. And with her, a part of me died too.

The second thing you need to know about me is: I work. A lot. In fact, it'd be fair to say my work means more to me than almost anything else (aside from my best friend and my cat). Which is why, until yesterday, I was on track to become a lawyer. New York is one of a handful of states that offer an alternative pathway into the legal profession – one year of law school and four years of on-the-job training – and Hendy had finally agreed. It was all set.

So when I tell you that everything I did in the Jane Delaney case was entirely by the book, please know that I mean it. Why would I jeopardise my job, my future, by doing the wrong thing?

The only reason I reached out to that witness was because *somebody* had to. I needed to ascertain whether this was a pattern of behaviour for Dr Grange. Because here's the thing: it can't be defamation if it's true. And so I asked this woman one innocent question: *Confidentially, what was he like?*

If nothing had come of it, I obviously would have let it go.

But something *did* come of it. The details of Jane's case were branded on my psyche, the way things are when they could have happened to you: the places they went, the things he did to her. And both women's stories lined up, word for word, right down to him videoing them every time they cried. Jane was right about him. About all of it.

How could I, in good conscience, just walk away from that? Could you?

So I told her about Jane. About the case. About how she could help.

And she seemed so strong, so certain that she wanted to finally be heard. She *wanted* to stand up for Jane. But when she was actually up there, face to face with Dr Grange, something must have changed. Because according to Hendy, who was there in the courtroom, her exact, shaky words were: 'Samuel Grange is a lovely man.' And when pushed as to why she was there, in that witness box, she said: 'The defence team asked me to lie.'

That meant *me*.

To be clear, I would never-ever-ever do something like that. I just wanted the truth to come out, the bad guy to get in trouble. And isn't that what the legal system is supposed to want too?

But none of that mattered, we lost anyway. Jane lost. Justice lost.

It tore the wound in my heart open just a little more than it already was.

And all I wanted to do was fix it, but I knew I couldn't. So instead, I turned to vodka. Which is how I ended up here – wherever 'here' is – with the sound of the ocean and Mr Burrito, my face hot and the bed swaying beneath me, thinking: *I have to go*.

There's a sheet wrapped around my leg. I move it aside then sit up carefully, glancing quickly over my shoulder as goosebumps form on my arms. He's still asleep. And my clothes are right there, a dark seductive pile in front of the bookshelf. I stand up, steady myself, and tiptoe across to them. I lift up my dress and put it on, then slip on one shoe as my eyes graze the bookshelf. There are

three trophies on top of it. I lean in to read the name engraved on the closest one:
Joshua Wilson.

Thank you for not murdering me last night, Joshie. I appreciate it.

And then I reach down for my second shoe...

Where the hell is it?

I scan the floor, taking in the greyscale shapes and edges. But I can't see it, and everything hurts. I kneel down and look under the bed. Nothing. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Maybe it's in the other room?

My bag is on the floor, so I pick it up and tiptoe slowly out of the bedroom, down a short hallway and into the living room. I look around: it's large and white-washed in here, with big windows that look out onto a wild and foggy ocean, steel appliances, an oversized fridge with photographs and bills on it, and a bottle of water gleaming from the countertop. The floor ripples beneath me and I reach for the bottle, twist off the top and drink. *I can do this*, I think, *I just have to get to work*. I take another sip and scan the floor for my shoe. But it's not here either. Just my black coat, draped over the white sofa. I'd cut off a finger not to have to wake Joshie and have that awkward chat, and besides, I have another pair of pumps under my desk in the office – beige ones, beige goes with everything – so I decide *fuck it*. I finish the water, reach for my coat and head for the front door, gently closing it behind me as I leave.

I'm standing in a hallway now; more white walls and a selection of minimalist paintings all around me, soft beige carpet beneath my one stockinged foot. There's a window to my right and as I pull on my coat, I move over to it and glance out. I can see a familiar jagged skyline through the haze – *I'm in Coney Island*. That's about an hour from the office. Maybe an hour and a half with morning traffic. I can still make it. I can still make this right. I'll shower at the office gym and change into the emergency outfit I keep in my downstairs locker.

I take one last look at Josh's apartment – number 18 – then stride towards the elevators and press the 'down' button.

Ping.

The light flicks on, the doors slide open and I step inside. As they close, my reflection shimmers in the metal doors – a blur of red hair and green dress and black coat – and I'm now hyper-aware of the fact that I must have been in this

very elevator last night, too. So why can't I remember any of it? And how late is it? I pull my phone from my bag to check: 6.27 am. I could be at the office by 8 am; at my desk before 9. Relief floods through me and my blood slows down for a moment. I glance at the photograph on my lock screen. It's of me and Sadie – she's my best friend – but I can't see our eyes because they're marred by the rectangle of a missed call from somebody I'm not at all looking forward to calling back.

Wait, what the fuck is that?

There, hanging in the middle of the screen.

It's a notification.

From Instagram.

And it came in last night.

I squint down at it – *no, no, no* – and lean against the cool metal walls so I don't fall over. I read it again, and again – maybe I'm wrong. *I need to be wrong.*

But I'm not wrong.

And all I can think is: *Uh-oh.*

Because it reads: *@DrSamuelGrange accepted your follow request.*

7.16 AM

I'm in the back of an Uber now, halfway across the Brooklyn Bridge, breathing pine air freshener and watching the rising sun glitter apricot off a thousand panes of glass in the distance, thinking of a story I read in the news not long ago. It was about how a stranger talked a man out of jumping off this bridge. I watched the shaky footage on YouTube: a silhouette up high on a beam, staring out at the East River, and the anonymous voice piercing through the night. Imagine being that close to letting go, thinking nobody cares, and it's a stranger who swoops in to save you. Like a real-life superhero.

I love stories like that. Proof that people can be good even when it doesn't add to their personal brand. Because 'good' is what you do when nobody is watching. When there is no personal gain. 'Good' is that voice on the bridge.

That's what I wanted to be for people, why I was drawn to the law in the first place; I wanted to help. So how did I mess everything up so badly?

I reach for my phone, pull up the selfie camera and assess the damage. My hair is a tangled mess, my mascara and eyeliner are smudged towards my cheekbone and my lips are cracked and dry. Add to all that my missing shoe and the fact that there's a big stain down the front of my dress – I must have spilled something last night – and it's no wonder the driver wouldn't take the Battery Tunnel when I asked; he probably thought I'd vomit in the back of his Prius.

He's talking on the phone now in hushed tones, glancing at me in the smudgy rear-view mirror every so often. I wet my finger with my tongue and try to wipe away some of the mascara beneath my eyes, but it's not working. And I can't head into the office gym looking like this; someone will see me and the rumour mill will start. I reach into my bag and pull out some tissues and a small tube of moisturiser – a free sample – and try again, then I reach for the brush in my bag and pull it through my hair. *Cigarettes*. My hair smells of cigarettes. *I was smoking last night.*

Which kind of makes sense, given my state of mind – I’m a stress smoker – but why can’t I remember it? Or anything, for that matter?

But *focus, Billie, focus.*

What am I going to tell Hendy?

Because it needs to be good. Unarguably good. *The truth.* I’ll just tell him the truth. *I didn’t do it.* I’ll point to everything he knows of me.

Because Hendy is *always* telling me I’m too idealistic and naïve. Usually it’s annoying, but today it might work in my favour. It just doesn’t make sense that an idealist would do something like this. Idealists believe in the law, they don’t circumvent it and ask witnesses to lie. And paralegals who are trying to become lawyers don’t tamper with witnesses; those are the sorts of character defects that keep you from being accepted to the bar. Hendy is a logical man – he says that a lot too – so he’ll see that. Surely he’ll see that.

I put some of the moisturiser on my lips, then pull a bottle of eyedrops out of my bag, tip back my head and, trying to anticipate any sudden jolts or swerves, squeeze a couple of drops into each eye. Blink. Wipe away the excess.

My glance darts to the rear-view mirror and the driver averts his eyes. His phone call is over now and he reaches for the radio and turns it on. Some sort of talkback show. I look down to my lap; to my phone still in my hands.

Dr Grange’s profile is on there, just waiting for me.

And *shit, shit, shit*, I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I also know *why* I hit ‘follow’ last night. I’ve been wanting to see what was on there ever since we first took on Jane’s case. Even though I often use social media (anonymous accounts, of course) to look into cases, I have a hard and fast rule: never actually ‘follow’ someone. That’s too risky; who knows how the algorithms will change tomorrow, what they will be able to piece together. But now that I’ve done it, now that I’ve broken my own rule and he’s right there, waiting for me, I can’t help it.

I need to look.

And so I tap through to his profile.

Adrenaline surges through me as it flashes white, then loads.

His most recent post is from October. It’s the one Jane was talking about, the ‘letter to his friends’. I tap on it and scan down through his words... *the toll these vicious lies have had on my mental health...* And then the comments beneath it:

What a sick girl to do this to you... You're amazing... I'm so sorry you're going through this!

I scroll down to the next post. He's standing on a boat, his bronzed biceps flexed as he grips the rail, his almost-black hair caught in the wind and his preternaturally green eyes seducing the camera. And I can't help wondering who is behind the lens, if she can see that he's looking at her like prey. A flash of Jane crying in the bathrooms, of our failed witness's eyes when I said his name. It was uploaded late August – just two weeks after he and Jane broke up.

I keep scrolling.

There's a shot of a blonde woman with coral earrings and it's also from August. Is she the one who took the picture on the boat? His new girlfriend?

I let out a deep breath and think about Jane and wonder where she is right now. I hope she's okay.

And then I think of Grange. I bet he had a good night's sleep last night. I bet he's calmly flipping through the newspaper right now, sipping connoisseur coffee...

Buzzz.

My phone vibrates in my hand, the screen alight.

And all I can think as I glance down at it is: *Uh-oh.*

Because: *Derek Sponsor is calling...*

Okay, so, I never usually tell people this – it's too personal – but 'Sponsor' is not his last name. That's what he *is*, my AA sponsor.

Because until last night I'd had eleven months and three days of sobriety. I had the chips and everything. That's part of the reason I've been single this last year, it was supposed to help keep me sober. But I missed my meeting last night, and that unanswered call on my phone this morning? The one I didn't want to return? Well, that was from Derek too.

And I know I should answer and tell him what happened, I know that's what sponsors are for, but my head is fuzzy, like my synapses aren't working properly. He'll hear last night on my voice and I can't stomach disappointing yet another human being in one twenty-four-hour period. I just can't. So I let it go to voicemail, put my phone in my bag, lean back, close my eyes and pray to a god I'm not sure I even believe in anymore to *please just fix things I don't care how.*

Between you and me, it's been a while since God stepped in on my behalf and this morning is no different. All I hear in response to my plea is an echo of Hendy's words yesterday afternoon: 'She said you asked her to lie! What the fuck were you thinking, Billie?' He was so angry, angrier than I've ever heard him.

He wouldn't listen when I tried to explain that I did everything right. Everything by the book. He acted like I *wanted* to lose. Like it was my fault. But that witness was supposed to *make* our case. If you'd met her, heard her story, you'd understand what I mean by that. She was supposed to show Hendy I could be trusted with more responsibility. That I didn't need his constant supervision, that I was capable. That I wasn't just some silly little girl with a heart full of candyfloss, that I had grit. That I'd make a great lawyer one day.

But now look.

8.49 AM

I'm standing at the back of a packed work elevator, leaning against the cool metallic wall and trying to stay out of Josephine's eyeline. She's a paralegal too, and a total gossip – I don't want her to notice me and ask why I look puffy. But it's okay, she's too busy scrolling through her phone to notice me.

I watch the little numbers light up with each floor we pass – 8, 9, 10. My face is tight and shiny from the patchouli soap in the office gym showers, my breath smells minty like the toothpaste I borrowed from a woman still pink from the treadmill, and there are two deep creases running down the front of my purple jumpsuit because it's been in that locker for the entire nine months I've worked here. But at least I'm wearing shoes now. Two of them. The beige ones. I came upstairs and retrieved them from under my desk before everyone arrived.

14, 15, 16...

Do I remember anything else? No, not yet. I've pieced together one thing though: I must have lost my shoe at the bar, not at Josh's place, because there was a big hole at the bottom of my stockings and my foot was really dirty; it took ages to clean. But there's something else there, lodged deep in my memory. I can feel it, like a warning bell going off inside me.

But what is it trying to tell me?

Josh. Pale blue covers. Citrus sheets. Cigarettes. The sound of the ocean... I grasp for more, but nothing else comes.

And then: *Oh god.*

My call logs. My texts.

Please don't let me have called anyone last night. And if I did, please, please, please don't let it have been Hendy. I was angry. Righteous. I might have said things...

I pull out my phone, go to my recent calls and scan through the numbers. But there's nothing new there, just the missed call from Derek this morning and

another from him that I must have declined last night. Quickly, I tap through to WhatsApp: nothing new there, just Heather – *almost there* – from yesterday afternoon.

I go to my text messages, and my breath catches as I take in the top one.

It's to 'Hot-Josh'.

And it contains three red love hearts.

Great move, Billie. Heat rushes to my face. Now the douchebag who preys on drunk girls has your number. Congrats.

My gaze moves to the next message down. I've seen that one before. It's from Sadie, it came in around midday yesterday: *Eeek! Twenty fucking eight tomorrow!!!*

xxx

Oh. Shit.

Sadie's birthday. It's tonight. Of course it's tonight. Her present – a vintage book of spells I found at the Chelsea flea market a couple of months ago – is wrapped in gold paper and waiting on my kitchen counter. I text her with clumsy thumbs: *Happy birthday beautiful! See you tonight! xxx*

Then I stare back up at the numeric lights – 20, 21 – and wonder how the hell I'm going to be okay by tonight. I'm telling myself lies – *it'll be fine, that's twelve long hours away* – but then: *Ping.*

The little light reads 29. And that's my floor. My stomach contracts as the doors slide open and a few of us file out into a familiar expanse of grey carpet. I weave past desks, black and navy jackets on the backs of chairs, whispering printers, photographs, shiny Christmas ornaments that haven't been packed up yet and pinging phones. We're only in the third week of January and already the *this is my year* mantra I adopted just before Christmas seems delusional. I glance through the big windows to my right at the skyline outside. I'm passing through the area where the secretarial teams sit and half of them are already here. It feels like they're watching me, like they know what happened yesterday. But they probably don't.

Calm down. Stop being paranoid.

I reach the office I share with Heather, and head inside. It's small and dark grey, with a big desk that we share pushed up against the right-hand wall. I sit on

the far side of the room and there's a rectangular sliver of window beside my desk, but aside from that it's all fluorescent lighting.

Heather is already here and she smiles up at me with a cup of coffee about an inch from her lips. I really like Heather, and she's always had my back at work – her brother is a cop and she's asked him questions on my behalf before, completely without prompting – but how could she have just left me there with a potential rapist last night? How, given that she's had five full seconds to say 'sorry', is she still saying nothing? And why is she *grinning*?

Innocently twirling her blonde hair between her fingers, she says: 'I got some photos last night, if you want to see?'

8.52 AM

I silently head to my side of the desk, put my coat on the back of my chair, sit down and turn on my computer. I can see Heather in my peripheral vision, completely oblivious to how pissed off I am as she passes her phone over to me. And I don't *want* to see, but I do *need* to see: maybe there'll be something I recognise; something to trigger a memory? Josh's face, perhaps? So I take the phone from her and swipe right.

But that's the wrong way, and now I'm looking down at a pouty-selfie of her in the brightly lit office bathrooms. She must have taken it just before coming to meet me at the bar. I change direction.

'I was really worried to leave you there alone,' she continues, rolling her chair over to my side of the desk. 'But you didn't want to leave when we did...'

And there it is, the reason she abandoned me: *we*.

She met a guy.

Heather and I have diametrically opposed strategies when it comes to love. My approach is: yearn for it 24/7 but then go all 10cc *I'm Not In Love* and push them away because what if they leave me? I'm not sure I can survive another hole in the heart.

Heather's strategy is more: Robert Palmer's *Addicted to Love*.

She's met 'the one' four times – five if I count this one (which, from her expression, I can) – in the nine months since I started this job. I'm not one hundred per cent sure of the hows and whys, but I do know she gets ghosted a lot. Every time it happens she becomes a little more anxious, suspicious and e-stalky. Usually – when I don't feel like I've crawled out of the deepest part of hell – I really feel for her. It takes a shit tonne of courage to put yourself out there the way she does, and people should be more careful with her heart. But right now, I only have enough energy to feel sorry for myself. 'Oh my god, look at me,' she

continues, inspecting herself in the reflection of my computer screen. ‘I’ve had like three hours sleep.’

‘What time did you leave?’ I ask, mentally trying to construct a timeline.

‘Around eight,’ she says as I swipe through to a picture of Heather, me and four shot glasses filled with clear liquid. I have a hazy memory of taking that one. I’d been there about half an hour by then and Heather had just arrived. ‘Did you fix your shoe, by the way?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your shoe. The strap snapped? Jesus, how drunk were you, Billie?’

And the answer to that is clearly: *very* drunk. Because I have zero recollection... *Shit*. I keep swiping. An elbow, a sliver of beard and a hot bartender, his bun reflected in the mirror. Swipe. A smear of crowd and a streak of orange light; that must have been a mistake. And then it happens: a flash of memory. *He’s helping me to the door...*

But then the memory is gone – *pouf* – a genie back into its lantern. And Heather’s perfume – rose and pepper – is cloying and making me even more nauseous. She’s too close, looking over my shoulder. And it’s hot. Too hot.

And now the phone on my desk is ringing. I reach for it. ‘Hello?’

It’ll be Hendy. This is good. We just need to talk it out. He knows me. He’s had time to cool down now; when he thinks about it, he’ll realise I wouldn’t do something like this. We can work it out...

‘Wilhelmina?’ But it’s not Hendy, it’s worse. It’s Jonathan. He manages all the paralegals. And he’s using my full name. *Shit*.

‘Yes,’ I say, my throat tight.

‘Come see me at nine-thirty.’

‘Oh... okay. Of course.’ I’ve barely got it out before he hangs up. And my heart is banging in my throat and the walls are spinning again. Hendy, I could talk around, but Jonathan, not so much. If they’ve handed it over to him, it’s game over.

‘Was that *him*?’ Heather asks.

‘No. It was Jonathan.’

‘Oh god,’ she says.

She knows this is bad, too.

‘Maybe it’ll be okay,’ Heather says, reaching for her phone, which I’ve abandoned on the desk beside me. ‘He probably has to give you a warning before firing you.’

But it won’t be okay. I can feel it. Because with something like this, he *doesn’t* have to give me a warning.

‘Oh my god, can I show you the flowers Toby got me?’ Heather asks.

And ordinarily yes, I *would* want to see the flowers, I’d want to hear everything, but right now there’s a thin layer of sweat forming on my upper lip and my life is about to implode. I need to focus.

‘Okay so,’ she continues from over my shoulder, and I recognise this tone of voice. It’s her setting-the-scene-voice. ‘He kisses me and puts me in a cab and says he’ll be right behind me. And I’m thinking *oh whatever, you’re totally going to ghost me*. I was getting sad and everything, Billie.’ She pauses for breath. ‘But when he turns up, he has these.’ She pushes the phone screen back into my line of vision.

It’s a close-up of a bunch of red roses. ‘I think I love him already.’

‘That’s great, hon,’ I say, as my eyes dart to the time in the corner of my screen: 9.07 am. And I’m happy for her, really I am, but I have twenty-three fucking minutes to fix this.

My pulse is racing, my forehead is damp – either with stress-sweat or last night trying to work its way out of my system – and I have to do something, so I pick up my bag and head for the elevator.

9.12 AM

Hendy's assistant isn't at her desk when I get there so I walk right in. But he's sitting exactly where he always is, at his desk amid a pile of papers, two screens staring back at him and a cup of coffee in his hand. The entire wall behind him is a bookshelf filled with leather-bound law books that make him look impressive but that I've never seen him open. And on the wall to his right hang three framed certificates, which catch the light coming in through his big window – three gentle reminders that he's one of the special kind of alumni who play squash or whatever with the very people who will decide whether to hire me if he fires me. His face flushes when he sees me.

'Billie,' he says. 'Did we have a meeting?'

I close the door behind me and move towards him. 'No, sorry, I just really need to talk to you.'

'Sit down,' he says, clearing his throat and motioning to a chair.

'I'm so sorry about yesterday,' I start as I take a seat. 'I really didn't think that would happen. She seemed so sure.'

'Hmm,' he says, looking down at the papers on his desk.

'How is Jane?' I ask, picking at my nail polish. I need to stop; it's navy blue, so now the chips are obvious.

He looks up at me with pale eyes and shakes his head. 'Bad.' And that's it. He lets that solitary syllable hang in the air and guilt swirls through my veins. I failed her.

'Jonathan called me,' I say. 'He wants to see me at nine-thirty.'

Hendy's gaze intensifies and I swear his pupils shrink. He knows exactly why Jonathan called me. He looks down to my hands now, to my nails, and instinctively I move them to my lap.

'Look, Hendy, can you help me?' I ask, and my voice comes out feeble.

‘Can I help you?’ he says, frowning. ‘Billie, this isn’t one too many sick days. We have a witness saying you asked her to lie. I’m sorry, but that’s indefensible. Do you have any idea how badly this reflects on me? It was *my* case. I was supposed to be in control of it. I’m the one who gets the heat now. Did you think of that?’

My throat tightens and my face grows hot with shame.

‘Hendy, you know I didn’t do it though, right?’

‘I don’t *know* anything of the sort,’ he replies, watching me as he takes a sip of coffee. I’m surprised he can get any coffee between his lips with his jaw muscles clenched so tight.

I need to fix this.

‘But you know me, you’ve worked with me. Think about it. Do you really think I have that in me?’

He shrugs. ‘Look, Billie, I wanted you to succeed. I really did. And I’ve been patient. But you’re just so fucking naïve and idealistic. In your own little mind,’ he says, tapping on his temple to illustrate my little mind, ‘maybe you thought the ends justified the means...’

‘But I did everything by the book. You have to believe me.’

He puts down his coffee cup and leans forward on both elbows so it looks like he’s confiding in me, but I’ve seen him make this exact gesture many times through glass meeting-room walls. I feel like it’s probably some sort of negotiation technique and now he’s using it on me.

‘Look Billie, I saw how much you wanted to help Jane. I know you had good intentions. But you overstepped. There’s no coming back from this.’

And then there it is, another flash of memory from last night: *a blur of orange light... sitting at the bar... wait... male hands... my phone... is he going through my phone?*

Why would he have been going through my phone?

I blink hard, trying to push the thought away because Hendy is looking at me now and I need to say the right thing. What was he saying? Oh... *there’s no coming back from this.*

‘But she’s lying,’ I say, swallowing hard. My mouth is so dry.

‘Really? And why, pray tell, would the witness lie? What would she gain from that?’

‘Maybe she got scared?’ I say, my voice coming out raspy. ‘Dr Grange was there. Maybe when she saw him in the flesh she became terrified of what he’d do to her if she told the truth.’

‘Oh for god’s sake, Billie,’ Hendy snaps. ‘The man has no history of violence. No, here’s what happened: you told her what you wanted her to say and she thought it would feel good to get revenge, but then she thought better of it. Simple.’

My breath is short and shallow. And it’s hot in here. Nausea moves through me. *This is really happening. My life is fucking over.* There’s a waste paper bin to my left, a blue one. I could probably get to it before I vomit...

He lets out a big sigh like he’s saddened by the whole thing, but there’s a vein popping out of his temple now so I’m pretty sure he’s still pissed off. ‘Billie, I’m going to do you a favour here and tell it to you straight: you’re not cut out for the law. You get too invested and you can’t let things go. It’s dangerous—’

I open my mouth to argue, but he cuts me off.

‘No, I don’t want to hear it. I told you that witness was a risk but you just wouldn’t listen.’ He pauses for a moment, like he’s calming himself down. But what he’s saying is grossly unfair; Hendy was entirely behind my little plan when it looked like it would work. ‘Now I have to deal with the fallout,’ he continues, like he’s some sort of victim. ‘But you’re lucky. You’re young, you can still find something else to do.’

‘I don’t want to find something else to do...’

And it feels like I can’t get enough oxygen into my lungs because just twenty-four hours ago I had a secure job, sobriety and a future. How is this happening? And then he says the next bit, and even as it happens, I know I’ll always remember it. It’s like a bullet coming at me in slow motion that I can see but can’t stop.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, picking up a pen like he’s ready to get back to work. Then he nods at the clock above my head: ‘It’s almost nine-thirty. You’d better go and see Jonathan.’

10.42 AM

I live in Hell's Kitchen, on the corner of West 58th and 10th, above the blue awnings of a Greek canteen and across the street from a small Thai takeout place. My building is up ahead on the left, just past the Food Mart and Justino's and number 881, where Miles Davis lived when he was starting out in this city. It's six storeys and red brick, with black fire escapes on the walls, and two naked trees and a pile of mixed garbage bags on the kerb out the front. There's a thin layer of snow on everything around me – the edges of the pavement, the cars, the trees, the roofs. Even the bicycles chained to the parking sign outside. Usually, this is my favourite time of year in the city. Covered in snow, Central Park looks like a fairyland; the ice rinks are still open but the looping Christmas music and creepy Santas are all gone; the catharsis of winter is in full swing. There's something poetic about this city in winter, stripped of her artifice. When tourists don't love her, when she's naked and raw and grieving, that's when I love her most. That's when I feel most at home. But it's hard to love anything right now because I'm carrying a plastic bag full of all the belongings I had in my desk and downstairs locker, the surplus of which is stuffed into my handbag. That's the thanks I get for all the work I've put in over the past nine months.

I breathe out a cloud of fog, punch in the entry code, pull open the security door and head inside. To my left are the bronzed letterboxes and a hallway that leads down to the communal laundry (three overpriced washing machines, two noisy/ballistic dryers and, well, mould), and ahead of me is a dark wood staircase. I take the stairs, grabbing onto the banister for support and trying to be quiet. But it doesn't work. As I reach the second floor, a door creaks open and a familiar voice says: 'You didn't come home last night.'

I look up and there she is, the only neighbour I ever talk to: Mrs Benson. She's squinting at me, a stooped silhouette, her grey hair backlit by the lights inside her apartment.

‘Yes, I stayed at a friend’s place,’ I say, smiling up at her as a flash of Josh and pale blue covers and that ice hockey poster flicker in my mind. I feel bad for her: she must be almost ninety, I haven’t seen a single visitor in the three years I’ve lived here, and there’s a limit to how many re-runs of *Friends* a person can ingest before they need to seek out real-life stimulus. So I guess that’s me: stimulus.

‘Hmph,’ she says, then slams the door shut.

My floor is just ahead of me now. The fourth floor. I can already hear Button’s meows intensifying, like she knows I’m here. Sharp guilt pulses through me; Button was really sick a little while ago and I don’t like leaving her alone for too long.

But now here I am, finally. Fumbling around with the key, I push it into the lock, twist, and the door swings open. Button runs out to meet me, purring as she weaves between my legs.

‘Hi sweetie,’ I say, stroking her head as I move inside. Button is black with a white love heart over one eye. She was a rescue when I got her and I fell in love with her the moment I saw her – how could anybody not? She follows me in, still purring.

I’m standing in the large studio area now. To my left are two doors: the kitchen and bathroom. To my right is my closet, then my bed (which smells of a mountain breeze), Button’s scratching post, a laundry basket, a big window that looks out onto the fire escape and 10th Avenue, a sofa facing the room from the far corner, a dresser, a chair I throw my dirty clothes on, another smaller window looking out onto West 58th that I smoke out of sometimes and, straight in front of me, a record cabinet with my turntable and CD player on top. The shelves are filled with the bulk of my mother’s old vinyl and CD collections – the overflow of which is in my closet. Think Prince meets Tom Waits meets Nina Simone meets Liz Phair meets Tiffany meets Nirvana meets Salt-N-Pepa meets Tupac meets Joan Jett & the Blackhearts meets Leonard Cohen meets The Ramones meets Blondie meets The Doors meets Talking Heads meets Cher meets the Stones meets Alanis Morissette meets James Taylor meets Hole meets Miles Davis meets Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young meets Fiona Apple meets Joni Mitchell meets Johnny Cash meets Dolly Parton meets Nancy Sinatra... you get the idea. I’ve added to it, or replaced albums she had on CD with vinyl over the years, but I’ve

never thrown anything out. How could I? It's almost all I have left of her. So if you've noticed I think in song a lot, this would be why: I've listened to every single album at least a hundred times and they've seen me through a shit tonne these last eight years. My most formative memories – losing my mom, my first love, my first heartbreak, everything in between – are now stored in the lyrics, in the silences between tracks. I guess we all have a soundtrack to our life and this is mine.

The only records I can't listen to are the ones she made herself. Any of them. It hurts too much.

Beside that record cabinet, wedged against the wall, is the pink yoga mat I've rolled out twice in the last year to meditate – Derek told me to try it when I started with AA and I tried, I really tried, but I'm not sure I have the temperament for meditation. And above it, watching over the entire room, hangs a large poster of my mother: Lily Tate. It's from her first album, *Jaded*. Once upon a time she was in *Rolling Stone* magazine, but now her music is fodder for grocery stores and easy listening stations. Nobody really remembers her name but sometimes, when it creeps up in conversation and people click, they say I look just like her. I love it when that happens. Not just because she was beautiful as hell, but because I learnt quickly that death makes people very uncomfortable, and that comment gives me the opportunity to talk about her for a little bit. And I love to do that... when I do, there's always this fragment of a second where it feels like she's still here. Still with me.

I was sixteen when she died and I don't know what to tell you about that other than it changed me. And I mean: visibly. I can see it in my eyes when I look at pictures of myself before and after. It's like in an instant, her absence became a defining part of my identity; like the flame of *my* soul was snuffed out that night too. And it took a long, long time for that little flame inside me to catch alight again.

When it first happened, people said well-meaning things like time heals all wounds. But it doesn't. I still miss her most days, probably every day, but it's worst when something good happens because she's not here to see it, or on days like today when I need her to tell me it'll all be okay, or on birthdays or Mother's Day or Christmas Day or actually, if I'm being totally candid, any time I hear a song she loved (or even one she didn't) or because, I'm buying bananas or

brushing my teeth and catch sight of my own eyes and for a second I think they're hers. And even after all these years I still find it impossible to believe she's not coming back, that she's not, I don't know, in Mexico with shitty wi-fi so she can't message me. But – and I mean this – I'd take that pain a million times over, a billion times, just to have known her.

If I had a therapist I'm sure they'd say she's what drives me; why I work such long hours. Because my mother's death was the first time I saw the system fail up close. It wasn't an overt failure, like it might have been if her killers had stood trial and been found not guilty. It was more the insidious kind, because nobody was ever held accountable to start with. It was too easy, too convenient, to just blame her and move on. But other people's actions caused my mother to die, so make no mistake: it *was* a failure. And for me it was pivotal, because that was the first time I knew what it was to be truly helpless. And all I wanted was for somebody to step in and fix it. To get justice for her. To save me from that pain. But nobody did.

And something about having nobody to step in on my behalf made me want to do that for others; I wanted to make a real difference. That's how I ended up working in the law, it was the only way I could think of to help. I wanted to heal hearts and change lives, because if I could do that, then maybe I could heal the big black hole I had in my own heart, and then life wouldn't hurt so much. But let me tell you a secret: it still hurts. Maybe even more than if I'd never tried at all. Because every time I see the system fail somebody else – someone like Jane Delaney, for example – I feel that helplessness all over again. It bubbles up inside me, sour and hot, like a toxic cocktail.

I guess you could call it a trigger.

My mother's eyes follow me from the poster as I hang my coat on the back of the door, then drop the plastic bag by the closet and my handbag on the bed. I plug my phone in to charge on the bedside table and stare out the window at the sky – dark clouds are forming – then down at the dusty, peeling paint on the windowsill. And that, right there, is a pretty good indication of the state of this apartment. There's also a growing hairline crack in the corner of the bathroom ceiling that may or may not become a safety issue one day. The radiator is temperamental as hell and I have no control over it – sometimes winter gets hotter than summer and sometimes it's like living in an igloo. I'm adjacent to the hospital

John Lennon died in, so there are sirens upon sirens upon sirens, and I had to plug up a couple of holes in the kitchen with duct tape after Button caught a mouse. So it's not perfect, no, but it's central and close to the park and rent stabilised, and I love it here. But the truth is, I could barely afford it when I was employed. So how am I going to pay for it now?

Button is calling to me from the kitchen. She's sitting in the box I use for recycling when I get there, and her meows get more and more frantic as I pull out a can of cat food and feed her.

She purrs as she eats and I open the fridge, ignoring the AA laminate stuck right in the middle, put the tin on the middle shelf, grab a half-full bottle of Coke, and head to my bedroom to die in peace. There are some vitamin B capsules on the table by the bed and I take one then lie down and stare up at the ceiling, willing it to swallow me up like one of those black holes in a space documentary. My phone beeps with a message and I reach for it.

Derek.

I can hear his voice in my head as I read: *Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.*

I've said that prayer every week for almost a year now, I know it by heart, but for some reason right now it's making my chest ache and my eyes prickle with tears.

Am I supposed to just accept this?

And I know I should reply to Derek, he'll worry, but I don't know what to say. So instead I do the only thing I can think of to take the edge off. I wipe my tears away, open a search window and type: *what to do when everything in your life goes wrong.*

I've consulted Google a lot since I got sober. I sit on Reddit reading posts on 'why do I feel dead inside?', which suggest that maybe I have an iron deficiency or maybe I have depression, but I suspect it's far simpler than that. I just miss the old me. Because that's what most people don't understand about sobriety: you're not just giving something up. It's not that simple. No, you have to create a whole new identity.

And I kind of loved my old one.

I scan the search results, seeking wisdom, but all I find is: *take a break and think positively* and that's bullshit, how the hell am I meant to see this as positive? So I close the search window and instead do the thing I always do when my defences are low: press the primal bruise.

I go to Twitter and pull up the profile for @therealbelturner.

The screen flashes white as it loads and a familiar ache fills my deepest parts. I see a flash of her profile picture in my mind's eye – blonde, round face and a tattoo of a big red (ironic?) heart on her wrist – and I'm thinking *don't do it Billie, it never helps, it just makes it worse*, and that's true, *I mustn't*, so I close down the app and my pulse is fast and I don't really think it through, or maybe I do, but either way, I open Instagram and tap on @DrSamuelGrange instead.

10.57 AM

I should probably explain my Instagram account because if you looked for me, you wouldn't find me. To start with, my handle is @norajane_8. And the girl in my profile picture is a pale, Nordic blonde, while I have red hair (dyed) in real life. I cloned the profile from a girl I found online and if that sounds creepy, well, it probably is and I feel bad about it, but I don't see any way around it. I couldn't just use stock photographs or I'd have no new content to upload (which would look super suspicious), and I don't use social media personally – it scares me. Hell, I didn't even want them to put me on the company website two months ago when the whole thing got overhauled.

Just so you know, this is not some *look-at-me-I'm-so-different* move, it's just that if there was no Twitter, no internet, my mother would still be alive. That profile I almost looked at a moment ago – @therealbeltturner? That was the troll who sent my mother the very last message she ever read: *Why don't you just kill yourself?* It included a link to a video tutorial on how to make a noose. Nice, huh?

She's one of the ones who wasn't held accountable. She probably never even thinks of me, but I've imagined bumping into her on the subway, in the line at the bodega, many times. I still don't know what I'd say, mind you. What *is* there to say, right? However, that's not the *only* reason I'm not on social media. In my line of work, I've learnt firsthand just how much people can learn about you online if you let them.

Because yes, there *are* the discovery files provided by the other side, but they're not always as extensive as I might like, sometimes there are holes in the information that need to be filled in. And my job is finding everything they *don't* want us to have – or at least, that *was* my job. And yes, there are databases I could use, the kind unavailable to the general population, but they have their limitations too. In my experience, it's usually the sort of detail a database would miss that proves the most valuable. A tweet can provide a clue to a person's emotional state,

you can glean their work history from LinkedIn, their current social contacts from Instagram likes, and old college contacts from a sweatshirt in a photograph. Some of my best work has resulted from clues I found online. And I guess knowing all that made being on there myself feel too vulnerable. Even without what it did to my mom.

Hence: @norajane_8.

But you should know, I've always been really great at walking the ultra-thin line between due diligence and e-stalking. Not everyone knows where that line is, but I do. Like, it's okay to search Google, or look through public-facing profiles. It's not okay to use a fake profile with a fake name to follow someone whose profile is private.

Which, obviously, is what I did last night and I don't feel great about it.

Still, it's less of an issue now because I don't have a job to worry about anymore.

And oh, look, Dr Grange's profile just loaded...

And there he is, the man of the hour, looking exactly like he did this morning before my whole life crumbled: like one of the airbrushed man-models in those photos that come in department store frames.

I scan the other images from under heavy lids, a dull heat rising in my stomach as I clock things like: he has a Porsche. *Of course he has a fucking Porsche.* And of course the licence plate starts with S-A-M. And I know it's bad to hate people but I'm just going to level with you here: if it's not hate I feel right now, it's pretty damn close. Oh look, there's that blonde woman again from the photo I saw earlier. I tap on it to see if she's tagged. She's not, but the caption reads: *Lovely Meredith.*

And as I lose my fight with sleep, I wonder: What would Meredith tell me if I asked her my question: *Confidentially, what is he like?*

6.33 PM

When I wake up it's to the ping of a text message, fogged-up windows, an inky sky, horns beeping and three seconds of blessed amnesia. But then I remember, and the doom hits afresh. Button jumps up on my stomach and purrs as she kneads into me; I push her gently aside, roll over and stare at my closet. I'm still wearing the purple jumpsuit, and my underwire bra is biting into my ribs. All I want to do is put on yoga pants, bury myself in a tomb of covers and cry until I fall asleep again. I glance across at my phone, lit up on the bedside table beside me.

Could I cancel tonight?

But no, I can't, it's Sadie's birthday. And Sadie is the closest thing I have to a soulmate. We don't see each other as much as we used to now that she has a husband (Kyle), a baby (Isobel) and has traded the witchcraft of her youth for prescription meds and a mothers' group that constantly makes her feel bad about herself. But it doesn't matter how much she changes, how much I change, there are some bonds that life and circumstance can never break. She was there for me when nobody else was. So I can't let her down, I *have* to go, even if it's only for an hour.

I reach for my phone and squint at the message.

Sadie: *Wear the red dress xx*

That's code for: I have someone to set you up with.

Sadie has been wanting to set me up ever since my last (and only real) relationship ended. That was just a few days before I entered AA. His name was Alistair but I called him Al, just like the song. Did I love him? Yes, I did, very much. But there was something else I *needed* more, and eventually he figured that out.

It was a Wednesday in the middle of last February when it happened; we'd been dating for almost a year. And it started with a text message. *When are you getting home? We need to talk.*

No kiss. No emoji.

Immediately, I knew that: 1) something was wrong, 2) he was waiting for me at my place with his key, and 3) it probably had something to do with the big fight we'd had the previous weekend. It had spilled into the Monday, which was also, unfortunately, Valentine's Day. And so, I rushed home.

When I walked in I found him sitting on my sofa, his face bathed in the light of my laptop screen. I remember the sound of the door clicking shut after me, and something about the air around him – hazy with pain – and the small canvas bag on the floor by his feet, which held the razor and underwear he'd kept at my place, told me not to ask him what the hell he was doing. So instead I just stood there, silent, until he spoke.

'Where have you been?' he asked, calmly, not meeting my eye.

'I went for a quick drink.' As I said it, I was conscious of the whiskey on my breath and I wondered if he would smell it too.

He let out this sigh and said, 'What a surprise, you *never* do that.' His voice dripped with sarcasm. Then he snapped my laptop shut, looked up at me and calmly said, 'I just can't do this anymore.'

'Do what?' I asked.

'This, Billie,' he said, gesturing to the laptop. 'Do you think I enjoy being this person? Trying to guess your computer password? Looking for pieces of... what? What am I even looking for? Probably pieces of you. Because I feel so fucking far away from you all the time.'

'I'm right here,' I said, sitting down beside him on the sofa.

But my voice came out feeble and five tones higher than usual because, well, he was right. Like I said before, I'm not great at letting people all the way in, and with him it was no different. I mean, yes, having someone love you in that Nick Cave *The Ship Song* kind of way – the kind of love that makes you believe in god and soulmates and all that, the kind where they've seen your worst and love you anyway – that's the dream, right? It's just more complicated for some of us than others. Some of us are destined to always end up heartbroken like the guy in The Killers' *Mr Brightside*. And I knew instinctively from the moment I met Al, with his preppy clothes and his perfect family, that there would always be edges to his love for me; he wasn't ready for the mess that my mother's death had left behind.

He wouldn't understand it and he sure as hell wouldn't love it. So I showed him only what was palatable, and I dealt with the pain myself, my way.

'You're joking, right?' he said and his face went red. 'You're not here. You're never here. Not really. Even when you are it's like there's this part of you I just can't reach... and you're always fucking going out for drinks. I think you might really have a problem, Billie. I mean, fuck me, you smell like booze right now. Have you even thought for one moment about what this is like for me?' It came out like a waterfall, like he'd been thinking these things for ages and if he didn't say it now he never would. I considered pointing out that he wasn't perfect either, but I didn't. All I wanted was for us to be fine again.

'It's not that bad, Al,' I said, trying to defuse the situation.

'You went on a two-day bender last weekend,' he said, very slowly, like I was a child who needed help with comprehension. 'You didn't even text me back. I thought you were dead... or with someone else.'

Remember how I said we'd had a fight: that's what it had been about. And in that moment, all I wanted was to rewind to that weekend and text him back, but at the time it hadn't seemed important.

'And when the fuck did you get a cat?' he continued, pointing to the bed where Button was sleeping.

'On the weekend, she was a rescue,' I said, dizzy because everything was escalating so fast.

'Great, just great.' The 't' came out clipped. 'And how exactly are you going to feed her now that you've quit your job?'

This is starting to make me sound terrible, but yes, in the spirit of full disclosure, I'd also quit my job that Monday – I'll get to that, I promise, but for the moment, welcome to rock bottom. It wasn't pretty. But then, nobody walks into a church hall to join a twelve-step program when things are going well.

'You should be looking for a new job right now, Billie, not going out for drinks and getting pets!' he continued. 'You're out of control.'

And he was looking at me with tears in his eyes and I knew if I said something else it would be the wrong something, so I didn't, I just sat there, looking at him looking at me and hating myself for hurting him. Telling myself over and over

again, *stay calm it will blow over, it always does*. And then he said something I'll never forget: 'You just make it too hard to love you, Billie.'

And, well: *Bang Bang*.

Yes, if you're wondering, that's the other reason why I've been single this last year. Because deep down, I'm pretty sure he was right, and I never want to hear those words ever again.

He gently slid my laptop onto the sofa between us, picked up the canvas bag by his feet, headed to the door and slammed it shut behind him. And as he did, something shook loose inside me.

It was like that was the first time I saw myself clear and sharp through another person's lens, and it scared the shit out of me.

I don't know how to explain this to you, other than to say that when you're in it, it's hard to know where the line between 'casually dabbling' and addiction sits. It's blurry, and there's no umpire, no playback. But in that moment, I began to suspect I'd crossed it a while back.

Because there I was, jobless, heartbroken, almost penniless and honestly, a total mess – my entire life had fallen apart in less than a week. If I didn't take a hard left soon, I'd end up going straight over the looming cliff face ahead. But it was okay. I'd stop. I'd change. No more benders. No more late nights. I'd stay home and take back control and turn things around. And I'd do it all now. Then maybe Al would take me back. But oh *shit, fuck, shit* there was a problem. I didn't actually *want* to stop, I really, really didn't. And also, I didn't know *how* to stop. How to change.

I needed help.

So... that's how I ended up in AA.

And I did everything right. I did it all, even though secretly I always wondered if maybe I'd been rash. Maybe I didn't really need to be there. Maybe mine was not a *proper* problem? Like a proper-proper one? I did it, even though while everyone else was talking about 'gratitude', I just wanted to gnaw my arm off; even though time had slowed to a shuffle and the world was blanched of all colour; even though Al got a new girlfriend three weeks after he walked out that door, so that was off the table as an incentive. I did it despite all of that. I gritted my teeth and walked that Johnny Cash line and built a brand-new life and stayed

single so I didn't screw it up. I went to meetings and avoided temptation and listened to Tupac's *Changes* over and over again because something about the Bruce Hornsby & the Range riff together with Tupac's searing lyrics broke my heart every single time and reminded me I could still feel. So yes, it was hard, but I did it anyway. And it was all going fine.

Until last night... And now here I am, pretty much back where I started and I want to cry.

It was one little slip up, Billie, no big deal. Nobody even has to know...

And maybe that's true. Maybe I can just pretend it never happened.

My phone beeps again.

Sadie: *PS. Don't be late!!! xx*

I let out a deep sigh and look back over at my closet. Because maybe Sadie's right. Maybe it's time. And what have I got to lose? I've already lost my job and my future and screwed up my sobriety; what's a little potential heartbreak added to the mix? I can't bundle my heart in cotton wool forever. So I get up, flip through the hangers, and pull out my red dress.

7.58 PM

I see Kyle first, Sadie's husband. He's standing by the yellow-lit front window in the duck-egg-blue sweater I helped Sadie pick out for him last Christmas. As for me, I'm standing on the sidewalk outside their brownstone in Washington Heights, my fingers numb despite my wool-lined leather gloves. It's just starting to snow, and an icy wind is hitting the exposed parts of my face. All I want to do is go inside, but I can't move yet. I'm watching. Kyle's talking to a woman in a low-cut cream dress who has just pulled her long dark hair forward over one shoulder. And she's looking at him in *that way*. She's flirting. Something inside me clenches. I hold my breath and will him to do the right thing. Sadie has had enough sadness in her life.

But then Kyle smiles. He says something, and the woman smiles too. And then – *yes, yes, yes* – he turns and heads back into the crowd. I exhale, then head up the stairs to the door and press the bell. It's one of those doorbell cameras, the kind you can connect to your phone, iPad, whatever; I have the app on my phone and Sadie signs me into it whenever she goes away just in case something bad happens. Thankfully it never has, because I'm not sure what I'd do, but I do know that right now she can see me in the camera so I peer into the lens and blow her a kiss as the doorbell sounds out – a shrill and jagged, three-tone chime. I hear quick footsteps, then the door swings open and there she is.

Sadie.

She's wearing a pink sweater, a pair of pale flared jeans and a sliver of moldavite around her neck that, if you met her, she'd tell you she bought *way* before TikTok caught on. She looks almost the same tonight as the day I met her eight years ago, sitting on classroom chairs in a circle at grief group – dark hair, amber-brown eyes, an I-put-a-spell-on-you smile – the same, just a little less angry and a lot less sad. I was there because that was the only way Dad would let me leave the city (and my therapist) for our house in the Hamptons for the summer, and she was there

because she lived there all year round and the drunk driver who'd hit and killed her father while he was out jogging had gotten off without jail time. She was struggling to 'process'. Anyway, on my first day in group, the facilitator told me to stand up and introduce myself. I didn't want to be there to start with and was ready to storm out – *first the sun rose this morning like a total psychopath, now this* – but then Sadie rolled her eyes at me conspiratorially and, well, I stayed. The grief group facilitator didn't love us after that, but we loved each other, and Sadie soon became the big sister I never had.

'Finally!' She grins, grabbing my hand and pulling me inside.

'It's so nice and warm in here,' I say as I hand her my present. Two months ago, when I found it and wrapped it, my life was still intact. But now the gold paper has rubbed away and ripped slightly at one corner, and that feels symbolic somehow. 'Happy birthday!'

'Thank you.' She grins, putting it on a table behind her with the other gifts, then leaning in to hug me. 'Thank god you're here. It's all Kyle's stupid work friends *and* I got my period. It's so heavy. Also,' she says, leaning in closer, 'I may or may not be a bit baked. I made brownies, *shhbb*. Oh, but let me take your coat,' she says, opening the hall cupboard.

I take off my gloves and stuff them into the pockets, then slip it off my shoulders.

'Wow, I fucking love that dress on you,' Sadie says, clapping. 'It's so good with the red hair.' Her gaze lingers on my face. 'Wait, are you okay?' she asks, frowning now. 'You look tired.'

'Thanks.' I smile.

'You know what I mean.'

I open my mouth to tell her what happened today but I know if I say it out loud I'll cry, and it's her birthday, I don't want to ruin it, so instead I just say: 'Work.' My voice comes out strangled. 'It's been a really stressful week. I'm exhausted.'

She looks at me with squinted eyes. 'Are you sure that's all it is? It feels like more.'

And *shit, shit, shit*, my eyes prickle with tears and I hug my coat, even though it's damp from snowflakes, and then I just say it: 'I got fired today.'

‘What?’ she asks, hugging me. ‘Was it that douchebag Hendy? Did he do something?’

I shake my head. ‘No, I messed up on a case.’

‘That doesn’t sound like you at all.’

I shrug and my lower lip quivers. ‘Well, it looked like I did and that was enough.’

‘Shit. This must be the last place you want to be tonight,’ she says, looking around. ‘I have some Xanax. Do you want one?’

I shake my head. ‘No, I’m okay,’ I say. I can just make out the tail end of a song playing in the other room – Big Thief’s *Simulation Swarm* – through the hum of conversation.

‘Deep breaths,’ she says, holding onto my hands, and our eyes lock. We breathe in simultaneously, hold for a second, then breathe out again, just like we used to back when we were teenagers and trying to calm ourselves down. ‘Okay, so there’s someone here I invited just for you, but you don’t have to stay long. Go home. Cry. We can catch up properly some other time. I mean, I’ll have to get a sitter because this is my life now but we’ll do it.’

I nod and hand her my coat and she puts it in the cupboard, then she takes my hand and squeezes it. ‘You’ll be okay. Maybe your dad can give you some money?’

‘Maybe,’ I say as we head towards the hum of conversation.

But the truth is, that’s not an option.

My dad is a retired music agent – he never represented my mom, but he worked for her agency and that’s how they met. He lives on the West Coast now with his new wife and young family. I was just there, three weeks ago, for Christmas and, well, it’s always a bit bittersweet seeing Dad. We love each other a load – that’s not the problem. But I have my mother’s eyes, her hands, her voice; I can feel how I remind him of everything he has tried so hard to shut out, and I can see it hurts him just to have me around, so I don’t call him that much. I don’t visit. But when I was there sipping eggnog, already feeling poor as hell, I took the opportunity to casually mention the cost of living in New York City and see where the chips fell. But Dad just said what he always says when I bring up money: ‘If that’s your way of asking for access to your fund earlier, it’s a hard no, pumpkin.’ (My mother left me some money that I’ll inherit when I turn twenty-

five.) ‘You need to learn to live within your means. Maybe you should move to a cheaper city?’

That’s the other thing you should know about my dad: he’s been trying to get me to leave New York for years. That’s why I applied to colleges out west, and even tried to go to one. And it makes sense, New York is where he lost *her*. He doesn’t want to lose me too. I get it.

But I’m not leaving ever again. I love this city. I couldn’t wait to get back.

And not just because when I walk down the streets I feel connected to something bigger, not just for the Chrysler Building or the red New Yorker sign or the Empire State Building or the Flatiron Building or the cheap tickets to Broadway sold in Times Square. I love it because it has *Chelsea Hotel #2* and *Tom’s Diner* and Lou Reed’s *Dirty Blvd.* and Blondie and Talking Heads and Grace Jones and The Velvet Underground and The Ramones and Tom Waits’ *Downtown Train* and Bruce Springsteen is just over the Hudson and, well, it was *her* city.

I’m not really sold on the whole life-after-death thing – I used to believe in it until my mother died; I guess faith is easy until it’s tested – but when I go to Central Park and sit on her bench (yes, we got her a bench) I can imagine her there with me. Especially when the seasons change, when the cherry blossoms bloom, when the leaves turn to honey and rust. I see her in every blue, white and gold Anthora coffee cup discarded in a trash can or on the side of the road because she called them iconic and would point them out to me in movies. I feel her in this city’s scars.

Leaving here would be like leaving her.

So I guess that leaves Mr Visa and Ms Mastercard until I find a new job. Except who am I kidding, they’re both still maxed out from last year when I was looking for a new job... so I guess maybe I’ll need to temp. I signed up with an agency a year ago, just after Al left and before I got the job with Hendy. Did those awful tests and everything. I’ll email them. See if they have something for me. Those Excel spreadsheet hellscape can’t have changed that much in a year. They won’t be able to find me a job I really want – they only deal in office support roles – but I’ve worked for them before; I can slot right back in without any new reference checks.

Because, yes, Jonathan said he'd 'obviously' confirm I'd worked there if anybody asked, and yes, Google assured me they *couldn't* give a bad reference even if they wanted to, but Hendy is super well-connected and so I'd like to give him a little more time to cool off before that call comes in – before I'm back on his radar. The last thing I need is him casually mentioning his 'nightmare experience' over a squash game with a 'friend'. Maybe in time he'll remember all the good I did. Maybe he'll even soften. Maybe.

We pause outside the door to the living room and Sadie gives my hand another squeeze then looks at me. 'Now, are you ready?'

I nod. And as she leads me through the doorway I think: *Things can only get better.*

Never think this.

Never-ever-ever.

The universe, if there is a sentient universe, seems to take it as some sort of cosmic challenge.

'So, I may or may not have invited Davis,' she whispers.

And there it is.

Shit.

8.12 PM

Sadie tried to set me up with Davis about two months ago. All you need to know about that is: he's walking proof that looks aren't everything. Because yes, he's hot, but he also has a podcast. Would not stop talking about that podcast, except for one brief moment when he paused for breath to say, 'I've never had a redhead before.' When Sadie asked how I felt about him I said he was 'nice but not for me' – he's Kyle's friend and I didn't want to cause friction, and besides, I thought I'd never see him again. But now there he is, talking to some poor unsuspecting fuck on the other side of the room, and I'm understanding exactly why I'm wearing the red dress and I'm not thrilled.

Kyle comes up behind Sadie, puts his arms around her and says, 'Hey, Billie' to me over her shoulder. 'How's everything?'

'Okay,' I lie.

'Good. Good. Great dress, you look like Jessica Rabbit.' I was thinking more *Jolene*, but okay. Then he turns his full attention to Sadie. 'Baby, I need you for a moment. Cassie is getting how she gets.'

'Okay, just a sec,' she says, turning to me. 'Have a brownie, they're on the drinks table.' Then she blows me a kiss and they're gone, dissolved into the crowd, and I'm left alone. She's right, I do need to calm down. And I'm starving; *when was the last time I ate?* So I head over to the table, pick up a brownie and a napkin with Rudolph on it – a leftover from the holiday season – then spot a free seat on the sofa and sit down. I take a bite as I scan the room, intentionally avoiding Davis. Sadie's laughing, Kyle's arm around her waist, over in the far corner. They're talking to a woman – that must be 'Cassie'. But there's nobody else here I know. And I don't want to run the risk of making eye contact with Davis, so I take another large bite of brownie and reach for my phone. As I tap on the screen, it lights up.

What the hell is that?

There, floating in the centre of my screen, like it's nothing at all.

A notification. A so-bad-my-pulse-is-speeding-up notification.

@DrSamuelGrange has posted something for the first time in a while.

Adrenaline shoots through me as I tap through to his page. The screen flashes white as it loads.

Then there it is.

A new post. His first since last October.

He's in a bar. There are yellow lights and a champagne bucket. He's flanked by a man with grey hair and pink cheeks, another man with a bleached smile and curly brown hair and the blonde woman from the other photographs – Meredith, I think it was. I tap on it and the caption reads: *Winners win*. The hashtags are #legaleagle and #cantkeepagoodmandown.

A dark heat rises inside me. *What the fuck is wrong with him?* Somewhere in this city right now, Jane Delaney is probably downing more diazepam or temazepam or one of the other pams, just so she can sleep. I'm here unemployed, scoffing down weed brownies just to cope, all because he manipulated a witness into recanting her statement and... what? He's out there celebrating? Has he no conscience at all?

My heart is a kickdrum as I gaze from one corner of the image to the next, looking for something, anything, I don't know what. I peer deeper into the photograph, searching its edges: where is he?

And what would 'Meredith' say if I spoke to her?

Would she tell me something revealing, something to prove Jane was telling the truth after all? Does she know *things*, things like he absolutely spoke to my witness just before we went to court? Does he video her when she cries too? What if she's just waiting for someone to ask, so she can tell the truth?

And then I see it.

It's gleaming white and sitting on the table to the bottom left of the frame. A menu.

And as I zoom in closer my ears roar with blood. Because just above the two neat columns of cocktails is the address.

I can still see Davis in my peripheral vision. He's over by the drinks table now, eyeing me, and it's just a matter of time before he comes over. And all I can hear in

my head is Derek's voice saying: *Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference...*

And I get that this is not what he meant by that, but...

8.56 PM

I take off my coat, drape it over my arm and scan the crowd as a swarm of butterflies make their way around my stomach. *I'm doing this, I'm really doing this.* And I know I *shouldn't* be, but this is a desperate situation.

Because what's the alternative? To just leave it alone? Have him ruin Jane's life and ruin *my* life and just drive off happily into the sunset in his stupid fucking Porsche to do it again and again and again?

No-no. Not today.

I'm sick of having no control over my own life.

So I need to do what Hendy always taught me to do: change the narrative. Introduce some new information. Which means I need a couple of moments alone with Meredith.

Except *shit*, I finished that brownie in the cab and I think maybe it's starting to hit; everything feels a little... fluid. Still, relaxed is good. Relaxed is natural. I scan the room, the walls, focusing hard: where the hell are they?

I'm definitely in the right bar, it looks just like the picture he posted on Instagram – all dark wood panelling and hanging yellow lights – and the location makes sense; it's right near the Chinese restaurant Jane Delaney said they went to 'every Monday night' in the notes I typed up. I looked it up on Yelp and it seemed like a nice place, people raved about the fried prawns, but it's also where he raped her the first time; in the bathrooms, his hand over her mouth, while other diners munched on chow mein and cracked open their fortune cookies. When she cried afterwards, he wiped away her tears and said, 'I'm so sorry, I thought you were into it.'

This bar is also conveniently located just a few blocks from his townhouse on East 82nd Street. I may or may not have looked that up on Zillow, StreetEasy and Google Maps when I first saw his address in the discovery file. I couldn't help it, I wanted to know where the devil ate breakfast. To imagine the bedroom where

Jane said he'd videoed her crying for posterity. But even though it's definitely the right bar, they're not here. I glance back down at Instagram for guidance. It looks like they're against some sort of wall, so I scan the periphery of the room.

The air is thick with perfume, cologne and what smells like bourbon but it's just grey suits and highlights and people elbowing each other to get through the crowd. Soon my gaze is back to the bar, to the amber and blue and green bottles catching the light and a bartender who is smiling so hard for tips it makes me sad.

And then: finally.

The grey-haired guy from the picture.

He's right there in front of me, carrying a tray of drinks back from the bar. I watch him as he moves through the crowd towards a table and then I see *him*: Satan. Okay, fine: Dr Samuel Grange.

I recognise him from the picture on the boat immediately. He's sitting beneath a television set that's showing the news with subtitles. He's laughing, and his perfect teeth catch the light and glint like a cartoon villain's. He's taller in real life than he looks in pictures, and broad too. His good looks are so extreme that he could easily belong on the TV above him. And there, between him and the curly haired guy from the photograph, sits Meredith, her tanned arms long and lithe, her blonde hair impossibly shiny.

There's a small, high table nearby with a clear view so I sit down and toy with the candle in the middle, pretending not to notice them.

But now the grey-haired man is picking up his coat and shaking Grange's hand and then the other man's hand. He's kissing Meredith on the cheek. He's leaving. *Shit. Are they all leaving?*

I bite down on my lower lip and watch him as he departs – it looks like the others are staying – and so I'm staring right at them, taking in every last detail, when it happens.

Almost in slow motion, Samuel Grange looks right at me.

Shiiiiiiit.

I look away, up at the television above his head, my heart thudding. Now he knows I'm here. Now he's noticed me. Of course he has, I'm wearing my red dress. It's like a beacon. *Fuck.*

I sip my water, adrenaline breaking through the weed-buffer as I frown up at the television like I'm super interested in the information ribbon that's talking about the stock market. Then I calmly look back down at my table. At the candle. I pull out my phone and scroll through it inanely for a little while.

It lights up with a message.

Heather: *Babe I am so sorry about today. I am going to miss you soooooo much. Nobody could replace you. Please can we catch up soon? xxx*

And as I read her words every cell within me fills with cement as full realisation hits. I have nowhere to go on Monday morning. My eyes burn with tears, and something aches in my chest.

And sorry, it *is* hate, it's hate I feel for him. I can't help it. I look up again, and wait. It's just him and the other man – Mr Curly Hair – there now.

Where has Meredith gone?

Has she gone to the bathroom?

My pulse races as I stand, grab my bag and look around for a ladies' room sign. This is my chance. I'm heading towards the back of the room because that's where they usually are, and then I see it, the sign. Green. Pointing left. I follow it quickly and as I get inside, the cubicle door closes. I can hear her peeing and the toilet roll creaking and *shit, shit, shit*, what am I thinking? What am going to say to her?

I should leave. Now. This is too risky.

But I don't leave.

Instead, I reach into my purse and pull out a lipstick and stare myself in the eyes and it probably helps that they're the exact shape, the exact shade of blue as my mother's, because they give me strength.

Through the fog of that brownie that I should *not* have eaten, I have an idea. A good one. I reach back into my bag, pull out my eyedrops, tilt my head back and squeeze three drops into each eye. I hold them there, right on the mascara and then blink hard as I drop the bottle back into my bag.

The cubicle door opens just as I scrunch up my face and the tears roll right on cue.

'Hey.' It's Meredith. She notices my running mascara. 'Are you okay?' Her voice is soft.

‘Yeah, I just... Don’t ever try internet dating,’ I say, shaking my head and wiping my cheek with the back of my hand.

I’m going for: chronic oversharer.

‘Wow,’ I say, looking at myself in the mirror. ‘Look at me,’ I force a smile, ‘I’m such a mess over some asshole who stood me up.’

‘His loss,’ she says, washing her hands and glancing at me in the mirror.

I watch her expression carefully now, because I need to be certain of what I see. ‘Why can’t I just attract someone... I don’t know... kind? Someone who wants to protect me, not hurt me?’

I’m expecting a look of recognition. Maybe a flinch, like a rubber band pinging her own heart. Something to lead into a conversation. But all I get is a wide smile.

‘There are good ones out there,’ she says, primping her blonde hair in the mirror. And I can tell she’s about to leave and I need something, anything, so I gently roll out a grenade and watch to see how she handles it.

‘Is *your* husband kind?’ I smile.

She doesn’t even flinch, just smiles right back. ‘I don’t have a husband.’

‘Sorry, I thought I saw you with some men earlier. In the bar. I just assumed you were with one of them.’

She laughs, ‘Oh, right, no that’s just my brother and a couple of his friends.’

Right. Well, this has been a wasted excursion. Even if she knows something she’s not going to tell on her brother.

‘I hope you feel better,’ she says as she heads for the door. And I fix my make-up as best I can and get ready to leave.

9.32 PM

I push my way through the crowd and I'm almost at the front door when out of nowhere a hand gently grabs onto my elbow. I swivel to look. It's Meredith. 'Hey,' she says.

Crap.

'Do you want to join us?'

Double crap.

My heart flares in my ribs as I gaze over her shoulder. Dr Grange is watching us from their table; a dizziness falls over me. What do I do?

'Come on,' she says, and I know where she's taking me and I also know I shouldn't go – the idea was to get information on him, not give him a good look at my face – but it's like there's this magnet in my chest and it's pulling me towards him.

'I'm Meredith, by the way,' she says over her shoulder as we get to the table, 'and this is my brother Sam.'

Our eyes meet and my breath catches.

He extends his hand so I can shake it.

'Hey,' I say, the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end as we touch. His hand is big and rough and I know what it's done and where it's been. But there's something within me that keeps me there. And I'm clocking things like: his handshake is the handshake of a man who's always in control. His eyes are those of a man who always gets what he wants.

But I smile anyway. I can't say 'I'm Billie' because when I leave tonight I want to be able to disappear into this city, a silhouette behind a plume of steam, and I try to avoid any outright lies because they tend to catch a person out. So I always tell the truth, just not the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

'Mina,' I say.

‘Nice to meet you, Mina,’ Grange says as I sit down and he pours me a glass of champagne. ‘This is Ramone, one of my oldest friends.’

‘Hey,’ says Mr Curly Hair, smiling up at me briefly then looking back down at his phone.

‘Hi,’ I say.

‘I saw you earlier,’ Grange says, his eyes boring into me. ‘Of course I did – you’re stunning.’

‘Oh.’ I smile back, my stomach flipping. ‘Thanks.’

‘I think you noticed me too.’ He gives me a wink as he hands me a glass.

Shiiiiiiit.

I frown at him as though I don’t understand. The last thing I want is for him to figure out he’s the reason I’m here.

‘You were looking right at me. Don’t be shy.’

I glance over at the table where I was sitting earlier and then back at him and up.

‘I was watching the news,’ I say. ‘There’s a TV up there.’

Meredith bursts into laughter.

‘Not everyone is obsessed with you, Sam,’ she says, downing her glass of champagne. And I’m thinking: *Is that what he told people, that Jane Delaney was obsessed with him?*

But his eyes are trained on me now; he’s tracing my features, my curves. If I didn’t know who he really was I’d think he was attracted to me, and to be candid I might feel the same way. But I do know.

‘So, why is a beautiful girl like you all dressed up and all alone?’ he asks.

I shrug and look down. I shouldn’t be doing this...

‘Sam, don’t.’ Meredith steps in. I glance up just in time to see her throw him a look that he seems to understand.

‘Oh, sorry,’ he says. ‘If it makes you feel better,’ he leans in a little closer, like he’s about to tell me a secret, ‘I’ve just had the love story from hell.’ And I’m not sure whether he’s talking about Jane or the woman after Jane – she’s not here tonight, did they break up? – but either way, as he raises his glass so we can clink I’m struck by the fact that he really thinks he’s the victim here.

Clink.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ I ask. Because how perfect would that be?

‘Not really. I’d rather talk about you. Do you work around here?’

I shake my head. ‘No, I live nearby,’ I lie. And my mouth is dry, so dry. So I go to take a sip of champagne but right on cue my phone starts ringing. I can feel it vibrating from my bag on my lap, so I reach for it. The screen reads: *Derek Sponsor is calling...*

Reality hits me like a bucket of iced water.

What am I doing? This is all wrong. I might have lost my job but I still have my life, I can’t afford to make things worse. I need to go. Now. Before it’s too late.

So I say, ‘Maybe some other time. Thanks so much for the drink, I really should go though. Nice to meet you all.’

And Grange is watching me through narrowed eyes, like he’s trying to make sense of me and good luck to him; he’ll never in a million years guess why I was here.

I stand up and reach for my bag and Meredith gets up and hugs me like she knows me and says, ‘You’ll be okay. He probably didn’t look like his pictures anyway.’

And then Grange says, ‘Great, another time then.’ He hands me his card while his friend, Ramone, just keeps scrolling through his phone. The card is thick matt stock, finished with his name and his title – *Surgeon* – above his phone number. I look down at it and try to look impressed, like I’ve never seen his name and that title in such close proximity, like I haven’t analysed his entire website time and time again, then I look back up at him. And he’s even taller than I thought and his green eyes are boring into me – they’re green, so green – and he smiles this smug fucking smile and before I can stop the thought it’s there, front and centre, flashing in neon: *he’s just my type*.

And then I feel it happen.

Deep in my abdomen.

A little familiar flame ignites. And, well... it’s been a while.

Shit. I need to get out of here. Now. Like: now-now.

‘Thanks,’ I say, smiling sweetly as I put his card in the inner pocket of my handbag. And then I turn to leave and he says ‘Call me’ because he has no idea what he’s doing right now and I say ‘I will’ and then I’m gone. Dissolved into the

crowd. And as I head towards the door, pushing past suits and a woman in sequins, my heart a hummingbird in my chest, I quickly text Derek: *Hey, sorry, I've been sooooo sick. See you on Thursday!*

And I mean it, I really, really do. But then I step out into the icy air and it's snowing harder now and there it is.

Lit up by a streetlight, parked just across the road. His Porsche.

And holy shit, I'm not made of stone...

9.58 PM

I recognise the first three letters of his smug licence plate immediately: S-A-M. My heart is buzzing with some kind of electrical current as I think *I cleared out my locker today and there's a corner store right there, a few doors down*. Just past a closed bridal shop. It's like the red neon light that reads 'OPEN' is lit up just for me. So I don't really think it through. I just move towards it, like the same invisible magnet that drew me to Grange is now pulling me into that store and right up to the counter. There's a small man with dark hair sitting behind the register, playing a game on his phone. I stand there for a few moments as the high-pitched dinging echoes off the walls and then he looks up and smiles. 'What can I get you?'

'Batteries,' I say. 'Triple A.'

And I know I'm playing with fire here, because this is not a simple case of adding someone on Instagram. Or turning up to a bar. I'm not dipping my toe in that pool of danger anymore. No, I'm about to jump right in. And two minutes later I'm standing in the darkened doorway of that bridal shop, breathing fog, putting on my gloves, ripping two batteries from their packaging and riffling through my bag for something small and hard plastic. And there's a voice inside me telling me to stop but I can't. I need to do this.

I need-need to do this.

And I need-need to do it now, before he leaves.

And then there it is. The small tracking device I've used before but not in almost a year now. And I have to say, if I believed in fate, which I don't, but if I did I'd think that's what this is. Because it's not usually in my handbag. Usually, it's safely tucked away in my gym locker at work. But today I had to clear it all out and there wasn't enough space in my plastic bag – I had to put it in my handbag – so now it's right here in my hand. And if it wasn't snowing, Grange might have walked here tonight. But it is, so he didn't, and now here we are: me, his Porsche

and my little tracker. The subscription for the tracker's app still has a year to run; I'll just redownload it to the prepaid phone I still have at home in my closet. Like I said, if I believed in fate, this would be it.

My heart thrashes in my chest as I put in the new batteries and close the backing. I wipe the tracker down on my coat, sling my bag over my shoulder and look around. The street is almost clear because of the weather, and the few people who are still out are hunched under umbrellas, their eyes trained on the ground. I pull my own umbrella from my bag and put it up, then I step out onto the snowy sidewalk and cross the street towards Grange's car. When I get there I lean down beside it and balance the umbrella between my jaw and my shoulder, pretending to do up my boot. This umbrella is shielding me from two problems right now: the snow and any nearby CCTV cameras. And so while one hand pretends to fix the long ribbon-like laces on my boot, the other reaches beneath his car to the midpoint between the front and back tyres. And the magnet does the rest: *snap*.

Then I stand up, and start to walk. And as I head towards 86th Street and the Q train home, I like to think I look just like any other girl who got caught out by the weather; like I didn't just do what I did. Like I've never done something like that before. Like I'm not a few more than *32 Flavors*, just like Ani DiFranco.

And, well, that brings me to the third thing you should probably know about me. But please just hear me out before you judge me?

AA

The first time I went to AA I cried the whole way through.

If Derek hadn't spotted me, standing there alone by the door, or if he'd waited three more seconds – no, two – to come over to me, I'd have walked straight back out again. But he did see me. And he sat with me that first night and on many nights to follow, my hand clutching his as I sobbed, thinking: *Why am I crying?* And he never flinched, not even once. Not even when I told him about my mom, about how I felt like it was kind of my fault, like I should have been there that night, I should have protected her. All he said was, 'Everyone in this room has a story like that. We all have a pain we're trying to numb.' He understood me in a way my shrink never did. I could feel it pulsing off him.

So I like to think we found each other; saved each other. Derek hadn't sponsored anybody in almost two years at that point – the last person he'd sponsored had relapsed and ended up in prison; he blamed himself – but I was just the right mix of vulnerable and confused to make him want to try again. I like to think that, but it's bullshit. He saved me. One hundred per cent. Because I don't even know what would have happened to me if I'd turned around and walked out again that night.

The months that followed were all bad coffee, good donuts, late-night phone calls when I just couldn't do it anymore, acceptance, laughter, love... but also: fear. And not just because I had a copy of the Big Book now and had seen the steps and knew I'd never get past number five (a full confession), but because I truly respected the people in that room. I could feel the kindness radiating off them as they held my hand and spoke of courage and wisdom and all the other things I really fucking wanted to embody in a way that wouldn't land me in prison. And I was terrified – TERRIFIED – that one day they'd realise I was a fraud. That I

didn't belong. Because I needed them, and in a lot of ways I was just like them, but in one vital way I wasn't.

You see, my name *is* Billie but I'm *not* an alcoholic.

And I don't mean that in the denial-y way most people say it. I mean it as truth. Because there *was* something going on, something I was hiding from Al. A part of me he'd never reach. A reason I was always going out. And yes, I often put it down to 'drinks', but it wasn't 'drinks' I was doing.

It was so much better than 'drinks'; better than anything I've ever tried.

That two-day bender I went on just before Al left? That's what that was. And I wasn't in a bar the night Al texted me to say we needed to talk. I was in a cyber café trawling through news sites, looking for signs of myself – a rogue iPhone picture, a video, something that would identify me and ruin everything. Because last time, somebody saw me.

I didn't want to lie to Al – I *never* wanted to lie to him – but what was the alternative? To tell him what I'd really done that last weekend? Where I'd really been that night? No chance. When I got his text, I knew he'd ask where I'd been, so I went into the first bar I saw, ordered a neat double scotch, downed it so he'd smell it on my breath and then went home to Al. And everything went the way it went. And I knew I had to stop but I didn't know how, I needed help. But how do you get help when you can't tell anybody what you need help with? Exactly.

So I came to AA.

It was all I could think of.

I'd seen meetings in the movies and they always seemed like kind, forgiving spaces. And I appreciated the whole *what's said in the room stays in the room* ethos.

And where else was I meant to go?

Because they have Narcotics Anonymous, they have Alcoholics Anonymous, they have Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, they have a support group for almost everything these days. But they don't have support groups for people like me. And if you're wondering, no, Sadie doesn't know about AA. About Derek. About any of it. Because if I told her that, I'd have to tell her everything else, too... I'd have to tell her about the first time.

THE FIRST TIME

Apparently there's no wrong way to handle grief. We all deal with it differently. Some people cry, some bottle it up. Others, like my dad, sprint towards the finish line, desperate for the pain to be over, not yet aware that there is no finish line. I came home from school two weeks after my mother's death to find removalists taking everything of hers to a thrift store. I managed to salvage two things that day: her music collection and that red dress. As for me, well, I didn't really have a coping strategy. Like I said before, the night my mother died the little flame inside me died too. All I could do was wander through a sepia world half-awake for a while, drifting further inwards and wishing I'd died too. Because everything that had mattered to me before now seemed pointless. And I kept waiting for it to get better like people said it would, but it didn't. I'd begun thinking maybe this was just me now. My new personality: sad-girl. That the closest I'd ever get to relighting that little flame inside me was listening to The Doors' *Light My Fire*.

And then one night I figured it out. Think Bruce Springsteen, *Dancing in the Dark*, the last three lines before the outro chorus...

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning: the summer after my mother died. The one where I met Sadie in grief group.

We'd started hanging out almost every day, outside of group. You should know that I was lonely, really lonely at the time; all my school friendships had somehow dissolved in the months after mom died, so having someone to talk to who wasn't paid to be there, someone who understood – well, it felt like a second sun shining in the sky. I was staying with Dad at the house we had in Sagaponack in the Hamptons, but he was never there and Sadie only lived fifteen minutes away. So we'd spend our days lying by the pool, listening to music, smoking cigarettes and watching videos on YouTube.

Sadie was *really* into wicca back then, so when the sun went down we'd head to my room and close the door, and cast banishing spells (with pure intentions, of course) on the people who took her dad and my mom from us. Even now, when I close my eyes and think back to that time I can still smell the *Teen Spirit*, sunscreen, candle wax and burning sage.

But eventually, the bravado always gave way to the same thing.

Us, sitting on my bed, e-stalking *him*.

Because the justice system had failed Sadie too, but in a more concrete way than me.

And while I couldn't get to the likes of @therealbelturner – the only solid piece of information I had about her was that she lived in New York City somewhere; I'd pieced that together from tweets – for Sadie, things were less complicated.

Because she had a real name to google: Keiran Astor.

He was in his mid-twenties at the time and I'd gone to school with guys like him: the picture-perfect all-American boy with his Instagram page full of gym visits and protein shakes and beach days and signed baseball bats and sweaters that read 'Cornell' and hashtags like #wallstreethereicome and vodka tonics and perfect teeth and a pretty girlfriend and everything else that tells us his future is secure despite the fact that, in a just world, it absolutely wouldn't be.

Because what Instagram didn't say was this: he was also the guy who'd got drunk, got behind the wheel and killed Sadie's father.

The guy who (according to our Google searches) should have been charged with vehicular manslaughter in at least the second degree, but wasn't.

How does that happen?

Well, who knows? Personally, I've always suspected his father – a high-profile lawyer – might have called in a favour or two, but I can't prove that, so I'll just tell you what Sadie told me.

His legal team argued that it wasn't the booze that led to the accident – Sadie's father 'wasn't wearing sufficient reflective clothing', they'd said. And so 'it wasn't Keiran's fault'. In fact, they'd added, 'The only reason that Keiran Astor was above 0.08 BAC that night was because he hadn't eaten that day. Stress.' Then they'd asked did the court really want to ruin the future of such a 'promising young person'? For what? To make an example of him? Couldn't the court *see*

how remorseful he was? (Insert what I suspect – for reasons that will soon become apparent – crocodile tears here.)

And their argument might sound reasonable to you but hold on, I'm not done yet.

You see, the day after Keiran Astor got off, Sadie received a Facebook message from a girl who'd been following the case saying: 'I'm so sorry, he's such an asshole. I've known him since we were kids and there has always been something really wrong with him. I mean he put a guy in the hospital in a bar fight last year and didn't even care. He belongs in prison. Just know I'm thinking of you. Karma will get him eventually.'

Sadie showed me that message soon after we became close. In hindsight, that's probably what fuelled our obsession.

Because it wasn't just us, someone else thought Keiran Astor should have gone to prison too. We couldn't all be wrong. But he didn't go to prison, did he? No. He didn't even get community service. He was given three years' probation and ordered to pay restitution to Sadie's family in an amount that was nigh on insulting, and the very next day he was being tagged in smiling photographs on Instagram like nothing had happened and Sadie was the one in prison.

Except hers was a prison I knew intimately; the sort nobody could see. And while I couldn't break myself out, maybe I could help break her out instead. I mean, there's nothing quite like a 'project' to take your mind off your own pain.

Which brings me back to us, sitting on my bed, seething as we scrolled down his Instagram page: @NYgent91.

The nights were long that summer; long and searing. We took turns reminding each other to breathe, poring over his profile, watching as people tagged him in pool party photographs like he hadn't even paused to reflect, and thinking: how is this okay? *Something* should happen to him, shouldn't it? He shouldn't just waltz on like nothing happened...

But what could *we* do?

This was back in the day when Instagram still had that 'following' tab – the one where if you were following someone (as we were; Sadie had set up a stalker account soon after her dad died) you could see what they liked and commented on, and that just fed our obsession. Because we could see every single time

@NYgent91 liked a new girl's picture. And from there, the pattern that followed was always the same.

Step one: he'd follow her, like a bunch of her images and she would follow him back.

Step two: she'd post some super upbeat meme about love and we'd turn to each other and say: *Has she not seen the girlfriend on his page? Who did he tell her she was?*

Step three: he'd disappear off the new girl's follower list and she'd disappear off his (we figured they'd hooked up and he was blocking the girl before she could figure things out and tell his girlfriend).

Step four: she'd post a sad meme and/or a really hot picture of herself.

And then finally, step five: her account would turn to private.

Once we'd watched this pattern play out five or six times we were pretty confident that (a) he was cheating on his girlfriend, who was away in Australia for the summer, and (b) it was only a matter of time before she caught on, just like we had. But we waited and waited and waited and maybe it was the time difference – she was sleeping when he was liking pictures – but that didn't happen. She was still leaving cute comments under his pictures.

He was going to get away with this too.

And it felt almost immoral not to intervene. Because maybe if we approached these girls, one of them would give us something we could show his girlfriend and then, at the very least, somebody else would know he was a shit. And maybe she'd tell more people. I know it all sounds petty in hindsight, but at the time it was all we had. And also: she deserved to know, right? The girlfriend?

So, we messaged one of them. We couldn't just come out and ask what had happened between them so we pretended he'd cheated with us too. We worded it like this: *Something happened between me and Keiran Astor. I think you might know him. Please can we chat?*

We thought we were super clever; we didn't say *what* had happened. We didn't lie. Not really...

There was silence for ages and we were about to message one of the other girls instead, but then: typing bubbles.

And then...

Beep: *When? If it's just happened you can go to the police and they can test you. He did it to me too.*

My vision blurred as I read those words because I knew instinctively what 'it' meant. We both knew. So we typed back: *Did you report it?*

It took even longer for the next message to come in. It read: *No. Are you okay?*

Sadie and I stared down at the screen and then at one another, and as we were trying to figure out what we could do with this new information without completely jeopardising this girl's privacy, the messages disappeared.

She'd unsent them.

And then, just like that, we were blocked.

I could imagine her sitting there, realising she'd said it, put it in print; pure panic, bubbling shame.

We never tried to contact her again. It felt wrong; cruel even. But now we knew exactly how dark his soul was. And honestly it was more than we'd bargained for; it scared us off a bit, I think. So we did nothing.

The summer was drawing to an end by then and it was time for us to re-enter the real world, but it hung heavy on us both: he was still out there, pounding vodka shots, date-raping whoever he wanted, maybe getting behind the wheel drunk again, and there was nothing to stop him. He appeared untouchable: the personification of everything that was wrong with the world.

And so, as the leaves started to change and I went back to school there was a new melancholy swirling through my veins. If I had to give it a colour it'd be heritage green, and it was a pain quite removed from the grief I'd come to know so well. Sadie felt it too. She'd text me late at night from the small apartment she'd moved into with three roommates in Bushwick, saying maybe it'd go away now that she was starting what she called her 'real life'. We still spoke about him sometimes, but the spaces between utterances became longer; she was still sad, I was still sad, but we stopped lamenting it and, well, life did what it does. It continued.

That is, until the next summer rolled around, the one right before I started college.

I'd been back in the Hamptons for a week, Dad was out for the night, and somehow I found myself logging into our stalker account and checking Keiran

Astor's Instagram page, just like old times. He was back for the summer too, it seemed. He'd posted a couple of pictures – one by the pool, one on the front lawn – with friends just that day, and his girlfriend was nowhere to be seen. A chill rolled through me: would he do it again?

I can't tell you exactly what made me decide to follow him *that* night as opposed to any other night, whether the moon was full, my PMS was spiking, I was stuck in the rage stage of grief or I just couldn't stand by and let him hurt someone else. Maybe it was all of those things combined. But I can tell you this: I got in my dad's car and drove to the Astor's holiday house. Because, from the pictures he'd posted, that's where he was staying – I recognised it from his mom's Facebook page.

I was just eighteen at the time, with a fake ID, a new driver's licence, an eyelash curler and a burning belief that if I didn't do something nobody else would. I knew the street name and what the house looked like – Sadie and I had pieced that together the summer before, from posts on his Instagram feed. And so there I was, parked beside their driveway on a street in Sag Harbor, waiting for – honestly, I don't know what I was waiting for. But I do know what happened: he came outside, got into his black Range Rover and those red tail lights flared up like flaming cherries. I didn't really think it through, I just followed him. What else was there to do? We drove for a while and the whole way I was stress-sweating – where the hell was I going? Would he notice me there in his rear-view mirror? Would somebody see me?

We were on Water Street now – the street Sadie's dad was killed on – and turning left, and then I knew where he was going: Baron's Cove. He parked and I watched as he walked into the bar. I sat there for a little while, my blood pumping double time, just staring in the direction of the door.

But what the hell was I going to do? Confront him?

I couldn't do that.

What was I thinking?

I was about to turn the key in the ignition and leave, but then I thought of Sadie, her face wet with tears as she struggled to breathe – her dad was gone forever. And that Facebook message, *he belongs in prison*, and that girl on Instagram, and how many more were there? How many more would there be? I'd

come this far, I had to do *something*... And in that moment, I knew exactly what to do: it was intoxicating. So I took the keys from the ignition, grabbed my bag, and went inside.

He was already drinking when I got there, flirting with the barmaids, his thick blond hair flickering in the light. My stomach clenched as I went to the far end of the bar and ordered four shots of vodka in a single glass, no ice, and a second drink, too: a plain cranberry juice. There was an empty table in the corner, a small green plant and a menu in its centre, so I took my drinks over to it and sat there, watching him as I sipped my cranberry juice. Waiting. And then about forty minutes later, it happened: he looked over to me, I smiled, my blush reflex kicked in, and that was it – I was doing this. But as I watched him stride across the room towards me, my throat dried up and my hands got clammy. Was I insane? Could I follow through? He was around six feet tall but it felt in that moment like he was eight foot four. I was trembling by the time he got to me.

‘Aren’t you the prettiest little thing?’ he said, his eyes scanning my camisole top for my nipples as he pulled the chair beside me closer and sat down, leaning in towards me. His cologne was too strong but I forced myself not to recoil – *deep breaths* – and reached for his drink instead. I was still at that point where I knew I had a certain power over men but I hadn’t figured out exactly where the edges lay yet. And so I kept my eyes on his, watching for guidance, as I took the smallest of sips. It was vodka and tonic, just like in his Instagram posts, and I winced.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked with a smile.

‘Mina,’ I said. It came out so naturally – it wasn’t even planned.

‘Well, Mina, can I get you another drink?’ he asked. My glass of cranberry juice was almost empty now. And the vodka, which looked like water, was waiting just behind the menu and flowers.

‘A vodka cranberry?’ I said in the sweetest voice I could. Smile.

He smirked again, like he was thinking something bad-bad-bad and left me there with his drink and went back to the bar. And the moment his back was turned, I took a big gulp of his drink to make room, checked nobody was watching, and coolly, calmly, poured those four shots of vodka into his glass.

And just like that, an invisible match was struck, and that flame inside me finally re-lit; I could almost smell the sulphur. That was the first time since my

mother had died that I didn't feel entirely adrift, like I was stunted somehow, falling behind, while everybody else rode off into their luminous futures. I had stumbled upon a salve for the pain. God might have forgotten me, but maybe there *was* hope for the future...

Fast forward half an hour of small talk, me tipping some of the drink he got me into the plant when he wasn't looking (there was no way I could drink it; I knew what he was capable of), and the fluttery-eyed promise of a blow job if he downed his drink and met me at his place, and then I'm standing beneath a starry sky in the parking lot, watching him stumble towards his car. Watching him get behind the wheel – his choice, not mine. Watching him slam the door. And watching him speed off.

That's when I called the police.

I gave them his licence plate and location, told them he'd been drinking and was now swerving all over the road, and begged them to hurry before he hurt someone. I'm not really sure how it all went down from there because I wasn't around. I was at home, deleting that stalker account once and for all.

But he's currently serving seven years in prison.

Sadie still thinks it was the banishing spell.

The girl on Instagram probably doesn't even know.

And me? Well after that, I was hooked.

SATURDAY

10.03 AM

I wake with a jolt as two sirens flare up outside like a couple of drunks in a Leonard Cohen choir. Then comes the beeping of horns, the low thud of bass from a passing car and some people yelling. My eyes crack open; the light seeping in from the edges of the blinds is a bright white. It must be late. I reach for my phone from beside the bed and squint down at the screen.

It's 10.03 am. Wait, 10.04.

But: *oh crap.*

What the hell is that?

There is a deep and jagged crack down the screen; it runs top to bottom like a river with no estuaries.

Did I drop it last night? *When?*

Images flicker in my mind as I try to recall: Sadie's party, Davis, Meredith, Grange, his business card... Wait, why the hell is my shin aching? I look down at it, tangled in covers, and see a big reddish mark. Is that a bruise? How did I do that?

And then: *oh.*

And then the rest of the night rushes back.

The red neon 'OPEN' sign.

The batteries.

The tracker, attached to the bottom of Grange's Porsche.

Adrenaline spurts through me and my throat gets a little tight. Because: *Whoops.*

Well, that explains the crack, at least: this is not my real phone. This is my burner phone. I put the battery and SIM back in and plugged it in to charge when

I got home last night, I remember now. I was eating a bagel and banged my shin on the edge of the bed in my excitement. Hence the bruise.

I call it my burner phone because there's nothing on there to lead back to me. I bought it from a private seller off eBay, have never used a payment method that isn't a prepaid card on it, keep a VPN installed to scramble my IP address, all voice assistance and location services (including Google tracking) are switched off. I reset it as a new phone and swap out the SIM card every time I finish a job, and I've never logged into my home wi-fi or entered a traceable email address into it or the Google account connected to it. The only email address I have ever entered into it is my fake one: MrJJ007007@gmail.com. Mr JJ was my childhood teddy bear, if you're wondering. But it's an Android – an older model with a removable battery – not a disposable flip phone. So while it's as safe as I can make it, 'second phone' is probably a more accurate description.

Still, whatever I call it, that crack down the front, the one I'm tracing with my finger right now, is a strong reminder of all the reasons I'm not supposed to do things like this anymore. A flash of memory from last time: *I drop my phone... there are stairs, so many stairs... my breath is so fast, he's right behind me... there was so much blood...*

So what was I thinking last night?

In the moment, it all seemed so simple, so obvious. But now, as I lie here staring up at the ceiling, my burner phone in my fist and my stomach clenching, I just don't know anymore.

Slowly, I sit up, my limbs heavy, and reach for my actual phone. Button meows and runs towards me from the kitchen.

'Morning, baby,' I say as she jumps up onto my lap and purrs and kneads while I check my messages.

There's one, floating on the screen, from Derek: *Great, see you Thursday.*

Sticky guilt pulses through me as I stroke Button's head. What would Derek say if he knew where I was last night? If he knew what it meant? But then again, what would Derek say if he knew the truth about me and AA full stop? I get a flash of the night I collected my thirty-day chip; he was so proud of me. I was so proud of me.

It felt like an achievement – one I didn't really want, but knew I needed. And I worked so hard to protect it. When we lost Jane's case I didn't run out and seek justice; no, I turned to vodka like everybody else.

And vodka followed Grange on Instagram.

And now there's a tracker under his car.

I guess Derek is right: it's a slippery, slippery slope.

But I can stop it all right here, right now. I'm in control of this. I haven't even downloaded the tracker app yet...

I pick Button up and we head over to the big window and pull open the blinds. A glary morning light floods into the room and I squint against it and look outside. The sky is bright blue – the blue of food colouring or exotic fish – lacerated by flight trails and cloud. Through the black iron of the fire-escape I can see people in coats and beanies making their way up and down the street, turning the clean white blanket of last night's snow to sludge. A child jumps in a pile of snow, there are black bags full of garbage and a guy in blue flannel is singing *Nessun Dorma* by Puccini. I love living here. I don't want to have to move. Which means I need a new job, and fast.

So that's what I need to focus on right now.

Not Grange.

But shit, shit, shit... *His handshake is the handshake of a man always in control. His eyes are those of a man who always gets what he wants.* A shiver runs through me and I clench my eyes shut, pushing the feelings away. Because I felt it last night when I looked into his eyes but I feel it even more now: he's exactly my type.

MY TYPE

When I started college I didn't really have a set life plan; it was an achievement just to finish school with grief frying my synapses. I guess deep down I'd always thought I'd follow in my mother's footsteps and maybe work in the arts. I'd inherited both her singing voice and her heart – the kind that beats with more fragile ferocity than most – but now I was terrified of all that; it seemed safer to stay invisible. Dad was in the middle of moving to the West Coast, so I applied to schools nearby, enrolled in a liberal arts degree, and was living on campus for my freshman year. That's how case number two happened.

It was maybe a month before summer break when I heard crying in the room next door. I'd only spoken to the girl who lived there once or twice in passing, but I knew (a) her name was Sascha, (b) whenever I saw her out she was playing 'mom' and holding another girl's hair back, (c) she loved Lorde's *Melodrama* record (thin walls, mutually open windows) and (d) in the whole time we'd been neighbours, I'd never heard her cry before.

At first I thought maybe she'd broken up with someone. And then I heard her say his name: Callum Harvey. She was on the phone to someone. And then she said, 'No I can't, it'll just make it worse... You're not listening, he's said this stuff to *everyone*.' Her voice faltered on *everyone*. 'And they're all looking at me and saying crude stuff behind my back. I don't want to leave my room because I'm so embarrassed.' Her voice got louder now, more intense. 'No – if I do that it'll just go on for longer...'

That night, the crying continued. And the night after that. And the night after that. And each night my blood grew a little hotter. Because I'd found Callum Harvey online and he was entirely unbruised. How could I just stand by and do nothing when I knew? But Sascha was right. Denying whatever he'd been saying about her would just give his words more weight. Even if people half believed her,

they'd always at least wonder whether maybe it was true. I needed to entirely discredit him.

So I watched his social media, went to the same places he did five nights running, and then on the fifth night he noticed me there, standing right beside him at the bar. He was drunk, I was pretending to be drunk, I asked him to take a picture of us together and he did, his hand grabbing my boob. Next, I touched his arm and said I was thirsty, and he turned to order drinks and left his phone just sitting there on the bar. The screen was still lit up – it hadn't locked again yet – and he wasn't looking. So I grabbed it and excused myself to the bathroom, where I scrolled through his photo reel, composed a new message to the number I'd brought with me, attached two of his very special photographs and pressed 'send'. Then I deleted our picture together from every folder, deleted the message thread I'd just created, returned to the bar, slipped his phone under a jacket on the bar stool beside him and left after I'd had my drink.

Two days later Callum Harvey was called into the Dean's office for sending dick pics to a female member of the college faculty. He said he didn't do it. But they came from *his* phone and it was his dick; *his* bathroom in frame. Can't fight with facts.

And as I sat in my room watching the group chats go wild, intoxicated by agency, knowing I'd helped, I also knew deep down that it was just a matter of time before I got caught.

If I wanted to keep doing this – which I did – I needed a safe container for my hobby. A way to hide in plain sight.

And there was only one entirely legitimate way I could think of to do that: become a paralegal.

When I tell people I was drawn to working in the law because 'I wanted to help', they always look at me like I'm a silly little girl with too much faith in the system. Like the world has some nasty surprises in store for me. But I've already had those nasty surprises; my way of 'helping' isn't what they think it is.

It's just that I needed access not only to guilty people who'd been found innocent but also to the resources I could use to make those wrongs right again: discovery files, addresses, schedules, photographs, databases; the sorts of records nobody questions a paralegal poring over. And the thing with paralegals is that

while we do a lot of the work, we're exactly what I knew I needed to be in order to stay safe: invisible.

So I transferred to a college back in New York, enrolled in a two-year associate degree in paralegal studies, began making contact with recruiters, and graduated to a job with a criminal firm.

And it was almost perfect.

Except for two things. One: I couldn't find any evidence of who @therealbeltturner was in the real world (and trust me when I say I looked. I tried every variable: Belinda, Isabella, Bella, even Thumbelina). And two: honestly, there were too many targets to choose from. I couldn't go after every married guy who hit on me after work, or every criminal who got let off (some of them are good people in bad circumstances, after all). I needed criteria. A way to pick. And so, based on the two organic choices I'd already made (and the choice I'd love to make if I could just find her), I came up with this.

My targets needed to be: 1) entitled, 2) remorseless and 3) have a victim who couldn't protect themselves.

And so began my real 'work', behind the scenes and sheltered by the façade of my paralegal job. And it was wonderful. For the first time in my life I had real purpose; meaning. And I would have continued like that ad nauseam if everything hadn't gone so wrong last time. But it did. I fucked up. My target came home unexpectedly, I was forced to run, and on my way out somebody saw me. I didn't know it at the time – I learned that thirty-six hours later, from the news.

What if they figured out it was me? What if they came for me? Let's just say I panicked.

So I quit my job, went to AA, deleted all my personal social media just in case, dyed my hair red and applied for new jobs, at civil firms this time.

Because if I was going to kick this habit, like *really* kick it, I needed to avoid the temptation of criminal cases altogether.

And it worked. Sort of. Except, now that I had all that free time on my hands I was bored. I was googling things like: 'Why do I feel dead inside?' And even though I was no longer doing things *my* way, I still wanted to make a difference. Still wanted to protect people and fight for what was right. So that's when I decided to become a lawyer. I was due to inherit that money I told you about, so I

could have used that for law school, but look what happened last time I was in a college environment. And then I heard about law apprenticeships, Hendy said ‘yes’ and it felt like maybe I’d ended up exactly where I was meant to be all along – I’d simply taken the scenic route.

And then boom: Grange came along and blew it all up.

Grange, who fits all three criteria perfectly.

It’s almost like he was picked out of a catalogue just for me.

But: *shit, shit, shit.*

My pulse is doing that familiar flippety-flip thing now and my blood is getting hot. That’s dangerous. *Don’t be rash Billie.* Rash is how bad things happen.

I leave the big window and carry Button over to the other one, open the blinds and push it up. A whoosh of cold air floats in and hits me on the cheeks. I take a deep breath, attaching the safety mesh I bought to keep Button safe. The radiator beneath it clanks and hisses, but it’s not loud enough to drown out Derek’s voice in my head saying: *Just do the next right thing, Billie.* He says that a lot.

But what does it even mean?

What *is* the next right thing in a situation like this?

How can it be the ‘right thing’ to just turn a blind eye? What about Jane?

Button meows from my arms. ‘Are you hungry?’ I say to her as I go through to the kitchen. I put her down on the floor and open the cupboard where I keep her food, but it’s empty. *Crap.* I vaguely remember putting a tin in the fridge yesterday when I got home from work... maybe there’s still some left in there.

I reach for the fridge door but a laminated message stares out at me and I don’t look away in time. It’s a copy of AA’s *Just for Today* meditation and it’s supposed to keep me on the wagon. But *uh-oh*, my eyes catch on one very specific line about halfway down: *Just for today I will do someone else a good turn without being found out. If anybody finds out about it, it will not count...*

I swallow hard.

This line has always been a bit triggering for me, to be honest, but I’ve managed to talk myself off the ledge every single time because I’ve always had a job that let me help people legally. But now I don’t have that job – or any job.

But wait... *think clearly, Billie...* This isn’t an option. Not even a little bit.

Because Dr Grange has seen my face, he's spoken to me; it's too risky. So, no matter how much I *want* to do this, no matter how much it might actually be the right thing, I can't. It's that simple.

I pull down the meditation, put it on the top of the fridge and cover it with a few rogue menus.

There. No more triggers.

Button circles my legs, her meows getting louder as I open the fridge door and scan the shelves: spinach, the leftovers of a Whole Foods wrap, a tin foil container of food-cart fruit salad, a bag of bagels, some cheddar, eggs – and there it is, on the middle shelf, right by the coffee. I reach for it, but the tin is empty. I throw it in the trash and Button is still calling to me, waiting for her breakfast. And I'm still thinking *Grange, tracker, app... shit*. Caffeine. Caffeine will help. So I reach for the coffee tin, but that's empty too. My throat tightens. And I need to do whatever I need to do to stop myself from doing what I really want to do right now. To take the edge off. So maybe... I don't know... nicotine? Yes. Nicotine.

So I grab my coat, bag, phone and keys, close the window and rush out the door.

10.33 AM

I step out into a sea of pedestrian traffic: strollers being pulled over cracks in the pavement, laughter and some guy saying ‘*of course* he wants that’ into his phone. I turn right and head past a pile of trash, two girls taking a selfie by the fire hydrant and a guy with a moustache carrying a guitar case into the bodega on the corner. There’s a green lit up sign in the window that reads ‘ATM’, and advertisements for the lottery and electronic cigarettes. I move inside, hold the door open for a tiny old woman and glance across at the man sitting behind the counter, texting. He is surrounded on one side by rows of potato chips and cigarettes sparkling under the lights, and on the other by a display of sticky buns and pastries. His name is Marco, he owns this place.

I head down the aisle housing the toilet roll and deodorant, past some guy with headphones on, past the laundry detergent, and stop just before the cat food. The ones Button likes best are on the bottom shelf, so I grab a box of twelve tins then move over to find a bag of coffee before heading to the counter.

‘Billie!’ Marco grins. He’s always upbeat. Always. ‘Do you need a bag?’

‘No, thanks, I’m okay,’ I say, motioning to my handbag, ‘but can I grab a cup of coffee and a pack of Marlboros?’ I ask, my eyes scanning the counter as someone else comes in through the door. There are piles of business cards for local places, all in little holders: blue ones for a nail salon, yellow ones for a mobile yoga teacher and a small pile of purple paws for the bad-tempered and expensive vet on West 59th Street I took Button to when she was sick – apparently cats can get urinary tract infections. *What if Button gets sick again?*

I need another job. I need another job. I need another job.

‘I thought you’d given up,’ Marco says, eyeing me curiously. His dog, Kevin, wanders over to me, wagging his tail.

‘I did, but then I got fired. I’m stressed,’ I say, as a wet nose covers my hand. ‘Are you the best doggie in the world?’ I ask Kevin. His tail wags harder and

Marco says ‘don’t encourage him’ as he reaches beneath the counter into his ‘special’ compartment. He sells contraband cigarettes from Virginia (\$5.25) at New York prices (\$16), but he gives them to me for cheap. Because he’s a cool guy.

He puts the cigarettes on the counter and pours my coffee, fastens the plastic top and then rings up my total. But as I glance at the digits – \$24.65 – reach for my bank card and tap, my throat tightens a little. I probably have enough for a month’s rent and maybe two and half weeks of living expenses left in my account. I need to be careful.

I grab the cigarettes, drop everything into my bag, take a sip of coffee and head back out onto the street as Marco gets back to texting.

Two minutes later I’m at my security door, breathing in a swirl of dust and heading back inside.

I move past Mrs Benson’s apartment – the muffled sound of TV laughter floats through her door – and trudge up the stairs. I can hear Button meowing from inside as I balance my cup of coffee in one hand and let myself in with the other. The door slams shut behind me as I go to the kitchen to feed Button. She purrs and eats and I grab my coffee and head to my bed with my handbag.

Right. Time to fix my life.

Instinctively, I reach into the inner pocket for Dr Grange’s business card then immediately put it back.

Because no, not like that.

I’m just going to have to fix my life the way anybody else would. I’ll get a new paralegal job, I’ll build new relationships, and I’ll apply to law school next year, once all the dust has settled.

So I reach for my laptop and while it fires up, I twist the lid off a B vitamin bottle to use as a makeshift ashtray then pull open the drawer beside my bed. There’s a clear shower cap and elastic band in there that I keep for moments just like this. I grab them, go over to the fire alarm, stand on the chair and fasten the shower cap over it with the elastic band.

Now I’m ready.

I go back to my bed, pull out a cigarette and flick the lighter as I take a deep drag. Yes, it’ll kill me, but other things might kill me first if I don’t calm down.

Taking another drag, I watch the Apple logo glow from the screen and then, holding the cigarette between my lips, I log in with my password: *B-u-t-t-o-n*.

I pull up a browser and go to Gmail thinking: *I can do this. I can do this. I can do this*. It's just like Derek is always saying: *One day at a time*. I breathe out a puff of smoke, tap on the search function and type: *W-a-n-i-t-a*. She's the temp agent I signed up with a year ago.

And there it is. Her last email. A temp job I didn't take because I'd been offered the role with Hendy.

I take another drag, rest the cigarette on my makeshift ashtray, centre myself, then click on the email and press 'reply'.

Hi Wanita! I type, *I just wanted to let you know that I'm available again!*

I pause: how many exclamation marks are acceptable? I remove the first one.

Please let me know if you have anything going. Ideally I'm looking for something legal.

Wait, that's not what I mean.

Ideally I'm looking for something in a legal office. Hope all is amazing with you! Billie.

I take one last look at the message, press *send* and reach for my cigarette. There. It's done. Next step: find a job I actually want. I take another drag, close my eyes, breathe out and... *beep-beep*. That's the sound of a text message coming in.

My eyes flick open and I reach into my bag, thinking *maybe I should have kept that first exclamation point?* while feeling around for my phone.

Beep-beep comes another message just as I pull it into view. *Derek. It'll be Derek.*

But it's not Derek.

No-no. It's worse. It's Hot-Josh.

His first message reads: *Just checking you got home okay?*

The next reads: *btw, do you want this back or can I sell it on eBay?*

My shoe. He must have found my shoe.

But then *beep-beep*. In comes another text. This one is a picture. And crap, no, it's not of my shoe.

It's of a golden locket.

And yes, it's mine. And fuck my life because I really need it back for, well, a couple of reasons, the first of which is: my mother gave it to me for my fifteenth birthday.

How could I have forgotten I was wearing it? I'm so stupid.

But I know how I forgot and it's not just because I was drunk and the last thirty-six hours have been insane. You see, I almost never wear it – I keep it safely in a box most of the time. I only put it on last-minute on Thursday morning because of Jane's case – for luck. So I guess that means it's not that lucky after all, but I still need it back. Which means *great, just great*, not only does the guy who took me home dead drunk have my number, but now I'm going to have to see him again.

4.02 PM

I move past the red lit-up sign that reads *White Horse Tavern*, past the fairy lights and the noise of conversation outside and into the warmth. I looked this place up on Instagram when Josh suggested it and its bio read: ‘favourite of Dylan Thomas, Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, James Baldwin’ etc. And so, as I look around I can’t help imagining Jim and Bob there at the bar, beneath the TV playing silently and the ceiling fan spinning slowly and the circular light fixtures with small white horses on them. My eyes flit to the two hot guys behind the bar. One of them has tattoos and is shaking a cocktail; the other one is pouring shots – is that Sambuca?

It’s full in here and I scan the crowd. *Who did I go home with the other night?* I tried to find Josh on social media, scouring for a face that I recognised, but there were way too many Joshua Wilsons to be sure. Still, I know he’s tall and I know he has dark blond hair – and there’s one guy fitting that description, sitting alone over by the wall in a really questionable shirt. That *might* be him...

I reach for my phone, my eyes dart to the time – 4.02 pm – and then I text him: *Here*.

I watch the guy by the wall to see if his phone lights up, but it doesn’t. *Shit*. All I want to do is turn around and go home again, but I can’t – I need my necklace back.

Hang on... typing bubbles...

I know, I can see you.

I look up and around – left, then right – and then I hear a low voice say, ‘Billie?’ from right behind me. I swivel to look and my breath catches: *oh*.

Because honest-to-god, he looks just like Eric off *True Blood*. If you don’t know who that is, please quickly google so you can see my moral dilemma. Otherwise, just think: *hot*.

He has thick caramel hair, a strong jaw, broad shoulders and he’s tall, even taller than he looked wrapped up in that pale blue duvet on Friday morning. He’s

wearing a dark grey T-shirt that clings to his torso beneath a black leather jacket. I'd guess he's about twenty-eight? Maybe thirty? And he's carrying two orange drinks.

He gives a little *Sex and Candy* smile and leans in to kiss me on the cheek; he smells like his sheets and I can feel his stubble against my cheek.

'Hey,' he says into my ear. Goosebumps race down my arm.

What the hell is wrong with me? He's the douche who took me home dead drunk. The kind of guy I'd usually target.

'Hi,' I say, pulling away. *I will not feel these things.*

I'll just get my necklace and go home.

'For you,' he says, handing me a drink.

I take it. 'Thanks.' He spots a table over my shoulder – a booth with a little candle in the middle – and leads me over to it.

'What is this?' I ask, sniffing my drink as I sit down. It smells like pineapple and cinnamon and something one hundred per cent proof.

'Ezekiel something or other,' he says as he sits down. 'The bartender suggested it.'

I trace his face – his eyes are kind and blue-grey like the sea on an overcast day. He doesn't seem like a sexual predator but then again, neither did Grange. And I still have no idea how my dress came off.

'Smells strong. Are you trying to compromise my decision-making faculties, Josh?' I give him a small, tight smile then take a sip. I'm giving him a chance to say sorry for the other night. To look a little sheepish. To be a good person.

'Yes. I need to get girls drunk so they like me. You know my secret now.' He winks, looking deeply into my eyes as he takes a sip...

And there's something about this – the smugness, the certainty that he can just do whatever the hell he wants – that has my stomach clenching, and fuck it...

'Well, that is kind of your MO, right?' I say, and then my cheeks get warm. Because what am I doing? Now I'm going to have to have an argument with him and I just want to get my necklace and leave.

'Huh?' he says, frowning. 'What do you mean, *my MO*?'

'Thursday night?' I take another sip; I can't back down now.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. Hard. His face gets very serious and he leans in close. 'Okay, wow,' he says. His voice is just above a loud whisper. 'You don't remember, do you? Any of it?'

Oh my god, and now he's trying to gaslight me. He's going to try to tell me I came onto him... just watch. This pisses me off even more.

'Yes I do,' I say. 'I remember you helping me stumble towards the door because I was so out of it. I remember you going through my phone...'

'I was trying to get you an Uber home but you were too drunk to tell me where you lived,' he says, leaning in closer, like he's urging me to do the same. 'And I took you home to protect you. Do you have any idea what kind of creep you were talking to, who you would have gone home with if I hadn't saved you?'

'Seriously?' I start to laugh. 'You *saved* me now?'

'Yes, I saved you,' he says, his voice going up a couple of tones. 'What was I meant to do, just leave you there? With some rapey dude?'

'Okay.' I nod, like I'm taking it in. 'And when we got back to your place, and you undressed me while I was blind drunk, was that *also* you saving me from some rapey dude, Josh?'

'Huh? No – wait, yes...' His eyes dart behind me, to the next table, then back to me. 'Jesus, Billie, you have major trust issues.' And then he clenches his jaw, reaches into his pocket and pulls out my locket. It glints in the light as he bangs it down heavily on the table. 'Here.'

'Thanks,' I say, slipping it into my bag. 'Well, thanks for the drink. I'm going to go.'

But as I move to grab my coat from beside me, he reaches across the table and puts his hand on mine to stop me.

'Wait,' he says. I look up and our eyes meet and something cracks behind his gaze. 'This isn't fair.' He frowns. 'I mean, yeah, maybe you're right, maybe I shouldn't have taken off your dress but fuck, you'd spilt something down the front and I was trying to help... that's why I took off your necklace too, before you ask – I didn't want you to choke to death. I mean, I really was trying to protect you Billie, it's not like I... like we...'

Sex, he's talking about sex.

And as he speaks, I can feel my blood slow down.

Because that's true. I'm pretty sure we didn't.

And *hang on...* there *was* a stain on my dress.

And *oh crap...* there's something else behind his eyes right now; it's soft and vulnerable and it catches on something deep in my chest. *Oh no-no-no...* I believe him. He really was trying to help me.

Shit.

My cheeks burn hot.

And I want to fix it the way I always want to fix it when I mess up, but I don't know how. But I have to do something and I have to do it now. So I do what I used to do with Al; I make myself more palatable.

'I know.' I laugh, squeezing his hand. 'I'm just fucking with you.'

I watch his expression – *please buy it, please buy it, please buy it.* His mouth gapes a little and he just stares at me and my pulse thuds.

'Seriously?' he asks, his eyes searching my face.

'Of course,' I say, forcing a grin like it's all fun and games.

'Thank fuck,' he says, smiling back, and my shoulders relax. Up close, his teeth are white and perfect but his nose has the slightest crick near the bridge and I want to change the subject – I *really* want to change the subject – so I reach out and touch it with my free hand.

'What happened here?' I ask.

He flinches just a little. 'I used to play ice hockey professionally,' he says. I'm super aware that our hands are still touching.

'Used to? Why did you quit?'

He looks down at the table. 'Life? Nothing turns out the way it's supposed to.'

An ache rolls through me, a deep fucking ache. Like I'm recognising something in him, something I can't name. Something that makes me want to close the space between us. But I swallow hard and search for inane conversation instead.

'So what do you do now?' I ask gently.

'Now... I don't know,' he says, looking up with a small smile. 'I drink a lot of protein shakes. I coach a bit. I save random women in bars.' He winks and his eyes dart to my mouth and then back up to my eyes. 'You really scared the shit out me before,' he says, his eyes narrowing.

I laugh, like it's a joke. 'I know. Do you forgive me?'

‘Sure.’ He shrugs. ‘At least you’re not boring. And also you’re a goooooodddd ppeeeerrrrsooon, remember?’ he slurs, and I’m pretty sure that’s meant to be an impression of me from the other night.

‘Oh god, what else was I saying?’

Seriously, what if I told him... THINGS. Things I usually keep buried. Things I’d never say sober?

‘I don’t know,’ he shrugs again. ‘You were slurring, it was hard to make out. Something about Jane? Wanting to save her?’

Phew.

‘I must have been really out of it.’

‘Aren’t you lucky I was there to save you?’ He smiles, glancing over at the bar then back to me. ‘So, another drink?’

And I know I should say ‘no’. I know I should go home and trawl through want ads and fix my life. But I’ve had a rough forty-eight hours and I can feel his knee touching mine under the table and there’s this feeling flowing through me. It feels like when you’ve listened to a whole record and it’s all a bit blah and then this one song comes on that you can feel in every single cell of your body, and now you love the whole damn record, even the shit songs because they give contrast to the great one. They lead up to it. I guess that’s how life always goes. It’s shit, shit, shit, and then out of nowhere, it’s fantastic for a sliver of a second. And the key is to grab onto those moments before it all goes to shit again. So maybe it’s that, or maybe it’s because my burner phone is at home and frankly I could use a distraction like Hot-Josh right now. Something to stop me doing anything I’ll regret. But either way I say: ‘Sure.’

I mean, it’s just a drink.

SUNDAY

8.51 AM

I'm starting to think maybe I *do* need AA, and not just because of my little hobby. Last night one drink turned into like eight, and now I'm questioning my life choices. Because instead of sipping coffee and calmly applying for new jobs, my mouth is full of damp hair, Josh's hand is warm on my stomach, my lips are dry and I feel a little nauseous.

I turn to look at him: he's still asleep. His breath is deep and steady.

And yes, this feels very *déjà-vu-ey*.

Slowly, carefully, I reach for my phone beside the bed and blink down at the screen.

Three messages. All from Sadie.

LOVE MY PRESENT!!!! xxx

PS. You ok? x

PPS. Can I give Davis your number? He keeps asking. xxx

And here's what you need to know about Sadie: she's as committed to my happiness as I am to hers. So simply typing back 'no' to that last message won't work. But I can think of one thing that will.

I move through to the camera, turn slowly towards Josh and snap.

I tap on the image and text it to Sadie, put my phone back on the bedside table and as I lie back down, my eyes catch on the space just beyond it. Right there, by the door, that's where Josh pushed me up against the wall when we got back to my apartment last night. Something flips in my abdomen as I remember his mouth: warm and soft. His stubble: rough. His hands in my hair; him kissing me as soon as we were inside.

But the glitter of last night has given way to the stark realities of day: I have nowhere to go on Monday morning and no paycheck coming in. Thick dread

moves through me as I look to Button, sleeping on the windowsill – we must have forgotten to pull down the blinds last night – as the radiator hisses beneath her and it drizzles outside. And all I want is to turn back time. To be sitting in the office with Heather when I decided to contact that witness for Jane. But do I really want that? Would I really do it differently, even if I knew how it would turn out?

I want to say ‘yes’, but that would mean giving up on what’s right.

My gaze softens and lands on the floor, on the records we played last night: Elvis Costello’s *My Aim Is True*, the Cowboy Junkies’ *The Trinity Session*, Lou Reed’s *New York* and on the very top, Jimi Hendrix staring me down from the back of his *Are You Experienced* cover, like *What the fuck are you doing with your life?* And honestly, he has a point, so I look away, towards the closet. And there’s my black lace bra – *he’s gently unhooking it, his lips are on my neck*. It’s just in front of the—

Oh crap.

The plastic bag.

The one by the closet.

I stare at it, catching the indifferent morning light coming in through the windows and I can see the dress I was wearing on Thursday – emerald green fabric – peeking out the top. But that’s not the reason adrenaline is flooding my veins right now.

Because just on top of that dress, I can see a flash of blue. An edge. And beside that, a flash of grey. Just two of the seven small drives I’ve kept in my locker downstairs at work for safekeeping over the last nine months. I hid them there because I was scared that whoever saw me running away last time might identify me. And if shit went down, I did *not* want those drives in my apartment.

Because I have a drive for every single prior target. Including the last one.

Now, if I had a shrink they’d probably jump to some dark conclusion about that, like they’re ‘trophies’. But they’re honestly not. To start with, I’m not a serial killer, I don’t take trophies, but they do give me a certain hope in dark times, a hope I don’t want to let go of – they remind me that we can all make the world a little better if we want to. Is that so bad? And also, the information on them is relatively benign – just lots of files – unless someone knows what they are looking

at. But staring me down from just beside the grey one is something else I've kept in that locker, and this is a little less benign, okay, a *lot* less benign: a newspaper article.

A warning to myself.

Something I absolutely would have already hidden if I hadn't been half dead when I got home with that plastic bag on Friday morning, if I wasn't so out of practice, if I'd suspected for a single moment when I left the house yesterday that Josh would be lying in my bed right now. But *shit, shit, shit*, I can't just leave it there, not with daylight streaming into the room illuminating the headline. I can almost read it from here: *WHAT HAPPENED TO AURORA HUGHES?*

8.59 AM

Carefully, slowly, I pull away from Josh, sit up, and glance back over my shoulder; he doesn't stir. I hold my breath and tiptoe towards the bag. I need to hide that article. Because I'm guessing from the way Josh picked cocktails off the menu last night that he can indeed read, and Aurora Hughes is definitely not morning-after material. I lean down and, as quietly as I can, I scoop up the drives and the article and head through to the kitchen. Button mews and runs after me; she thinks I'm going to feed her. She gets inside just before I close the door, jumps into the box I use for recycling and looks up at me.

'Shhh,' I say as I reach into the cupboard near the fridge and pull out a distressed blue tin labelled 'teabags'. I empty out the three remaining Earl Grey teabags onto the countertop, put the drives inside and press the article flush against the edge. And even though I don't read the headline, don't even scan the text, a flash of Aurora lying in a pool of blood flares in my mind, I can't stop it.

My muscles clench; my hands get clammy.

I push the lid on tight.

My hands are shaking as I put the tin back, nestling it between the cereal and pasta and telling myself: *It's all in the past... all in the past... all in the past.*

And all the while, Button purrs as she twirls around my legs.

As you've probably guessed, Aurora Hughes was the thing that went so wrong last time. The reason I stopped doing this. And look, I'd rather not talk about it because it makes me super panicky and I need to go back in there and act normal, but just know it was bad.

I take a deep breath to centre myself, fill the coffee machine with water, put in a paper filter and open the bag of coffee I bought yesterday. I spoon some into the machine, press the 'on' button and watch it glow red. And as it simmers to life, I think: *You've got this.*

That's when I hear my phone *beep-beep* from the other room.

I pick up Button, pull open the kitchen door and head back into the bedroom. Josh is lying there, eyes half open, watching me. ‘What are you doing?’ he asks, his voice croaky with sleep. His stubble is a little longer this morning – *it suits him* – and his eyes are heavy.

‘Making coffee.’ I smile, self-conscious as he watches me – just a T-shirt, bare legs with goosebumps – walk back to the bed.

I put Button down on my side, sit on the edge and reach for my phone.

Sadie: *WHO IS THAT?*

I smile down and reply: *Josh.*

Typing bubbles, then: *So a NO to Davis then? x*

I look over to Josh. Button is on his chest now, kneading and purring.

‘She likes you,’ I say.

‘Mmmm,’ he says, stroking her. I wait for him to say something else but he doesn’t, and neither do I. We just sit in awkward morning-after silence – well, as much silence as we ever get in this city: horns, sirens, water pipes creaking, voices and a series of dull thuds courtesy of the upstairs neighbour. I always forget how much I hate this part of dating. Or one-night stands. Or whatever it is we’ve just done. The magic of booze and night-time giving way to me trying not to swallow too loud and pretending to read something on my phone, and him looking aimlessly around the room, anywhere but at me really. That can’t be a good sign.

His eyes land on the record covers on the floor. ‘I still can’t believe I found the one girl who loves the Cowboy Junkies as much as I do,’ he says, puncturing the silence. ‘Nobody has ever heard of them...’

And that sounds good, promising. Except he’s still not looking at me. And so I’m about to pick up our conversation from last night about their song *Misguided Angel* when he suddenly says, ‘Wait, what’s the time?’ and starts looking around for his phone. I look back down at mine. ‘Just after nine.’

‘Shit, I should go,’ he says, sitting up. ‘I coach on Sundays.’

And there it is. His exit strategy. *Great. Just great.*

‘Do you want coffee first?’ I ask, as he gets up and heads for his clothes, draped over the chair beside the window.

‘Sure, thanks,’ he says, throwing me a quick smile.

So I leave him there, pulling on his jeans, amid the wash of beeping horns and the thuds of the upstairs neighbour as I go to the kitchen. I pour us each half a cup of coffee – it's still bubbling away and there's not enough for two full cups yet – and head back through to the bedroom.

Josh is standing by the window, looking out at the buildings across the street. His silhouette – its smooth, well-defined edges – is stark against the bruised and brooding sky.

I put his coffee down on the dresser, then sit down on my bed, stroking Button as I watch him pull on his grey T-shirt.

'Last night was fun,' he says, flashing me another quick smile and taking a sip of coffee.

'Yeah,' I say. 'It was.' And as I watch him rush to get dressed to leave I can feel my inner walls go up again and I'm sad, sadder than if we'd never met at all.

If you were wondering, this moment right here is why I avoid hook-ups. Maybe I make too much oxytocin or something, but once a guy's penis has been inside me, I just feel things, no matter how hard I try not to. Like I want to be cool with it but right now all I can think is: *Does he like me? Will I ever hear from him again? And what the hell is wrong with me? Why can't I just do casual sex like a normal person?* It's distracting. Exhausting. And shit, I can't be like this today, I have so much to do.

I need to focus.

I need my brain for important things.

I will *not* be pulled into the same boy-vortex that frequently devours Heather.

He takes another sip then puts his cup back down on the dresser, sits on the chair beside the window and pulls on one shoe, then the other. Then he gets up, comes over to me, kisses me quickly on the forehead and says: 'I'll call you.'

And I say 'sure', even though I know he won't.

Button, on the other hand, can't read the room like me so she runs after him like it's a game as he goes to leave. He puts on his coat, opens the door, smiles, and closes it after him. And then he's gone and his footsteps are fading. The air still smells like his cologne, my cheek is raw from his stubble and there's an ache inside me now, a familiar emptiness. I reach for my bag, pull out my gold locket and put it on the bedside table. At least I have that back.

First up: apply for a new job.

So I reach for my laptop, turn it on and take a sip of coffee as it fires up. Then I pull up a browser window and type in *Paralegal jobs, NYC, Civil*. I scan down through the adverts, avoiding anything in a criminal firm, thinking: *no, no, maybe...*

But then a weird, foreign *ping* comes from my phone.

I say 'weird' because I never get messages on social media; nobody knows I'm on it. And so I reach for my phone and frown down at the screen.

And *oh shit*.

It's bad. Bad-bad.

Because it's from Instagram. A message to my *norajane_8* account.

@DrSamuelGrange: *Hey sexy, have we met in person?*

And this is going to take some next-level self-restraint.

MONDAY

1.01 PM

My old office building looks just like it always has, but today it feels bigger and more daunting and I have to force myself to breathe as I walk past it – *you can do this, you're not a total failure* – to the café just around the corner. I pull open the door and head inside, scanning quickly for Hendy even though I know he won't be here – this is way too downmarket for him – and then there she is: Heather.

She's sitting by the window at an isolated table, frowning down at her phone. I weave my way over to her, around plastic tables and coats on the backs of chairs. The air smells like coffee and grilled cheese and sounds like clattering cutlery and *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*. And I love Whitney but right now it's more *I Wanna Hide in a Hole* because there's a pang of nostalgia pulsing through me. We've come here a lot over the last nine months, me and Heather. But this time is different. Because this time I no longer have an access card to get back into our office, and she does. It's lying on the table. And as I look down at her washed-out photo smiling back at me from underneath the plastic casing, my insides twist.

She looks up and sees me. 'Hey,' she says, looking at me with a sad expression. I search her face for news.

Heather called me just after I'd left the temp agency. I was staring down at my phone, sad because even though I knew Josh wouldn't text me I kind of wanted him to, sadder because while Wanita had a role for me it was only admin and only for ten days, and even sadder still because I'd just checked on Jane Delaney.

It seemed harmless enough when I pulled up her Instagram. Maybe she was okay...

But she wasn't okay. Not even a little bit. Her most recent post was a picture of her crying, her face squished against a pale pillowcase with the caption: #defeat. So

yes, I was staring down at my phone, every part of me aching, hating myself for not doing better by her when my phone started flashing: *Heather is calling...*

‘Hey,’ I’d said, pushing a finger against my ear so I could hear her above the sirens, traffic and nearby construction.

‘I need to talk to you, Billie,’ she’d whispered back. I could barely make out what she was saying, but I could sense the panic in her voice. ‘In person. Can you come meet me at the usual place? At maybe... hang on... lunch? 1 pm?’

It was noon, I was newly unemployed, and I was secretly hoping something had come to light over the weekend that meant I wasn’t actually fired after all, so here I am.

The waitress comes over and puts down a black coffee and a green tea.

‘I ordered for you,’ Heather says, putting her phone on the table. ‘Black coffee, right?’

‘That’s great, thanks,’ I say.

‘How have you been?’ she asks with a pitying frown. ‘It’s just so fucking crap here without you.’

‘I got a temp job.’ I smile, trying to be upbeat. ‘I start tomorrow.’

‘That’s great.’ She smiles back, but her eyes dart to the table, like there’s something she’s not saying.

‘So what’s going on?’ I ask.

She lets out a big breath and looks back up at me. ‘Please don’t get upset.’

Oh god.

‘I didn’t want to put this in a text,’ she starts, leaning in towards me to whisper, ‘but you need to know. Hendy has been saying things about you.’

‘What sort of things?’ I ask.

She shakes her head and her mouth gets this sort of pursed look, like she’s tasted something sour. ‘Okay, so Josephine told me she overheard something this morning when she brought Hendy a file he’d asked for. He was talking to Jonathan when she got there, and before she went in Jonathan said—’ Heather pauses, like she’s trying to recall it word for word. ‘He said: “*Wilhelmina asked about a reference.*” Then Hendy said: “*Of course she did. Look, be careful. That girl is a loose cannon, she should be working in a nail bar or—*” then they saw Josephine

standing there and stopped talking and so she gave Hendy the file and they made her close the door on her way out.’ Heather stops and stares at me.

‘Shit,’ I say, for a couple of reasons. One: Josephine is the office gossip; if she knows something, anyone who’ll listen knows too. It wouldn’t surprise me if she loitered by the door on purpose to eavesdrop. And two: Hendy has clearly not forgiven and forgotten quite yet – nobody’s going to hire me if he and Jonathan have anything to do with it. And what happens if I apply to law school and they call?

I let out a deep breath, trying to calm myself, but how can I stay calm? I did everything right. This is so unfair.

‘I’m so sorry, Billie, I’m not trying to make you upset but if you don’t know that’s even worse, right? Like, I’d want to know. It’s always better to know.’ She’s nodding now, big knowing gestures, her eyes wide open.

‘Maybe you should just lie about where you worked last?’

I nod back and try to smile a sweet smile, but my blood is fizzing, and something hot and sour is bubbling up inside me now as images flash in my mind. First: Jane, crying, #defeat. Second: Grange’s eyes on Friday night; his handshake. Then: Hendy and those certificates behind his desk and *That girl is a loose cannon*. And me, with my plastic bag full of possessions pushing my way through the security door.

How is any of this just?

Why do I have to play by the rules when they don’t?

And my pulse is speeding up and that’s a bad-bad sign and I’m telling myself *deep breaths, deep breaths, deep breaths*, but it’s not helping. Instead I’m thinking of the tracker on Grange’s Porsche and my witness on that stand and Grange’s message to me yesterday that I didn’t even reply to because I’m being so good: *Hey sexy, have we met in person?*

And *fuck, fuck, fuck*, the heat is rising now, because deep-deep down, I know he’ll do this again. Of course he will. Why wouldn’t he when he always gets away with it? And because of him, because of whatever he did or said to make my witness change her mind, everybody thinks I’m a loose cannon, unreliable – I’ll never get another job in the law. I won’t be able to help people anymore. Somebody has to stop him. Somebody has to step in.

He's crossed the line.

And then it happens, like it always happens – a wave of clarity washes over me. That high-definition, autumnal clarity.

It needs to be me. Nobody else is going to do it.

And yes, I know I screwed up last time, that I said 'never again'. Yes, I know it's risky. But I also know I don't want to be the kind of person who just lets this slide; who stands by and lets him get away with it. Not when I *can* do something about it. That would make me almost as bad as him. And I need Hendy to know how wrong he is about me, about Jane, about Grange – about all of it. I need everyone to know.

So it'll just be this one last time.

Just to put him out of action.

Just to do the right thing by Jane.

Just to get my life back on track so I can help other people the *legal* way.

Then I'll go right back to AA and Derek and the straight and narrow and a brand-new paralegal job.

Promise.

'Are you okay?' Heather asks, her voice a normal level now. 'You look a little pale.'

I nod, my throat tight, because... *Dr Grange has seen my face*. That's a risk.

Still, he liked me. That could be helpful.

'God, I just wish there was something I could do to help you,' Heather says, piercing my internal dialogue. 'It's all *so* unfair.'

And as I look at her, her dark eyes filled with feeling, I know she means it. And the truth is, right now, in this moment, there *is* something she could do. Because while I don't have an exact plan, I have... let's call it 'historical data' to go off. And whatever I do will need to be witnessed by somebody in my old office. Otherwise nobody will tell Hendy and he won't shut the hell up.

'I just wish I could see what Grange is posting on social media,' I say. 'It's so stressful. Like, that witness said I asked her to lie, she said that under oath. And she knows my name. What if Grange somehow gets it out of her? What if he posts about me the way he did with Jane? I won't even know. God, do I sound paranoid?'

‘Hell no,’ Heather says, taking a sip of her green tea. ‘Whenever I have a big fear, my therapist makes me do this thing where I have to tell her what evidence I have. And you have some pretty strong evidence there because he’s done it before.’

‘Shit,’ I say. ‘You’re right.’

‘I mean, *I* could add him. If you want? Let you know if anything happens? It might just put your mind at ease?’ she says, shrugging and taking another sip of tea.

I realise I haven’t touched my coffee yet so I take a big gulp. ‘I can’t ask you to do that,’ I say, the ceramic cup rattling on the saucer as I put it back down. ‘What if he figures out who you are and where you work? It’d look really bad if he figured out we were watching him after everything that happened.’

‘Oh please – I’ll use my stalker account: Lizzy,’ she says. ‘And Lizzy is sexy as fuck. He’ll totally add her.’

I let out a big sigh. ‘I couldn’t ask you to do that,’ I say again. Because honestly, guilt is moving through me. I want to fix this but I don’t want to get Heather involved.

‘You didn’t ask,’ she says. ‘Happy to help. What are his handles?’

Still, it’s just an Instagram follow. Nobody will know.

I frown down at my phone like I have to try to recall them.

‘I only remember the Instagram one, it was in the notes: @DrSamuelGrange.’

She looks down at her phone and taps and scrolls. ‘There, done.’ She smiles up at me. ‘One less thing to worry about. I have your back.’ She puts her phone back on the table.

‘Thanks,’ I say, like it’s not the massive deal that it is, just as her phone lights up with a message. Her eyes dart to it and so do mine – *Toby* – and her face lights up like her screen.

‘How are you, hon?’ I ask.

‘I’m good,’ she beams, biting her lip like she’s trying to hold herself back. ‘I think he actually likes me, Billie,’ she says, nodding to her phone. She’s talking about the guy she met the other night. And on one hand I’m happy for her but on the other, I’m maybe a little, I don’t know... jealous, because now I’m thinking about Josh. Josh who *hasn’t* texted me. And how maybe Al was right and I am too

hard to love. And how actually, when I think about it, I have no fucking control over my life.

Honestly, that just makes the prospect of being Mina for a little while all the more attractive.

‘And I just keep thinking,’ she continues, ‘what if I *hadn’t* gone to that bar with you that night? What if I *hadn’t* needed to pee at exactly that moment so I *hadn’t* walked past him? We never would have met and I’d still be sitting here upset about that last douchebag. I mean that’s wild, right?’ She pauses and smiles. ‘God, Billie, how am I going to not fuck this one up? I always fuck it up somehow.’

‘You won’t,’ I say, checking the time on my phone quickly. Because now that I’ve opened Pandora’s box, my mind is a whirl of *I-bet-he-likes-florals* and *I-wonder-what-time-he-eats* and *I-really-should-go-home-and-get-my-burner-phone-and-recharge-it-with-call-minutes-and-download-that-tracker-app-and-put-on-my-golden-locket* and *oh-I-need-another-flash-drive*.

I think of Jane Delaney and that failed witness and what they have in common: sweet, demure, kind. So that’s what I’ll be. You see, Dr Grange is my type... now I need to make sure I’m his type, too.

Because the only way for me to protect the next girl is if I *am* the next girl.

8.22 PM

The door opens, my pulse jumps and I look up from the blue-white screen of my laptop. A woman dressed all in black walks in and looks around. She spots her dinner companion, smiles, gives her coat to the hostess and I look back down at my screen, my eyes darting to the top right corner. It's 8.22 pm.

Where the hell is he?

I reach for my burner phone and check his location: he's still at home. He's been there since just after I arrived, my clothes still smelling of the subway. And I've been here, intoxicated by anticipation, watching that door open and close and open and close, checking and rechecking the tracker app. Filling my time by downloading Facebook and Instagram and LinkedIn onto my burner phone so I'm ready. Staring at my laptop screen so I have a prop, a reason to be sitting here alone other than waiting for him. But still: nothing. I don't understand. Jane said Mondays, every Monday, and today is Monday.

And I've been here over two hours now, eating dim sum and sipping Coke; now I need to pee.

I snap my laptop closed and gesture for the waitress to watch it in my absence. She smiles and nods, and I stand up, take my bag and head to the back of the room. It looks just like the Yelp photos in here, except the ceilings are a little higher. And it smells like fried pork and pastry and sweet and sour sauce. I turn left, following the signs to the bathroom, and move inside. It's a large square space with pale green tiles, little musk odour sticks, a small window and no space beneath the door. It's totally enclosed. Soundproof. And as I sit down to pee I think: *So this is where it happened. This is where he raped her the first time.*

I flush and wash my hands and check my make-up in the mirror, applying another layer of peach lipstick and glancing over my reflection. I decided on a dress. A long-sleeved woollen navy one. It's demure, but it clings in all the right

places. My nails are a barely-there peach now; a similar colour to the one Jane wore a lot.

But what am I going to do if he doesn't show? I can't just stay here all night.

And then I have an idea. It's a long shot, but it's all I have. So I reach for my phone, scroll through to my norajane_8 Instagram profile, tap on Dr Grange's message and, my blood electric, I type back: *Hey, yes we did! It was a few months back. How have you been? What are you doing right now? ;)*

And then I pull open the door and head back into the main room and look around. Maybe he arrived while I was gone. But no.

I'm three steps from my table when 'delivered' turns to 'read'.

This is it. I stare down at the screen, waiting for the typing bubbles and a reply.

'Excuse me, miss?' comes a voice, and I look up. It's my waitress – she's smiling and holding out my cheque on a small black plate.

'I'm sorry but we need the table.'

Crap.

And so I nod and slowly pack up my computer, put it in my bag and follow her to the till as I wait for his response. The hostess hands me my coat and I put it on, then check my phone again and *oh my god*, he replied.

Hey sexy, doing nothing, just waiting for your message... where are you?

My heart goes wild.

What do I say now?

The hostess clears her throat and when I look up, the total is displayed on the cash machine. I reach into my bag for my debit card and tap to pay, glancing out through the window onto the cold street as I run through my options.

I could ask him to meet me somewhere, so he's not at home, and then try to break into his townhouse.

I type back: *We could meet up?*

I've broken into places before. You can jimmy a bad lock with a credit card but no, outside doors are usually double bolted. Triple bolted in this city. I could try to shake loose a window; I've done that too. But it's risky.

'Have a nice night,' says the hostess, and I nod, but I'm not going to have a nice night.

I grab my beanie out of my bag and put it on, looking down at my phone, chewing on my cheek and thinking, if he says let's meet, I'll go around to his place and just SEE if I can break in...

Someone opens the door and I head outside.

I take a few steps and I'm thinking *my fingers are getting numb, I should put on my gloves*, and then boom.

I walk straight into something.

Someone.

I look up. 'I'm so sorry,' I say.

And our eyes meet – sea green and deadly, just like on that stupid boat – and holy shit. A little electric shock rolls through my spine.

It's him.

'Mina,' he says, a grin spreading over his face as he takes me in. 'What are you doing here?'

I search for my lie from the other night: Live? Work? I'm pretty sure it was live.

'I live around here,' I say, brushing my hair out of my face. 'I was just heading home.'

'You like this place?' he asks, nodding to the Chinese restaurant, and his dark hair flops across his perfect face.

'Best fried prawns,' I say, mimicking what I read on Yelp as I hide my phone in my coat pocket.

'You never called,' he says.

'Yes, sorry, I was going to but then, I don't know, life...' I shrug. My teeth start to chatter.

His gaze darts from my mouth to my breasts, my shoulders, like he's sizing me up, like a python. 'Well, what are you doing now?' he asks.

'Just bed.' I smile. Shrug. 'Maybe something soothing like a murder documentary.'

He frowns. 'Why don't you come back to my place and grab a drink? It's not too far... I just have to pick up my takeout?'

'Ummm...' I say, feigning hesitancy as I look around.

'I'm not going to hurt you, Mina. I'm a doctor.' He smiles. 'And if you must know, I'm also a feminist.'

I give a little giggle, like I'm embarrassed now. 'Of course,' I say. 'Okay, sure, that sounds fun.'

'Great,' he says, his hand on my lower back as he shuffles me back into the restaurant. 'Now let's get you out of the cold.'

And so I follow him back inside and wait by the door, watching as he smiles that smile at the waitress, then pulls out his phone and types something.

I reach for mine and it lights up with an Instagram message.

@DrSamuelGrange: *Just been called back into the hospital for an emergency. Raincheck?*

8.47 PM

We're walking down 82nd Street and I'm thinking *Lenny Kravitz used to live on this street* but right now we're heading to Dr Grange's place, and it's just up ahead on the right. I recognise it from Google Maps. He turns to me just before we get there, smiles and says, 'One moment.'

His car is right there, and he walks over and puts his hand on the doorhandle and as if by magic, the interior lights up. I watch as he reaches inside and pulls out a small piece of paper that I'm guessing he really doesn't need right now, then closes the door and smiles at me. And I say, 'Wow, that's a great car,' because I know that's what he's looking for. He wants to remind me that he's the good-looking surgeon with the magical Porsche and the brownstone and I should remember how lucky I am to be there.

He puts his hand on my lower back again and ushers me up the stairs to his front door. It's dark mahogany with a gold knocker, but I already know this. I've seen it on the internet many times. Took a screenshot. Zoomed in so far it pixelated, then deleted it because: *Don't get obsessive, Billie*. But in person, there's something else too: a small, black doorbell camera to the right. I squint down at it, toying with my locket as he looks for his key; it's the same brand Sadie has. The sort you connect to an app and monitor from your phone. He probably has cameras inside too.

'My lady,' he says as he pushes it open, and I step inside. It's grand with white marble and dark wood and I imagine Jane walking in here for the first time. She probably thought she'd met Prince Charming. 'Can I take your coat?' he asks, and I let him help me out of it then wait as he puts it in the hall cupboard.

There are rows of shoes near the door and he's taking his off, so I take my boots off too. Then we move through to a sitting room: lemon yellows, a glass coffee table, an oversized chandelier and a baby grand piano that's completely devoid of dust even though I bet he doesn't play.

He puts the bag of food down on the table then turns to me and says ‘Red or white?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Wine?’

‘Red.’ I smile. *Definitely red.*

‘I’ll be right back,’ he says as he heads to the kitchen.

And I sit down and glance up and around: there’s a camera. Top left corner. I look down at the glass coffee table: his phone. The app for the cameras will be on there.

‘Here we are,’ he says, and I turn and smile as he re-enters the room. He’s carrying two glasses and a bottle opener between his fingers in one hand, plates in the other, and a bottle of wine under his arm.

‘This is a great place,’ I say, like I’m impressed.

He opens the wine and I watch as he pours two glasses.

He hands me mine and our eyes meet and I take a sip as he reaches for the white cartons of food and opens them up. But I need him out of the room for a moment, so I force a cough.

He does nothing so I cough a bit bigger, putting my glass down.

‘Are you okay?’ he asks, looking back at me.

‘Could I get a glass of water?’

‘Of course,’ he says, putting the food back down. He heads out of the room and my eyes flit to his phone, still face-up on the coffee table – he can’t check on his security cameras right now – and so I click open my locket, pull out two of the three pills still in there and click it shut again.

I told you there were a couple of reasons I needed that locket back.

This was the second one: it’s where I keep my roofies.

And not the socially responsible olive-green ones with blue dye in the middle. No, the white, easily dissolvable, high-dose, generic ones. I got them off the internet soon after I realised this was less a phase, more a lifestyle choice.

I drop the pills into his wine and mix them in with my finger. Blood roars in my ears as I stare into the glass.

Hurry up and dissolve.

And then the kitchen door opens with a creak as I wipe my finger on my navy dress – *Why am I shaking?*

Am I scared? Am I that out of practice?

‘Madam,’ he says, handing me the water.

‘Thanks,’ I say, smiling up at him.

He sits down and reaches for his wine but I want to give it just a few more seconds, so I grab his hand and look him deeply in the eyes. ‘I’m so glad we bumped into each other again,’ I say. ‘I should have called.’

‘It’s fine,’ he says, leaning in and tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear. His eyes burn into mine like two little balls of kryptonite, and I can see what Jane fell for, really I can.

He looks at me for a moment as though drinking me in.

‘It *is* kind of cool, right?’ he asks.

‘What?’ I say, and my voice comes out raspy.

‘Us meeting again like this?’ He’s almost whispering and our faces are close now. Closer than I want them to be.

‘Yeah,’ I say.

‘It feels a bit like fate.’ He grins.

I give him a small smile. ‘It does.’

But I’m lying; I don’t believe in fate. Fate would mean what happened to my mother was always going to happen. That Jane was always going to be a victim. That I was always going to get fired. And that’s as big a lie as *everything happens for a reason*. No it fucking doesn’t. Sometimes the worst thing ever just happens for no reason at all, and all we can do is deal with it the best way we can. This is my way.

But if Dr Grange wants to play the ‘fate’ game, well, we can do that. So I lift up my glass and he reaches for his and as we clink I say, ‘Cheers to fate.’ And then, his gaze trained on mine, we both take a sip.

I narrow my eyes a little like I’m trying to see into his soul, then I give a little frown. ‘Are you... a Leo?’ I ask.

His grin expands, ear to ear now. ‘Is it that obvious?’ He says it slow as he nods and his eyes trace my neckline. My clavicle.

I give a little giggle and look down. ‘A little bit.’

Which, to be fair, it was.

I could just as easily have said: 'Were you born on August 13th, 1981?' It was in his file. But that might have given me away.

'What are *you*?' he asks, taking another sip.

'I'm a Pisces.'

'Does that mean we get on?' he asks, his eyes darting to my mouth.

'Maybe... I'll need to do your whole chart.'

'That sounds technical.'

'It's a lot of fun,' I say, taking another sip, prompting him to do the same. I watch as he drinks.

Twenty minutes.

On average, that's how long it'll take once he drinks it. Sometimes it's even quicker.

There's enough in there that he doesn't have to drink it all. Half should suffice.

I reach for my phone and go to Astro.com. 'Should we do it?' I ask, like it's a naughty thing to do and not just a way to buy time.

He shrugs. 'Sure.'

I go to create a new horoscope, logging in as a 'guest user'. I can fill the first part in already.

Name: *F-u-c-k-f-a-c-e*

'Okay, what is your birthday?' I ask, my eyes meeting his.

'August thirteenth.'

'Year?'

'1981.'

'And where were you born?'

My eyes move to his. He's mentally undressing me, wondering what sort of panties I'm wearing and whether he can wear them as a hat. I can see it in the softness of his gaze.

'In this city. Lenox Hill,' he says, taking another couple of sips. 'Not far from here.'

'What time?' I ask.

'6.23 am.'

I tap in all the information while he opens up the takeout boxes. ‘Can I tempt you with more food?’ he asks.

‘No, I’m good thanks,’ I reply, still tapping and scrolling on my phone. He starts to eat, lifting the chopsticks to his mouth, and I’m quiet for a while, I just let the minutes tick by.

‘There we go,’ I break the silence. ‘Let’s see what it says.’

I watch as the screen loads and then nod knowingly and say, ‘Wow, this makes sense.’

‘What does it say?’ he asks.

‘Not telling.’ I smile up at him, gazing out from under my lashes. He takes another sip of his wine; he’s had about two thirds now. The little muscle on the side of his jaw twitches.

‘You’re quite the little tease, aren’t you?’ he says, putting down his plate and leaning in towards me. His mouth hits mine – it’s rough and tastes like metal and wine – and I force myself to melt into him as my eyes flit to the stairs. He’s at least 200, maybe even 220 pounds. I can’t carry him up there.

‘Where’s your bedroom?’ I ask, my voice low and crackly, even though I know too well it’s on the second floor because there was a floorplan on Zillow. And he grins and finishes his wine in one gulp.

He offers me his hand and I take it, picking up my bag with the other hand, and he leads me up the stairs, plush carpet beneath my feet.

9.21 PM

We get to the bedroom – pristine white sheets, gunmetal grey curtains and duvet, a big dark wood closet, a grey velvet Louis XV chair, and a laptop charging on the small wooden coffee table in front of it. He's unbuttoning his shirt now... I need to stall – he's not even slurring yet – so I move over to the bedside table and pick up a copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. I flip it over and frown down at the blurb but I'm not really reading anything – I feel like every second heartbeat is in my throat and I'm thinking: *It must have been almost twenty minutes by now – do roofies expire?* Because I can see him in my peripheral vision, shirtless now, dropping his phone on the table by the bed. And he's still one hundred per cent in control. Now he's coming over to me. I feel his hands on my waist, his heat on my back, and then he takes my handbag and puts it on the floor.

'Is this good?' I ask, all innocence and sugar, as I motion to the book.

'No idea,' he says, throwing it aside and pushing me backwards. The book lands somewhere near the window – *thud* – while I land hard on the bed. *Ow*. I force a smile and he grins back, unbuckling his belt. By my calculations we should be at around twenty-three minutes now, but his hands are still quick. Nimble. A surgeon's hands; a practised seducer.

His belt is off. I swallow hard as I glance towards the door.

I need to abort this mission.

Now.

And so I go to sit up, to make an excuse. I'll say I need to pee.

'Where do you think you're going?' he asks as he comes around to my side of the bed and lies down on top of me. His mouth finds mine and he's kissing me roughly. 'I need to pee,' I lie. But he says nothing, just smiles and pins my arms above my head with his forearm. And his full weight is on me now and he's heavy. 'I can't breathe,' I gasp as I push him away but I can't move, and then his tongue is in my mouth. I struggle for breath and try to wriggle away, to put some space

between us so I can breathe, but he just holds me still and *Oh god, is he getting hard?*

He reaches for my underwear and pulls it down roughly. This has gone too far. 'Stop,' I say. 'I don't want to do this.'

He reaches for my mouth with his free hand and covers it as he hisses: 'Just relax,' and then he gives me this sick smile and his eyes flash. 'It's a game.'

A white-hot panic flies through me. It sings the little hairs on the back of my neck. I struggle to breathe. And I can feel him reaching down towards his groin then there's the sound of his zipper echoing loud, too loud, in the silence of the room and I know I'm supposed to play along but I need to scream. I need to get out of here. I take a deep breath, but he senses what I'm about to do – does every woman scream? – and now his hand is back on my mouth, and then he says, 'Don't you fucking dare.' And something in his eyes screams danger. So I freeze, and even after he takes his hand away I stay silent. But I can feel his hand moving down towards my crotch and now his fingers are inside me. Like, three of them.

Ow.

I pull away – I can't help it – and he grabs me harder. Terror moves through me. I clench my thighs together and his face is red, contorted... but changed somehow.

As I stare up at him, his eyes glaze over.

And then his grip slackens just a little bit.

He blinks a few times, squints. He's trying to focus.

And then his features melt like a candle.

He blinks a little faster and looks around, like he knows something is off but he's not sure what.

His breathing slows to a slur. A rasp.

And three, two, one.

He slumps on top of me and I push him off; he's even heavier now. I can see him trying to sit up, trying to control things, but I know he won't be able to. And then he lolls around and lies back. And I sit up, then hit him hard on the chest.

'Fucker.'

I grab for his phone. I don't have long. I have to do this while his eyes can still open or the facial recognition software won't scan. He shouldn't remember any of

this tomorrow, but if he does, it'll be hazy and I'll be long gone. I hold his phone in front of his face and he blinks at it and it opens. I tap through to *Settings* and *Display & Brightness* and *Auto-lock* and change it to *Never*. Then, leaning in towards Grange and slapping his face so his eyes open again, I angle it towards him and tap through to *Passwords*. It sees his little retinas and then I'm in.

All his passwords are listed in alphabetical order.

But I need pictures.

I kneel down on the floor and feel around in my bag for my burner phone. *Shit, where is it?* I peer inside, reaching past receipts and dust, checking the inner pocket where I keep a bundle of cards and everything else important, and then there it is. I pull it into view, press the home button and it flashes to life. I angle it towards Grange's phone and use it to take pictures of any saved password I might need.

Amazon: *snap*.

Facebook: *snap*.

Instagram: *snap*.

LinkedIn: *snap*.

Google: *snap*.

eBay: *snap*.

And finally: the password to his security app. I was right – it's the same app Sadie uses. *Snap*.

I swipe through the pictures. He uses the same Gmail address for everything, SamuelJGrange@gmail.com, and his passwords are all one of three options: either *Brother88#* or *Surgeon9&* or *fuckinpassword717*.

This is good, keeps things simple. I'll be in and out fast.

I stand up, pull back the covers and roll him into bed. His jeans are still by his knees so I pull them off, then take off his socks and leave him in just his underwear. He rolls over and grabs a pillow and I pull the covers over him. Then I glance over to the coffee table, to the laptop. It's an Apple, which is handy as I've reset the administrator password on those a couple of times so I know the steps by heart. I pick it up and flip open the screen – it's still on. No need to reset the password. So I take it to his side of the bed, position his right pointer fingertip over the sensor pad until it opens, then take it with me. I flick off the light and

pick up his phone and my bag. And as I head back down those plush stairs to the living room, somewhere inside me Blondie's *Atomic* starts to play...

9.35 PM

There are lots of ways to watch someone, to gather information, and just as many ways to get caught. Spyware might sound sexy, but... there are problems. It's always just one OS update away from not working, is easily detectable through a simple Google search for offending file names to check for, and hardware issues like shortened battery life and overheating are dead giveaways. Then you have the hassle involved in jailbreaking an iPhone or rooting an Android or figuring out iCloud credentials without getting caught. It's not as simple as the blurbs on the websites make it sound. Then there are the 007 type devices you can buy online. Miniature cameras (with no battery life), small audio transmitters that can be sewn into a target's clothing (but run the risk of being found), keyloggers that generate a vast amount of data to sift through... The list goes on. But in my game I'm only looking for one thing. One way to tell the truth. Because you can unravel any life if you know which thread to pull; all I have to do is find it.

And the best way to do that is to keep it simple.

Which is why I only use what the good people of Apple, Google and Meta have made freely available to me. That, and a small flash drive I bought on my way home from coffee with Heather, the flash drive I'm now plugging into Grange's computer from the comfort of his sofa. I drag the contents of his documents, desktop, pictures and movie files onto it.

But don't be fooled. That's the easy bit.

Next, I reach for our phones – his, and my burner phone – and position them on my lap.

I pick up his first and scroll through it, looking for his security app.

Bingo.

There it is, on the second screen: a swirl of green and white.

I reach for my burner phone and navigate to the app store. As the security app downloads, I glance up at Grange's computer: the files are 34 per cent copied

across now.

A moment later the app is ready to use on my burner phone, so I tap 'open' and am met with the welcome screen. It asks for an email address so I enter in the one Grange uses for every damned thing: *SamuelJGrange@gmail.com*.

I swipe through to the picture of his password and enter it in.

Up pops a new screen: *Verify your account*.

It's asking for a code.

This is the sort of thing that might stress a person out, but thankfully I know where to get one.

I reach for Grange's phone, tap on the dropdown menu and go to the control centre. Then I tap: *Account verification, Authorise a new device* and *Generate code*. Just like Sadie and I did last time she logged me in.

Up comes a number: *934941*.

I reach for my burner and enter: *9-3-4-9-4-1*.

Then I tap: *Verify code*.

The screen flashes white for a split second, and then I'm in.

Now Button and I can watch his cameras stream from the comfort of my bed.

Next up: socials.

I scroll through his phone to his Facebook app and tap on his pretty little profile picture: tanned skin, green eyes, hair flicking around in the wind. He has over a thousand 'friends' but he hasn't posted there in a while. This is good, it means he doesn't check it much. I suspect this will work in my favour. I tap through to his *Settings*, scroll down to *Security and login*, and then I go to *2-factor authentication*.

I could easily turn it off if I needed to – I have his password, I have his phone – but it's already off.

Tut-tut Sam, that's not very secure.

I reach for my burner phone, scroll through to the pictures of his passwords again, and swipe through them.

Then I head to the Facebook app on my burner and log him in there.

Email: *SamuelJGrange@gmail.com*.

Password: *B-r-o-t-h-e-r-8-8-#*.

I repeat the same process – email, password, check two-factor verification is off – with LinkedIn and Instagram.

Now all three social apps are logged in on my burner phone.

And I'm thinking: *Heather*.

Or rather: *@Lizzy*.

I go back to Instagram and scroll through to Grange's follower requests, scanning through them. There's Heather's stalker account, right at the top: *@Lizzy88987*. I tap on 'Confirm' and then go to Grange's notifications. Right at the top sits: *@Lizzy88987 started following you*. I side swipe on it, press the little red trash can, and delete the notification.

There. It's like it never even happened. Except, well, it did.

And now Heather can bear witness to whatever takes place.

I glance across at his laptop screen – the files are 46 per cent copied across now and I'm almost done and my heart is wild and my breath is shallow... and then I hear it.

A low shuffle.

A bang.

My breath catches in my throat as I look around me. *What the fuck was that?*

9.54 PM

I swallow hard and hold my breath. My eyes snap to the front window; to the crack in between the curtains. *Is somebody there?* I tiptoe over to it, pulling them aside. But there's nothing there, just inky night and my own reflection staring back at me. So I turn to face the stairs. *Crap, what if it's somehow worn off already? What if Grange is about to come down here?* My heart thuds.

Memories from last time come flooding back and I clench my eyes shut to push them away, but they won't stop.

The floorboards creak and he looks up, right at me.

I drop my phone and it cracks.

And I'm running...

There are stairs, so many stairs. He's right behind me.

And all that blood around Aurora...

My eyes flick open and I stand dead still, focusing on my breath. *Slowly in. Slowly out.*

Maybe it was nothing.

But it doesn't feel like nothing.

My blood is electric as I rush back to the sofa and check the laptop screen – 72 per cent copied across.

Almost there.

I sit down and reach for his phone, tapping through to his photo reel, but it's just screenshots of receipts and pictures of him from his victory celebration the other night – nothing suspicious. So I tap back to his albums and scroll down to 'hidden' – *maybe, just maybe.*

It's empty.

Still, I didn't expect this to be easy.

So I tap through to his text messages. There's always *something* in the text messages. Maybe he texted my failed witness. I type her name into the search

function but nothing comes up, so instead I scroll down through the messages. There's one to Meredith, sent earlier tonight: *Ran into the redhead tonight. We're having takeout. Told you she liked me!*

Great. Now she knows I was here. Still, to her I'm Mina. I tap to see her response.

Hahaha! Okay fine, maybe she did. Love you Bro.

I scan down through his other messages.

There's one to Ramone sent earlier tonight – that's the guy who was there on Friday night with Grange and Meredith, the one with the curly hair. It reads: *A bonus one for you.*

There's an attachment, an image.

I tap on it.

It's a nude. A woman, her back arched, her chest out. I glance down through the message thread. They've exchanged a few nudes, him and Ramone.

Assholes.

But then there's something else. Just beneath the nudes... a screenshot. It's black with pale text in the foreground.

I tap on it and the image expands.

It looks like some sort of online forum. I scan quickly down through the comments: *they like it lol... Sluts... bitches.* I'm not sure what I'm looking at but I pull out my burner phone and take a picture of it for later, just in case.

That's when the ringing starts and my pulse flares. It's coming from my handbag. My phone. My real one.

Fuuuuuuck.

I reach for my bag, rustle through it – *where the hell is my phone?* I pour the contents on the carpet, retrieve the flashing screen and turn it to silent.

But as I put everything back into my bag, the screen keeps flashing with: *Hot-Josh is calling...*

A notification flashes up: one missed call.

And then a text.

Hot-Josh: *Hey, just calling to see if you wanted to hang out on Saturday?*

See, this is why my relationship with Al was so strained. Like, Josh couldn't wait to get out of my apartment on Sunday morning and I couldn't stop thinking

about him, but now that I'm busy, now that I don't *want* to hear from him, now he decides to call. It's like they have an antenna; like they can sense it.

But also: *Yay! He called!*

So I text back: *Sure. Sorry just working. See you soon. x*

Then I drop my phone in my bag and turn back to the laptop. Dr Grange's files are 84 per cent copied across now and I'm almost done. There's just one last place to check: his emails.

I reach for his phone, go to his inbox and type my failed witness's name into the search function.

But: *nothing.*

A heaviness moves through me and settles in my lungs.

Still, maybe she'll write to him, reply to him, something, in the future.

If that happens, I want to know. And there *is* a way for me to know... it's just a little risky. Still, unless I want to come back here and use my last roofie, there's no way around it.

So I pull up Chrome on his laptop and type *g-m-a-i-l.-c-o-m* into it. I can't do this bit from his phone.

The page loads but Grange isn't logged in. So I grab my burner and swipe through until I get to the picture of his email password.

I enter his email address (*SamuelJGrange@gmail.com*) and his password (*S-u-r-g-e-o-n-9-9*) and chew on my cheek as I stare at light of the laptop screen and then it flashes and loads and...

Shit.

2-step verification.

It's asking for a code.

I fumble for his phone beside me on the sofa, go to his text messages and there it is. I slowly enter it in: *3-4-5-4-9-9*.

The screen flashes white for a moment and then I'm in.

I'm staring at his inbox, but it's not his inbox I need.

I tap on the gear icon for *Settings*, then on *See all settings*. My eyes graze the top tabs: *General, Labels, Inbox...* and then it snaps to what I'm looking for: *Forwarding and POP/IMAP*.

I click on it and stare at the top option: *Add a forwarding address*.

But I pause. Historically, I've only used that fake email address for login credentials, not for, you know, emails. But there's nothing in there to link it to me or to any other case, so what does it really matter? Besides, I'll never do this again after Grange.

So, slowly, I type in: *M-r-J-J-0-0-7-0-0-7-@-g-m-a-i-l-.c-o-m.*

I click *Next.*

Then *Proceed.*

It tells me a confirmation email has been sent to that address, so I grab my burner phone, go to the email, click the link, press *Confirm*, and *ta-da*, it's done.

Now every email Grange receives will be forwarded to me.

I turn back to his computer and click through to settings again. Because I can't just leave that forwarder there indefinitely. And I won't have his phone with me next time, so I won't have access to the second step of 2-step verification.

I'll need something else.

So I navigate to 2-step verification, scroll down to *Add more second steps to verify it's you*, and click on: *Backup codes.*

It asks for his password and I enter it again.

Then I click *Add backup codes*, watch as they appear on the screen, and take a picture of them with my burner phone.

Now, when the time comes, I will have everything I need to login and delete that forwarder. But between you and me, what with Gmail's emotional commitment to security alert emails and the on-screen notification that tells you if anyone else is logged into your Gmail account, that's kind of risky, so I'll need to do it when I know he's asleep. I mean, there are currently two security emails sitting in Grange's inbox pertaining to my recent activities. Which is fine right now, because he's... busy. But it wouldn't be fine if he were conscious. So I delete them, then delete them from the deleted folder and check his inbox on his phone – they're gone from there too.

Then I log him out, delete his browser history for the last hour, drop my burner phone into my bag and, as a blissful calm washes over me, I look around.

Our wine glasses are still sitting there on the table in front of me. Mine is almost untouched and his has 'evidence' in it. So I take them through to the sink

and wash them out, leave them on the drying rack, and then reach beneath the sink for a cloth and dampen it.

I make my way back up those stairs with his computer and phone. He's fast asleep when I get there, lying on his side. He doesn't stir as I creep past him, plug the laptop back in where I found it and wipe it down for fingerprints just in case. I plug his phone into the charger by the bed, change the lock screen time back to thirty seconds and wipe that down too.

And then I head back downstairs.

I drop the cloth in the kitchen sink, pick up my bag and go to the door. My boots are right there next to his shoes and I pull them on, then put on my coat and reach for my phone. I could order an Uber or a Lyft, but the fewer e-trails, the better. No, I'll find a cab. I open the door, peek outside and carefully scan the street. There are a few people in the distance, but nobody close by.

So with my pulse thumping, I pull the door closed behind me and rush towards 3rd Avenue, watching the pavement for ice.

There's a cab just up ahead on the corner, letting someone out. I start to jog, but the little hairs on the back of my neck are standing on end like they're trying to tell me something – *Is somebody watching me?* – but when I look around, there's nobody there.

This is just because of last time. Stay calm.

But I'm not calm. I'm breathing quick little clouds of fog and my lungs are burning by the time I get to the corner and the cab driver says: 'Where to?'

'West 58th and 10th,' I say, the air biting my cheeks. He nods, and I get in and pull the door closed. And as we drive away my phone beeps with a message.

Heather: *He just accepted me! xxx*

So I pull out my own phone, go to norajane_8's Instagram and unfollow @DrSamuelGrange.

Then I reach for my burner, move through to Grange's security app, go to *Event History*, find the little trash can icons next to all of today's videos and press delete. Now 'the redhead' – whose last name he doesn't know, whose phone number he never got – was never even there...

TUESDAY

8.47 AM

Right now, Heather will be arriving at our old office, sitting down at *our* desk and checking her calendar for the day. And that's where I should be. But instead, I'm here, beneath a cheery winter sun, looking up at my new office on West 35th Street. It's big and concrete, with a mismatched art deco façade on the ground floor and it feels all wrong. I push through the smudgy set of glass revolving doors and look around the lobby. There's a marble security desk and rows of elevators with people dressed in grey and black staring down at their phones, waiting to board.

Because this is me now: the temp.

I head up to the security desk and the man behind it looks up at me.

'Billie Spencer-Tate,' I say with a smile. 'I'm here for Carla at Robertson, Ball & Sons.'

He picks up the black plastic receiver beside him and presses a couple of buttons, and as I hear him announce me, last night flickers in my mind.

The sound of his zipper.

The pills in his drink.

His fingers inside me.

'Seventeenth floor,' he says, handing me a visitor's pass. Another reminder that I'm on borrowed time. I need to find a proper job soon.

I head over to the elevator and shuffle inside with everyone else. The air smells like deodorant and dry shampoo and everyone is staring straight ahead or down at their phones.

This is okay. This is fine.

I watch as the little numbers above the door illuminate and the doors slide open and closed and soon 17 is lighting up. I head out into the grey and white

hallway and scan the list of companies on the metallic sign on the wall.

Right. I need to go right.

I pass door after door, scanning the names and then I'm here, reading white frosted letters on a glass door: Robertson, Ball & Sons.

I push it open and go inside. My first impression is: *this is nice*. Everything is painted white and it's on the edge of the building so there's a lot of natural light.

'Hi, I'm Billie,' I say to the receptionist. She looks up from her screen like I'm interrupting her, then right back down again.

'Spencer-Tate?' she asks, eyes still on the screen as she clicks her mouse.

'Yes, I'm a bit early.'

'Mmmm-hmmm, take a seat. Carla will be right out.'

I take a seat, pick up a magazine and start flipping pages – they smell like perfume samples and soap. I scan articles I don't read and somebody emerges from the back of the office and I get ready to smile and shake a hand but it's not Carla, it's a man and he heads out the front door. I reach for my phone and check the time. I'm ten minutes early, and the magazine is boring. And my burner phone is right there, in the inner pocket of my handbag. I look up and around, edgy. The receptionist is still staring at whatever she's reading on the screen, her cheeks flushing pink, and there's nobody else here in reception, just the muffled sounds of industry leaking in from somewhere beyond the dividing wall.

I'll just have a quick look. Just while I wait.

I reach into my bag, pull it out and tap through to the @MrJJ007007 inbox first. A couple of emails have been forwarded from Grange's email since I checked this morning. Amazon suggestions. A promotion from American Airlines. Nothing exciting; just the usual suspects. Disappointment pulses through me.

I move to the security app.

Five thumbnails stare back at me. I tap on the one labelled *Living Room*. The screen loads and there it is, the sofa we sat on, the coffee table. But all the takeout boxes have been cleared away now.

I look up and around: still no Carla.

So I navigate through to the list of saved footage snippets, quickly tick the box at the top for *Select all* and press *Download*. Because what if he figures out

someone has access and kicks me off before I can go through them all? The little circle spins and—

‘Billie?’ I look up. *Shit*. A woman with long dark hair over one shoulder, a tight plum dress to her knees and a cardigan smiles a warm smile. She reaches out her hand and I shake it. ‘I’m Carla,’ she says, her gold hoop earrings catching the light. ‘Thank god you’re here.’

‘Hi,’ I say, dropping my burner back into my bag. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘This way,’ she says and heads down the passageway. ‘Did you find it okay?’

‘Yes, all easy,’ I reply, glancing into doorways as we pass. Big offices with well-dressed people in them, all shuffling around like they have a plan.

We get to the end of the hallway and she says, ‘and this is you’, opening the door and flicking on the light. I look inside and well, I was wrong.

It *is* so bad.

So bad.

There are no windows, it smells like dust, and I think maybe it’s meant to be a storage room because it’s just piles and piles of papers with one random desk and a chair in the middle of the room.

‘It’s filing,’ she says, looking at me apologetically. I get the sense that if I wasn’t here, she’d be doing it.

‘Everything in date order,’ she continues, pointing to a stack of boxes in the corner. ‘Those should start you off, but I’ll bring you more when there’s room.’

I look around – it might take a while before there’s ‘room’.

‘It’s probably easier to sort it all first?’

‘Probably.’ I smile back as I head to one of the piles and leaf through it, pretending to take it all in.

Derek’s voice is echoing in my head: *Focus on the positives, Billie. There’s always something to be grateful for...*

Positives... Positives... Well, at least nobody can see what I’m doing in here.

‘Bathrooms are just outside to the left, the kitchen is to the right. There are free apples in there but try not to have more than one a day. And I’m just down the hall, left of reception, if you need anything,’ she says. ‘Wait, are you a smoker?’

‘Yes,’ I say, because I sort of am again and also, it’s always nice to have an excuse for a break.

‘Make sure you head to the back of the building, past security and smoke there, not in the front of the building.’

‘Sure,’ I say.

And then she closes the door with a click and leaves me here, just me, the papers, one visible air vent, my burner phone, and the zip file that’s probably just finished downloading. I reach into my bag, go to the app, and when it asks where I’d like to save the file to, I choose: *Send to an email address*.

And when it asks which one, I slowly and intentionally enter: *M-r-J-J-0-0-7-0-0-7-@-g-m-a-i-l.-c-o-m*.

10.58 PM

I stub out my second cigarette and gaze past the fire alarm, covered once again by the shower cap, and over to Button who's lying on the windowsill. Just beyond her, I can see snow falling outside through the misted glass, flakes lit up by the ambient light and gathering in corners.

And here I sit, propped up in bed, stripped down to my underwear with a bead of sweat running down my temple even though the big window to my right is wide open. When I said the radiator was unpredictable, this is what I meant.

I squint back down at my laptop as I get to the end of Grange's photographs and videos and try to ignore Leonard Cohen as he sings *Everybody Knows* from my turntable. Because, ironically, I know nothing, absolutely nothing more about Grange now than I did four hours ago when I first plugged that flash drive into my computer.

And how? How is that even possible?

Because Jane said he videoed her sobbing on numerous occasions, my witness said the same, I have personal experience of what he's like; there must be something I can use here, somewhere, but where?

I move to the list of files on the drive and scan down through them: GBB, ING, JR, LPP, IIW, YOY – he has some obtuse way of filing and that just makes me hate him even more. I click on the first folder and search through the documents – just PDFs and Word documents.

This is bullshit.

I resist the urge to throw my laptop against the wall and look around the room. My phone is charging by the bed, and I reach for it, scroll to Hot-Josh and stare down at his last message.

I've been thinking about him all day, like a song I can't get out of my head. Convincing myself not to text him. To play it cool and not get attached. But right

now I can almost feel the warmth of his hands on my skin, almost smell his shampoo...

So slowly I type out *h-e-y* and my finger hovers over the send button.

But I pause. Because what am I doing? As soon as he knows me properly he'll just find a reason to leave. Why hurry the process? It's just, it felt like maybe it'd be different with him. Like we had that 'thing' – that intangible thing where it feels like somebody knows you without even trying. And in this city of over eight million people, it's hard to find someone whose heart beats at the same tempo as yours.

But *no, Billie, no.*

This is a bad idea. Hold back. Heather throws herself in all the time and I've seen how that plays out. She's walking proof that Taylor Swift had a damned good point when she wrote the bridge to *Blank Space*...

So don't do it, focus on yourself.

I delete the message, take a deep breath, reach for my burner phone and tap through to Grange's security app instead.

This is better. This is why it's good to have a project. A hobby.

The screen loads and I tap on *Bedroom*.

And there he is, standing in a fluffy towel, looking down at his phone. *What are you up to?* Then he puts it down by the bed and heads into the bathroom.

And as I watch him go, a notification flashes up on my screen, a new Instagram message: To @DrSamuelGrange.

I'm about read it but *shit I can't*. If I do that, he'll see it's been read. He might get suspicious. I need to wait. And so I go to his feed instead. It's just selfies and quotes and normal things but *what have you been looking at, Sam?* I tap on the *search* icon and up come his recent views.

At the very top is Jane Delaney's profile.

He's still watching her; still has front row seats to her demise.

A flash of her buckled over in that bathroom, her knuckles white as she held onto the sink, her breath jagged. How much I wanted to help her. How much I still do. And then I think of Grange last night, his weight on top of me. That feeling: *I can't move, I can't breathe.*

I tap on her profile and it loads.

The crying photo has been deleted now, but there's a new one in its place. It's a selfie of Jane in front of a series of brown packing boxes in a pale A-frame room. The caption reads: *A new adventure. #Delaware #newstart #homeagain*

But the smile on her face doesn't reach her eyes and the sparkle is gone. Don't worry, Jane, it's just a matter of time before I figure this out.

But deep down, I'm thinking: *Is it? Not at the rate you're going.*

I clench my jaw and head back to Grange's profile and tap on his messages, scrolling past the new one. I see his messages to me. I consider deleting them, but that will draw his attention so instead, I scan down through the others.

Most are from women. I tap on the one three messages down.

It's a photograph.

A nude.

The same nude he sent to his friend, Ramone.

And now I'm thinking of Grange's other texts. That screenshot. The online forum. What was that?

I navigate through to the picture I snapped of it, zoom in and scan through the comments. It looks like some sort of dating advice site – guys giving each other tips. Some of them are disturbing: *Just take her man, they like it lol... Give the sluts what they deserve...* Some of them seem relatively sound: *My only advice is it's all about trust...* There are a couple of pleas for help: *Can someone message me, I've followed everything you guys have said, but it's not working...* And then it's back to the kingdom of douche: *fucking bitches, man...*

Why did Ramone send this to Grange?

I glance up to the top of the image, to the URL, pull up a private browser on my laptop and type it in.

Up comes the forum.

It looks much like it did in the screenshot – like someone with strong IT skills and no design experience set it up. But there's a link marked 'important' to the top right, so I click on it.

How it works.

- 1) *To comment publicly, hit 'reply' as you usually would.*
- 2) *To make the comment private between just you and the poster, tick the box marked 'invisible' and enter your email address. Their replies will come through*

our servers straight to your inbox and vice versa.

3) *Relax. All posts and data are deleted every 45 days. You are safe to be yourself here.*

My stomach contracts as I re-read that last point – something feels really ‘off’ about it. I click back to the main page and scroll down through some of the recent comments – *stupid whore... man, I’ll DM you something* – then move through a few of the sub-posts. But it’s nothing new, just more of the same.

Is Grange in here somewhere? Maybe. Probably.

But he wouldn’t use his real name so there’s no way to know which one he is, and even if there was, I need something a lot bigger than *this* to bring him down. I need to think. Clearly. Calmly. Because it exists somewhere, the clue I need – there’s always *something*.

So why can’t I find it?

I snap shut my laptop, reach for another cigarette, light it and take a deep drag, watching the snow still falling outside. But bad thoughts swirl around me with the smoke: *What if I fail? What if I can’t fix this? What if he wins? What if I’ve lost my edge?* Button comes over, gives a little ‘meow’ and jumps up onto the bed. And as I stroke her head and she looks up at me and purrs, I think of the night I rescued her. Of all the reasons I *should* stop but *can’t* stop, and certainly *won’t* stop now. And look, I don’t love talking about it, but if I don’t tell you what happened last time, you won’t understand. And I want you to understand, so here goes...

LAST TIME

The first time I saw Aurora Hughes was eighteen days before she died. It was a Thursday, late in the summer and I was working at my previous job, the one at the criminal firm. I hadn't taken lunch and my blood sugar was dipping so I'd gone across the road for a cupcake mid-afternoon.

I'd just taken a seat by the window when I saw them walk past. She was wearing a long-sleeved silk shirt in a pale chartreuse and I remember thinking she must be boiling hot – the humidity was brutal that day. She was walking hand in hand with someone I would come to know as her husband, but at that moment knew only as: Rubin Hughes.

Rubin was a witness on one of our cases. I wasn't working on that case but one of my friends was, and I knew from her (and too many frozen margaritas) that it was something white collar, and that our client was only a minor player but probably guilty. However, in her opinion it was one of the witnesses (Rubin) who was actually shady as all hell. She had no evidence, only instinct. 'How did he get away with not even being questioned by the police?' she'd asked. Still, none of that mattered in the end because their case was strong and they expected to have an easy win. But the next time he came into the office, my friend pointed him out to me and whispered 'that's him.' I clocked what he looked like, but didn't see him or think about him again after that.

Not until that day in the café.

I watched as they walked for a moment. Aurora said something. Rubin's face changed. And then he did this thing – he grabbed her arm and she flinched. It was a small gesture, but it tugged at something inside of me.

It was still tugging as he headed across the street and into our building and Aurora came into the café. I watched her walk over to a table not far from me. She ordered timidly, and then she pulled a hair pin out of her handbag and put up her

hair, like it was too hot to wear it down (which it was) – and that’s when I saw the bruise.

It was on the back of her neck, peeking out from underneath the collar of her silk shirt. A garment which now, to be fair, made sense; my money said there were matching bruises on her arms.

I didn’t talk to Aurora that day but I took a couple of casual pictures in her direction, so I could zoom in and analyse them later. Just to check I wasn’t wrong about what I thought I’d seen. Then I finished my cupcake and coffee, went back to the office and looked Rubin’s file up on the system.

I won’t bore you with the specifics, you know my MO by now, but a week later I was in the change rooms at the pool I had discovered Aurora went to at 6 am every morning. The bruises were almost faded by then, but I managed to get a couple more discreet photos – maybe I could use them against Rubin – and then struck up a casual conversation. The next morning I was there again at the same time, and soon we became friends. Well, as close to ‘friends’ as we could be, given that she thought my name was Mina and I’d put a tracker on her husband’s car. I mean, I needed to know where he was; what if he came home and saw me, recognised me from the office? As paralegals we’re not exactly client-facing, but sometimes you pass people in the halls. And I’d seen him, so maybe he’d seen me.

So yes, it was Aurora who first took me to their home.

It was Aurora who disabled the alarm system while I watched and mentally took note of the numbers.

Aurora who gave me a grand tour and showed me exactly where his office was.

Aurora who introduced me to Button.

And Aurora who unlocked her phone in plain view many times, revealing her passcode to be *1-1-1-1-9-3*, her birthday. I mentally noted it, but before I ever needed it, a more solid plan formed.

I’d learned by then that Rubin was a witness for a conspiracy to commit securities fraud case. So if my friend was right, and Rubin was indeed part of it, there was bound to be some sort of evidence somewhere, if I could just get into his study to look. It wasn’t certain, but it was a chance I had to take.

The idea was simple: I’d search his study and copy everything I could from his hard drive. I’d anonymously give anything I found to the prosecution, I’d make

damned sure they knew it came from Rubin's computer, that he was guilty too, and then I'd let the chips fall where they may. Once the authorities knew what they were looking for, and who they were looking for, he'd go down for sure. And I would do all that because if he was sent to prison, Aurora would be safe.

I retrieved that tracker from his car the day before it all went wrong. I thought it was safe to do so, but in hindsight it was a risk I shouldn't have taken. I was taking lots of risks by then; like nothing scared me anymore.

You see, I knew from Aurora that they were going out the night she died, but I thought they'd be late. And because the tracker was gone, I didn't know they were on their way home. I didn't know until I heard the door open. I was in his study, and I'd disarmed the alarm – would that alert them? But he was too angry to pay attention to that. The yelling started immediately. Then the crying. The pleading. It headed up the stairs, past me in the study, up another flight to their bedroom.

I stared at the screen, my pulse thumping in my ears as I willed the files to copy across faster while the fighting went on and on and on. And then there, it was done. I grabbed the drive and was about to wipe everything down for fingerprints when I heard it: a loud crack.

And all the yelling, all the crying, stopped.

An eerie silence rang through that townhouse. And I knew I should leave. But I couldn't – what about Aurora? Was she okay?

And so I did something rash.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins as I crept up to their bedroom door. I needed to make sure she was safe.

But when I peeked around the corner, just for a fragment of a second, I gasped. Because she was lying on the floor and there was blood all around her head and he was standing over her holding something. I couldn't see what it was at the time, but I'd later learn from the press that it was a small sculpture.

I reeled backwards and the floorboards creaked. And he looked up and saw me. Our eyes met and an icy terror flew through me. *Fuck*. And so I ran. My phone fell from my hands – it landed at the bottom of the first flight of stairs – and my lungs burned as I ran down-down-down and picked it up, and he was coming, I could hear his heavy footsteps. I ran to the door. I pulled it open. And Button was right there, next to it, looking up at me. And I couldn't just leave her there. Not with

that monster. Not when Aurora loved her so much. So I picked her up and turned left and ran towards the main road and the sound of traffic. There were cars, so many cars, but I wove across it anyway, not even looking back, not for a moment – I couldn't lose speed. And then I heard another sound.

The screech of tyres.

Bang.

That's when I looked back.

And Rubin Hughes was lying in the street. All the traffic had stopped. And I just kept on moving, one foot in front of the other, until I was at home, stripped off and in the shower, crying. And then I dried myself off, fed Button what I had in the fridge, sat down in front of my laptop and plugged in that drive. If you've ever been in an impossible situation yourself, you'll know that small gestures take on enormous significance; and that's how it felt that night as I copied those photographs I had of Aurora Hughes and her bruises onto that drive with Rubin's files. I could no longer save her but in that moment it felt like I could still make it right if I could just let everybody know the truth about him and what he'd done to her.

I was going to send a copy of that drive anonymously to the papers, to her family, to his family, to anybody I could think of.

After that it was just a case of resetting the phone so there was nothing linking me to Aurora, replacing the SIM card and re-downloading a VPN like I always did, but this time that didn't feel like enough – people were dead, the police would get involved – so I pulled out the battery and SIM card instead and told myself I'd dispose of the phone as soon as I knew it was safe to do so.

I didn't know anybody had seen me there, running from Aurora's house, until I read it in the papers on the Monday morning. But they reported it all wrong. The title read 'Who killed Aurora Hughes?' and the text said she'd been killed by a female intruder. That her husband was hit by a car running after the culprit. A panic flew through me.

Because, I'd found Rubin Hughes the exact same way I found all my targets: through my job.

What if someone made the link?

What if someone had seen me with Aurora?

What if my friend from work had noticed my interest in the case?

What if someone came looking for me?

Now the idea of sending that drive to the papers, to anybody, seemed naïve and dangerous. To start with, it confirmed that there was a third person there that night. I didn't want that. I *really* didn't want that. And I *really-really* didn't want anybody knowing I'd been on Rubin's computer. Because if I was right and Rubin Hughes had been part of a bigger fraud scheme, there were other people involved, people who were *not* minor players, people who might not love the idea of information that implicated them coming to light and who might be better than the police at finding me. People who held a grudge. Besides, the pictures I had of Aurora showed bruises, they didn't show Rubin giving them to her...

There was only one solution: I needed to fade out of view.

So it kind of makes sense now, right? The whole quitting my job on a whim, not texting my boyfriend back all weekend (if I texted back he'd call and then he'd hear it in my voice), suddenly having a cat, being willing to go to AA, deleting all my personal social media and, a week later when the press hadn't let it go, dyeing my hair red. It fitted with the whole break-up-AA-new-me theme, so I rode that wave. But there it is. That's what happened. How I ended up here. But sometimes I wonder if deep down, despite all the AA meetings, despite the danger, I always knew I'd do this again; I just couldn't let it go. Because it's been almost a year now and I could never bring myself to get rid of that phone.

WEDNESDAY

6.05 PM

The key to this is patience. I know that. But as I emerge from the Columbus Circle subway underpass onto West 58th Street, as I'm pushed from behind by pedestrians who smell of wet fabric and day-old deodorant, and burnt by the wind in front of me, an inky sadness, a feeling of defeat, flows through me. Because after another full day of watching his cameras and his little blue dot, of waiting for something – anything – to fall into place, of telling myself *it will, just be patient*, the only new thing I have is a small papercut from filing.

I pull my phone from my bag, but crap, I can't even do that right, because there's a crack in the screen – it's my burner phone – but wait just a moment. *What the hell is that?*

There, in the middle of the screen, hangs the preview of an email; an email that must have been forwarded from Dr Grange's inbox.

Sender: *Ramone James.*

Subject: *Sluts.*

My blood speeds up, someone behind me barks 'move' and I step out of the way as I tap through to the message. My fingertips are so cold that I have to push the screen hard just so it registers my touch, but I can't stop to put on my gloves now, I need to know what it says...

There's no text, just an attachment. I hold my breath as I tap on it and watch as it loads. And then I press 'play'.

A flare of oranges, reds and greys fill the screen, like it's badly lit.

It's a small room, I can see that. And there's a woman who's just moved into frame. She's looking at herself in a mirror, unzipping her jeans and pulling them down... she unhooks her bra and cups her breasts in her hands as though to defy gravity, inspects her hips, then reaches for a dress on a hanger.

A change room.

This woman is in a change room.

A dizziness washes over me because I don't know what I'm looking at but I do know it's something. Because there's no way she knows she's being filmed.

I drop the phone back into my bag, put my gloves on and walk quickly home thinking: *What's going on here?* I cross 8th Avenue, heading down West 58th. *Why would Ramone have that footage? And why would he be sending it to Grange?*

There's a street food car with A4 sheets of paper proclaiming *Peace and Love* pasted in the windows and a UPS van and Starbucks and a red Vespa glistening under a streetlight. I'm almost home, heading past the CVS pharmacy and then I'm at the crosswalk.

My building is up ahead, just across 10th. The lights change, the walk signal fires out its *tik-tik-tik* and I rush across to my security door. My fingers and nose are numb from the cold as I punch in my code and head inside.

A hot guy with dreadlocks comes down the stairs with a basket of laundry as I approach.

'Hey,' I say as we pass, smiling.

'Hi.' He smiles back.

He heads into the laundry room and I take the rest of the stairs two at a time, my pulse thrumming as I pass Mrs Benson's apartment, pull off my gloves and fumble my door key into the lock. The door closes after me with a gentle click as Button yawns and meows and swirls around my ankles and I drop my bag on the floor by the door, pulling off my coat and shoes. It's cold in my apartment today so I take my bag over to the bed, strip off my work clothes, put on some sweatpants and a big oversized sweater and get under the covers as Button jumps up to join me.

And then there, in bed, I reach for my burner phone and once again press play.

And as the flare of orange and grey fills the screen I think: *She DEFINITELY doesn't know she's being filmed.*

So there it is, more proof for me that he's shady as all hell, but still nothing to show the world... and then: *shit.*

Because I know what I need to do but it's not good. Not at all.

You see, this email came to Dr Grange's Gmail first and *then* it was forwarded on. And I've only been receiving those since late Monday night. What if there's something else in his inbox from before, something else like this video? Something I can use?

I need to log into his emails.

But that's a risk, and I'm not supposed to be taking risks. I bite down on my lower lip and tap through to the tracker app, thinking: *Then again, what choice do I have?*

I glance down at the location map: Grange is still at the hospital. Which means he's probably away from his phone. Or at the very least he'll have it on silent. Theoretically, if I wanted to take a quick peek into his emails, now would be the perfect time. I could probably get in and out again before he ever saw the 'Did you just sign-in?' or 'suspicious activity' alert.

Fuck it.

My pulse thuds as I check the VPN is working on my burner and then choose my location – today I'm in the Bronx, not far from the far Upper West Side hospital where Grange works. Then I open up a private browser window and head to Gmail.

I tap in his address: *S-a-m-u-e-l-J-G-r-a-n-g-e-@-g-m-a-i-l-.-c-o-m*. Then I scroll through the photographs of his passwords and find the one for Google.

I go back to the login page and slowly enter it in: *S-u-r-g-e-o-n-9-℘*

Up comes the 2-factor verification screen so I tap: *choose another way*. Then I scroll through my pictures to the list of his codes and enter in the top one: *4-4-9-0
7-8-2-2*

The screen takes a moment to load, it flashes white and then *I'm in*.

But I'm on borrowed time, I know that, so I need to work fast. *What do I do, what do I do?*

My eyes catch on the *new sign-in using a backup code* email so I delete that first. Then I delete it from the deleted folder too.

Next, I click on the search field.

I type in *F-r-o-m:-R-a-m-o-n*—

The software does the rest. There he is: *Ramone James*. I tap on his name and up come hundreds of emails, all with the subject title 'Sluts'. I click on the first

one. It contains a picture of a woman asleep, her underwear off and her dress up around her waist. A hot rage burns in my stomach and I click on the next one. It's more of the same. Except this one contains a single line of text in the message body: *Hope you've all had a great week ;)*

My head gets light as that phrase rolls round in my head: 'You've all'. That sounds a lot like Grange is not the only recipient here. I click on the 'To' field to see who else is listed, but it's empty... and Grange's email is in the blind copied section. *Who else was blind copied in?* I click on the email above, the one with the woman in the change rooms. I check the 'To' field there as well. But again, nothing.

Still: 'You've all'...

And so I go to the search field of Grange's inbox and slowly type in: *S-l-u-t-s*
Enter.

Up come pages and pages of emails. All from different senders. I click on them at random, scanning down through the images – more nudes, some videos – and the text: *beat this... man, you can do better, she's not even hot.* They're egging each other on.

What in sweet hell is going on here?

Because these comments sound a lot like the ones in that forum but I didn't see a single image on that site. So what then... is that where they chat? Learn new tricks?

A heat rises in my throat as I think of all the users of that site. I want to take every last one of them down. But I know I can't. This is it – the last time. I promised and I meant it, so I need to focus on Grange. On his part in all this.

But now a wave of nausea rolls through me. Because I'm thinking of Jane and my witness and how they both said Grange videoed them. *Is this why? Did he send those videos to these men? What else did he send?*

I go to his 'Sent file' and type in: *R-a-m-o-n-e-J-a-m-e-s*

And there they are. All of Dr Grange's contributions to the collection. But he's a doctor, a feminist, remember.

I click on the first one: it's a nude. The same girl he sent to Ramone via text, but a different picture.

I click on the next: it's another nude. A blonde girl. A mirror shot. She's smiling at the camera.

I click on the third.

And this one is a video...

I press play and it takes a moment – *please be something, please be something, please be something I can use*. And then the video starts and *holy shit*, my core turns to ice.

Because I recognise the linen, the bed, the mirror, the carpets: it's Grange's bedroom. A flash of the other night; his weight, his voice. *Just relax... it's a game*. A heat burns in my throat: *what a gaslighting fuck*. There's a woman with brown hair sitting on the floor. She's grabbing onto her knees, mascara smeared down her cheeks. I reach for the volume button and turn it up. Grange's voice says: 'You're pathetic.' Then she looks up at the camera and says with a strangled voice: 'I just want to talk to you.'

A shudder moves through me as I quickly download it to my camera reel.

I scan down through his other 'Sent' emails, looking for another video. *There. There's one*. I tap on it.

The scene is the same – only the woman has changed.

I download the video and keep scrolling.

Jane will be here somewhere...

I tap past nude after nude after nude and then *there, another video*. I press play. And as the image loads and the video starts, my ears roar with blood and I get a little dizzy. I lean in closer to the screen to double check. But *yes. It is*.

It's Jane Delaney.

Crying. On the floor in the fetal position. Just like she said she was. I turn the volume up-up-up and then boom, louder than her sobs comes Grange's voice: *Fucking whore*.

So now I have it. Conclusive proof that Jane didn't defame him at all – she was telling the truth all along.

I tap to download it and as I do, I notice that my hands are shaking. But I keep going. I scroll through the rest of the emails and as I download everything else I can find, a little thrill rolls through me. Because: *Dr Samuel Grange, you're going down*.

THURSDAY

9.18 AM

If you want to know why I do what I do, this is it. This moment. When it all comes together. Because there's nothing quite like it. It feels like fireworks or smoking ten cigarettes at once or your favourite Prince song being played at a thousand decibels in the very centre of your heart. Who am I kidding? It feels like all of those things all at once. Like, for a single moment in time the entire world makes sense and everything you risked to get here was worth it.

I'm in the staff kitchen now, leaning against the counter, waiting for the Nespresso machine to hurry the hell up and make my coffee as I bite into one of the free green apples and stare down past the crack on my burner phone to the tracker app.

Dr Grange is parked at the hospital right now.

He's been there ever since I left the house an hour ago. He's probably in surgery by now.

That's my cue. I need to hurry.

'Morning,' comes a voice and I swivel around. It's Carla.

Crap.

'Hi,' I say. The Nespresso machine stops and I reach for my cup.

'Everything okay?' she asks, frowning, her eyes darting to my phone.

'Fine.' I smile. I need to get out of here before she draws me into conversation and I miss my window of opportunity. So I clutch onto my coffee and my apple and step towards the door.

'How are you getting on with everything?' She smiles at me as she puts her own cup under the coffee nozzle and sorts through the pods.

'It's all fine, I'm getting there,' I say, taking another step towards the door. 'Better get back to it.' And as I stride towards my filing room, I run through a

mental checklist.

VPN on: *check*.

I double-checked that as I left the house this morning, and again a moment ago while I waited for my coffee. I'm back in the Bronx.

Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn all logged out from the sessions on Grange's phone: *check*.

I did that 25 minutes ago as I waited for the elevator. Now the only active sessions are mine. The ones on my burner.

Privacy settings all set to public: *check*.

I did *that* as I stood in the kitchen ten minutes ago, huddled by the fridge, waiting for the Nespresso machine to be free.

I balance my coffee, apple and phone in one hand and use the other to pull open the door to my filing room. As it clicks shut behind me, I take a sip of coffee and think: *it's time*.

My heart pumps fast as I rush over to the desk, settle myself down behind a pile of papers and open the Facebook app. Up at the top of the screen, Grange's eyes stare back at me, daring me to continue, and beside him sits the question: 'What's on your mind?'

I'm so glad you asked...

I tap on it, choose *Photo/Video* and select the six videos I've carefully curated from those I saved last night to my burner.

They all have Grange's voice clear as a bell in the background or his bedroom or living room in the foreground. Jane Delaney is the third video; this is deliberate, he'll obviously think it was one of the women depicted who did this and I don't want her directly in his crosshairs. What I *do* want, however, is for it to be clear beyond any reasonable doubt that Jane was telling the truth. That he did abuse her. That I had no reason to ask that witness to lie because he abused others too. And that despite it all, despite everything he did to them, the women in these videos won.

He might not be prosecuted in a criminal court – I'm not as naïve as Hendy thinks – but everyone will know the truth about him. And for a man like Grange, that's almost as bad.

It takes a moment, but then there they are. All six of them. I type 'I'm sorry' into the 'Say something about this video' field and then I just sit there for a moment, staring at the screen.

Because my hands are clammy and there's a teensy part of me whispering: *Are you sure?* But I ignore it. This feels too good.

And so with one more click, I press *Post*.

A rush of adrenaline surges through me as I wait for them to upload and appear on his timeline. I think about all the people who might see those videos. How will he get out of this one?

And then it's done, they're up there, and as much as I'd love to, I don't have time to stick around and watch the comments flood in.

Instead, I log myself out of Facebook and delete the app.

Next I go to LinkedIn and repeat the process: upload, post, log out, delete the app.

Then Instagram: upload the videos to both his feed and his stories, log out, delete the app.

Last, I pull up Gmail and log out of the MrJJ007007@gmail.com email address.

And just like that, a familiar and blissful calm moves through me. I'm sure this is how other people feel when they meditate.

Because that's it. I'm done. Out. Now it's back to 'by the book' for me.

All I need is for Heather to see those videos and report back to everyone in my old office.

And Jane. Please let Jane see them too.

Then she'll know that somebody, somewhere, has her back. We all need that.

But now it's just me and the dusty air and the hum of conversation floating in through the door and piles and piles of papers. So I reach for the pile in front of me, pick up the top sheet, and get to work.

6.11 PM

‘Oh my fucking god, you’ll never believe what happened today,’ comes Heather’s voice – a low and raspy whisper – as soon as I pick up her call.

‘What?’ I ask. I’ve just walked into the Greek canteen downstairs. The woman behind the counter mouths, ‘the usual?’ and I nod back and smile, ‘yes’.

‘I wanted to call you as soon as I saw, but shit, you know how it gets, so many meetings...’

‘What happened?’ I ask.

‘Okay, so he posted something,’ she says, almost breathless with excitement. ‘Or *someone* did. I mean, I doubt it was actually him...’

‘Oh god, is it bad? Is it about me?’

‘No, it’s amazing.’ She pauses and takes a big breath. ‘It’s like all these videos of women crying on the floor,’ she says, ‘and his voice is totally audible in the background. He’s saying all this fucked-up shit. It’s insane.’

‘What?!’

‘I know. I showed Josephine and she told *everyone* in the office. But I played them for Hendy myself. Honestly, Billie, I thought he was going to have a heart attack!’ Her voice drops to a whisper. ‘And you should have seen how many comments there were. Thank fucking god whoever did this made sure his profiles were public, otherwise how would I have seen it, right? I mean I couldn’t just say I’d been following him. That would have been really tricky. It’s like fate. Fate, or that Jane Delaney woman. I didn’t think she had it in her...’

‘Do you have the videos? Can you send them to me?’

‘Of course. They’re gone now, but I videoed my screen,’ she says. ‘But Billie, this is so good for you. You should totally sue for unfair dismissal – obviously this proves you were right. *Obviously* you didn’t fuck with that witness – she just freaked out. Oh shit, someone’s here – I have to go. Chat soon.’

I look up and the woman behind the counter is holding up my food so I reach into my bag for my debit card and pay.

'Thanks,' I say. As I head for the door, I scan the diners. One guy is reading a newspaper and I can just make out one word screaming across the front page: *War*. And as I pull open the door something aches in my chest. Because John Lennon sang about it, Marvin Gaye sang about it, but peace, it seems, is still well out of reach. And I know I can't change the trajectory of this world of ours, I can't end world hunger or climate change or gross inequality or smash the patriarchy or deflect another world war, at least not alone. And even though I recycle and avoid single-use plastic wherever I can, I'm mostly powerless. But then a day like today comes along. A day where for a couple of hours I'm not just a pawn on a chess board, I'm a player; not just *Born to Die*. Because today I did what I *could* do. As Derek would say, I took care of my side of the street. It may not have changed the whole world, but it was one small step in the right direction.

As I'm hit by a wave of icy air my phone starts beep-beeping from my bag and I reach for it. It'll be Heather. She said she'd send me the videos. But it's not; it's Derek. And I'm filled with anxious dread.

Where are you????

Shit.

I should be at AA right now. Sitting on a plastic chair, sipping questionable coffee. And I was going to go. I was on my way there. But I hadn't heard from Heather yet and I knew I'd keep checking my phone. And Derek has a sixth sense about these things. Once, when I'd just started in AA, I was sitting there next to him thinking about relapsing. Just *thinking* about it. And somehow, he knew. He took me aside after the meeting and made me download a meditation app, walked me home, insisted on searching my apartment for booze and stuck that laminated copy of *Just for Today* on my fridge to keep me motivated. He'd have taken one look at me with those soulful brown eyes of his and just *known*, and honestly, I feel too in the bliss bubble right now. I don't want to waste it meditating or sharing or any of the other things I'm going to have to get back to tomorrow.

I move towards the security door, typing back: *I'm sooooo sorry, had to go see my dad. Long story. But I'll see you next week. Billie.*

And then I mute his notifications. It's only temporary. Just until the meeting next week because I'll *definitely* be at that one. Promise. And then I punch in my security door code and go to pull it open but just before I do, something catches my eye in the reflection in the glass door.

I turn to look behind me, my pulse wild and the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end again.

What was that?

What am I feeling?

But as I scan the street, there's nothing there. Just pedestrians and traffic and all the usual shit.

So I head inside and up the stairs.

Mrs Benson watches me through the crack in her door and I nod then head up to my apartment. I can hear Button inside and I tell myself everything is fine but I can't shake the feeling from downstairs, that somebody was there.

I reach for my key in my bag and go inside, closing the door behind me, and Button circles round my legs.

I head over to the windows and pull down the blinds, then I kneel down in front of the record cabinet, my eyes scanning the CD spines first – Hole's *Celebrity Skin*, the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack, Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* – but none of those are right for tonight. So I lean forward and flick through my records. Is tonight a Prince night or a Rolling Stones night or a Bangles night or a Liz Phair *Exile in Guyville* night or a Stevie Nicks *Bella Donna* night or – no, tonight is definitely an Aretha kind of night. I pull *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* out of its cover and place it on the turntable. And as the opening riff of *Respect* starts to play, my phone beeps again.

Heather: *Here they are.*

And in come the video files. Beep after beep after beep.

I grab a plate and fork from the kitchen, and as my mother watches from the wall I head back to my bed and the deepest part of me aches. Because I would do anything to have achieved justice for her the way I did for Jane. Even just a little bit.

And now I'm thinking about doing something I really shouldn't but, fuck it, I can't help myself.

I reach for my phone, tap on Twitter and pull up the profile for @therealbeltturner.

It loads and my eyes snap to her feed. *Oh good, a new tweet.*

But *argh*.

I didn't think anything could mess up my mood right now, but I was wrong. So wrong.

Because at 2 pm today, @therealbeltturner posted: *People can be so awful! Be kind! #kindness #checkyourself*

And beneath it is a picture of her love heart tattoo.

Something simmers beneath my skin. Because even though I've watched her spew venom at strangers many times over the last few years, even though it twists the knife every time, these are the posts that piss me off the most. Because she's fake-nice, fake-good, and that's even worse than plain old bad. Like honestly: pick a side. And I'd love to show the world who she really is. But even after all this time I still have no idea what her real name is or anything about her. Sometimes I wonder whether, if I'd been able to find her, confront her, I'd ever have felt the need to do what I do.

I guess I'll never know now.

And today has been a good day. So I need to focus on that. *Gratitude Billie, gratitude.*

FRIDAY

8.54 AM

I'm still kind of intoxicated as I push my way through the smudgy revolving doors of my temp building, heading past the security desk and over to the elevators.

The doors ping open and as we all file in, all I want to do is reach into my bag for my burner phone and check his security cameras one last time, but *I'm not going to do that*. In fact, as soon as I'm safely inside, I'm going to log out of that security app and delete it altogether. I should have already done that. But I will. I will. In fact, soon I'm going to reset that entire phone to factory settings and retire it for good. I just can't do that until I've retrieved the tracker from under his car; I need to know where it's parked. And I know you're thinking maybe I should have already done that, but I learnt the hard way last time just how badly things can go wrong when you retrieve a tracker a smidge too early...

The doors close, we start to move, and as I watch the little numbers light up I clench my jaw.

Would it really be so bad to take a little peek?

But I said this was the last time, and I meant it. So: *no*. I bite down on my lower lip and focus on my breath. On the illuminating numbers. Anything else. And then 17 lights up and the doors ping and slide open and I get out and turn right and head towards the offices of Robertson, Ball & Sons. The receptionist ignores me just like usual and my phone beep-beeps from my bag and I pull it into view as I almost float through the office.

Hot-Josh: *Still on for Saturday?*

Pyrotechnics fill my veins and I wait just a moment – I don't want to seem desperate – and then text back: *Sure*.

Typing bubbles...

Beep: *I'll come get you at 6.30 x*

A kiss. A kiss is good.

'Morning,' Carla says and I look up. She's walking towards me, her bright red nails wrapped around a coffee cup, but she freezes mid-movement when she sees me.

'Morning,' I reply, trying not to grin.

'You're in a good mood,' she says, eyes narrowing. 'Oh god, you're not leaving, are you?'

I laugh. 'No, just happy.'

'Phew,' she says, as she heads to her desk and I bounce down the hallway, past the glass-walled offices towards my little dungeon.

I pull open the door, step inside and hear the hum of the office behind me close down as it clicks shut. I look around: I'm about half done with the filing and this morning it feels like maybe good things are finally on the horizon. There's Josh on Saturday and now that Hendy knows the truth, I'll be able to get a job I actually care about. With a reference and everything. I'll be able to help people again.

I head over to the desk, piled high with half-filed papers, take off my coat and hang it on the back of the chair. And then I sit down and reach into my bag for my burner phone.

It's time to do what has to be done.

The screen flashes to life and I scroll through to the security app.

I tap into it and go to log out, really I do, but my eyes catch on the dashboard. On the five snapshots of each of his cameras.

Would it really be so bad to check one last time?

Because after this, I'll never get another glimpse into his living room again.

Don't I deserve to see the fallout? To watch Grange pacing around, yelling into his phone about how somebody hacked his social media, trying to explain away his voice in the background as a deep fake? As though he can undo what has been done?

I sit still, biting down on my lower lip, weighing the pros and cons.

One quick look, Billie. That's all. Just for closure...

And, I mean, closure is important.

So I tap past the big crack in the screen and an electric pulse moves through me.

But I must savour this, not rush.

I tap on the one called 'Living Room' and scan the frame: the sofa we sat on, the coffee table, but no Grange.

I squint down at the screen and tap on the camera for the kitchen. It takes a moment for it to load but then there it is – all marble and steel and clear countertops and black and white tiled floors – the sink where I washed out our glasses, the drying rack and *ummm, who is that?*

There's someone lingering on the edge of the frame.

He moves into view. What's he carrying? Is that a camera? Is he taking photographs?

I peer in closer, instinctively trying to zoom in with my fingers like you would on a photograph, but it doesn't work. *What the hell is he wearing?* And then somebody else wanders into frame too, and he's wearing gloves and something over his hair and I'm watching him and thinking *this is really weird* – but then he stops and looks down and I look down too. Away from the counters, towards the floor. And that's when I see it.

What. The. Hell. Is. That?

Then: *No! No! No!*

Because there's a mass in the middle of the kitchen floor. A dark patch seeping from around it like Lucifer's wings.

NOOOOOOOOOO.

It's a body.

It's a fucking body.

And it has dark hair and a chiselled jaw and oh *fuck, fuck, fuck.*

It's Dr Grange.

9.05 AM

My vision blurs and I hold onto the desk to steady myself. How the hell is he dead? Because he was one hundred per cent alive last night at 11 pm. I know this for certain because the last thing I did before I flicked off the lights and went to sleep was check his location on the tracker app. I know I wasn't supposed to, but I couldn't help it. And his little blue dot was safely parked at the hospital then. And now it's at his home.

Which means last night he was alive enough to drive.

My ears ring as I stare down at the screen, willing those figures to vanish, for everything to be okay. But they don't disappear. In fact, there are three of them now, all milling around the kitchen in protective clothing doing things I can't quite make out.

Police.

Those are police.

But something aches in my chest now and the world spins a little slower. He had a mother. And a sister, Meredith; a flash of her smile in those bathroom mirrors. Probably a father, too.

My eyes prick with tears and my insides ache as I think of the morning they told me *my* mother was dead. Nothing prepares you for that.

Do they know yet?

This wasn't meant to happen.

And what did happen?

I need to know. I need to know everything. *Now.*

And so I pull up a search window and, as my breath gets quicker and quicker, I type in *D-r S-a-m-u-e-l G-r-a-n-g-e.*

A list of links appear; I scan down through them. But I've seen every single one of them before: his practice website, articles in the news, pictures at events.

There's nothing new. Nothing to explain why there are police in his apartment and he's lying dead on his kitchen floor.

But his security app. His saved footage. Maybe there's something there?

My hands shake as I tap on the app and move through to his saved videos.

I scan down through the list of recordings; there are two from this morning. I tap on the most recent one and watch it play. It's the doorbell camera: there are flashing lights in the background and people in uniform. The police.

I tap on the next one down: a woman in a uniform arrives at the front door, inserts a key and moves inside. She looks like she's maybe from a cleaning service.

Is she the one who found him?

I tap on the one below that, but it's just a delivery guy and it's daylight. There's nothing at all from last night. Not even from the doorbell camera.

A dark certainty moves through me: Whoever killed him deleted those files. Just like I did the other night. Which means they knew what they were doing.

And: Oh crap, is this my fault?

Is this because of the videos I uploaded yesterday?

Did one of those women do this?

Jane. Please don't let it have been Jane. But it couldn't be. According to her social media, she's in Delaware. And you can't lie about things like that so openly on social media; people close to her would know. So she's off the list.

But if *I* was watching him, surely his victims were too? Did one of them just snap when she realised she wasn't the only one?

Fuck, fuck, fuck – it IS my fault.

The room is spinning; little star-like flashes appear in the corners of my vision. I'm pretty sure I'm hyperventilating and then: *tap, tap, tap.*

A knock at the door.

As it pushes open, I reach for a piece of paper in front of me so it looks like I'm working, and grin a bit too hard.

It's Carla. 'Hey, darlin', it's Brianna's birthday and she's brought birthday donuts. Come join us?'

'Sure,' I say, putting the piece of paper back down with one hand and dropping my burner back into my handbag with the other. I calmly stand up and follow her, but my legs are wobbly and my hands are shaking as we weave through

the office desks towards the chatter in the kitchen. Because there's still a tracker on the bottom of Dr Grange's car. And it's connected to my burner phone. And I can't fucking go and get it now...

That tracker wasn't a risk – not a real one, at least – when Grange was breathing. Nobody would have looked for it before I retrieved it. The NYPD has far bigger fish to fry than some guy saying someone hacked into his Instagram. But now – now that there's a dead body? What if they look? What if they find it? What if they think it's connected to his death?

What if they find *me*?

What if they find me and somehow blame me?

We head into the kitchen and I look around: there are maybe ten smiling faces in here, all standing around a table with two boxes of donuts in the middle. Brianna is standing in front of a single donut with a lit candle sticking out of it, one of those feeble ones you get from a supermarket. And then the woman beside her starts to sing 'Happy birthday to you' and we all join in as I do a mental risk assessment: *Did I wipe down all my fingerprints? Oh god, what if they take my fingerprints?*

'Happy birthday to you...'

Because what if someone figures out Grange got me fired? That sounds a lot like motive to me.

'Happy birthday dear Briiiiiiiiiiaaaaaannaaa...'

I mean, Meredith has seen me up close... that can't be good. A thin layer of sweat is forming at my hairline now.

'Happy birthday to you.'

We all start clapping as Brianna blows out the candle and my eyes dart to the door. All I need to do is get back to my filing room and delete everything and pretend none of this ever happened.

I take a step in that direction but then a hand lands on my arm.

'You can't leave without a donut,' comes a voice. Carla. *Fuck.*

I smile at her, and turn back to the boxes on the table. There's a woman dishing out donuts on little napkins but she's doing it *really slowly*.

'I just wanted you to know,' Carla continues, in between small, delicate bites of a pink-glazed donut, 'I was talking to one of the partners about you. There

might be something opening up soon.'

'Fingers crossed,' I say, my voice brittle. 'That would be great.'

And it *would* be great. Assuming I'm not in prison. Because aside from my potential motive and the tracker and the Gmail being forwarded to my burner phone and my DNA in his house, *I have no alibi*. If Grange was killed last night after 11 pm, which he probably was, I was sleeping when it happened. Alone.

Someone hands me a donut in a white napkin and I smile and take a bite as the room warps around me. *How did this happen?* Carla has started up a conversation with a woman behind us so I say, 'I better get back to it,' and rush out the door and past the desks and down that corridor to my filing room.

I close the door behind me. *Click*. Put down my donut and fumble through my bag, searching for the burner phone. My hands are trembling, my fingers sticky, as I pull it out and tap through to Grange's security app. I find the videos I've just created by live streaming and delete them. Before the police can find them first, before they can figure out someone was watching...

And then I log out.

I delete the app.

I go to reset it to factory settings and am about to tap through and do it, but... *shit*. What if I need this? Need access to – I don't know, *things*? Right now I have his passwords, his login codes. If I get rid of everything, I won't know what's coming. That'll be even worse.

But also, I don't know what sort of tracing is available to the police in homicide cases. *What if they can somehow find this phone through the tracker?* No. There's no way around it. I need to reset it to factory settings and make it untraceable.

There's a pen right there on the table in front of me, and a piece of paper too. So I reach for them, swipe through the burner phone and quickly write down his passwords and codes. Just in case.

I fold it up and put it in the inner pocket of my bag, reset the phone, then snap off the back panel, pull out the battery and take out the SIM.

Without the battery in it, it omits no waves. Nobody can find it. Or me.

And then I just sit there, staring at the wall barely blinking, thinking: *fuck, fuck, fuck*.

But: *Calm down, Billie.*

I close my eyes and take a deep breath in and assess each risk objectively. Logically.

Even if they find that tracker, even if they somehow link it to that phone, there's nothing to link *me* to that phone.

And yes, they will probably find out that I got fired because of the Grange case, but that doesn't make me a murderer. They probably won't even question me. It's far more likely they'll think one of the women in those videos did it. Honestly, one of them probably *did* do it.

And it's not like anyone will ever find out I went to that bar to find him. Yes, Meredith saw me but she thinks my name is Mina.

There is nothing to link this to me. Nothing.

Except: fingerprints. What if I left a rogue fingerprint in Grange's apartment somewhere?

But then again, how could they know it's mine? My fingerprints aren't on a database. No, they'd have to find me and fingerprint me and check it that way...

But *holy fucking shit*, this isn't calming me down anymore because if that somehow happens, then I'll have significantly bigger problems on my hands.

Because if my fingerprints or DNA end up on a database, it isn't just Grange they will link me to...

It's February 12th last year.

It's last time.

5.45 PM

I'm standing on the platform now, breathing in urine and debris, waiting for the D train as rats scuttle along the tracks and people around me smile down at their phones as they text, or swipe left, or listen to music or play air guitar with sound effects like the guy three people to my right. But I'm not doing any of those things. I'm scouring the crime pages on every website I can think of, searching for information. Because I'm scared to google his name from my real phone.

How did I get back here again?

Scouring the internet for signs as to whether I'm going to go to prison for something I didn't do.

There's a high-pitched screech of brakes and a swirl of dust; a metallic blur and the train is here. I wait to get on as others get off and keep scrolling down, down, down, and then:

Prominent NY surgeon found dead in his Upper East Side apartment.

Crap.

My heart races as I look up and around and then down again, obscuring my phone with my hand as I get onto the train and scan the first line.

Dr Samuel Grange, 42, a prominent surgeon and the son of socialite Felicia Benedict, was found dead this morning of multiple stab wounds in his East 82nd Street home...

Fuck.

It's rush hour so there are no seats and all I can do is move past a guy with a box, a cat's face poking out a man-made hole, past a woman reading *Post Office*, and into the centre of the carriage where I wrap my elbow around a metal pole for balance – I need both hands to scroll and tap. The guy next to me is listening to music up really loud and I know that song, it's my sober song: Tupac's *Changes*. He's not paying attention to me but an echo of why I stopped all this last time ripples through me. And I can see myself in the glass of the window; I look so

young. So much younger than I feel. Way too young for prison. My stomach clenches and I glance back down at my phone as we pull away from the station.

Officers were called to the scene by a cleaning service just after 9 am following the discovery of the body. Police believe Dr Grange interrupted an intruder. No arrests have been made and the investigation is ongoing.

I get a little dizzy as I take in the last line: *Please call Crime Stoppers... NYPD...*

And then I just stand there, focusing on remembering to breathe, the train slowing and stopping and starting again until a voice says something over the loudspeaker and *oh crap, where are we?* Brakes screech as we pull to a stop, the doors open and I look up and around. How many stops have we passed? But the signs read: *7 Avenue*. My stop is next. Then I'll be home and everything will be fine. But my mouth is dry and my stomach hurts and it doesn't matter how many times I tell myself it's fine, it's just not. My instinct is to toss the burner phone. Cut my losses. Get it as far away from me as I can. I look around at the crowd, nobody noticing anybody else, just a guy talking loudly to himself on the other side of the carriage. I could drop it when we get to my station. It'll get lost in the movement; the noise.

The train slows again and people start to stand up – a flash of orange and yellow seats before they're reoccupied – as my nerves fray a little more. I reach into my bag, pull the burner out and hold it by my side as we come to a stop. A woman's voice announces over the speaker: 'This is 59th Street – Columbus Circle. Transfer is available to the 1, the A and the C trains.' The doors open and as I move towards them, I let go. I don't even hear the phone hit the ground.

Relief surges through me as I step over the yellow lines onto the platform – *one less problem* – and head towards the exit. There are two NYPD patrol officers coming towards me dressed all in blue, the same colour as the pillars, so it's good I didn't try to drop it in the trash. It's illegal to throw out electronics in New York. I walk past someone sitting on a bench with a blanket draped over their head and my breath is almost back to normal now, but then—

'Excuse me, miss.'

My breath catches as a hand touches my arm and I turn.

'Yes?' I say, frowning. It's a boy of about sixteen, his dark hair held in place by gel.

‘You dropped this,’ he says, and he looks kind of shy and he’s done the right thing and *fuuuuck*.

The patrol officers are looking at us now and I can see at least one CCTV camera hanging from the ceiling, recording this very interaction, and am I just making everything worse? Drawing attention to myself? Giving the police something to present me with at a later date?

‘Oh, thank you!’ I say, taking it from him and dropping it into my bag.

‘No problem,’ he says. He heads back in the other direction and I walk past the patrol officers towards the line of people exiting the platform.

But I’m dizzy again now; I can’t afford to make another mistake.

Maybe it’s more of a risk to ditch it than keep it. I need to calm down. There is absolutely nothing on that phone to link me to Grange. It’s completely reset. And the article says nothing about the videos. Nothing about the tracker. Nothing about a redhead.

I’m just being paranoid. Panicking.

And as soon as the police find who did this, all my problems go away. Then I’m free and clear. I just need to not freak out or do anything stupid before then.

So I’ll give it a few days, let the dust settle, make sure there’s nothing I need it for, then I’ll find a safe way to get rid of it. A way that won’t make things worse. Until then, I’ll just have to hide it somewhere that’s not in my apartment, just in case.

And there is only one place I can think of.

6.19 PM

Button circles my legs, purring, as I pull open the top drawer in my kitchen. I scan the cutlery and my gaze catches on a pair of kitchen scissors with black handles. I reach for them; I'll need those.

I pull open the second drawer now: tin foil, some instruction booklets I've never read and a box of ziplock bags. I'll need one of those too. I cover my hand with my sleeve and reach for one, then use the other hand to pull open the last two drawers but: nothing. The thing I need most of all isn't here.

Where the hell did I put it?

I take the scissors and the ziplock bag to the bedroom, dropping them in my laundry basket and, biting down on my lower lip, I yank open the cupboard and scan the floor.

There, staring back at me, is my orphaned shoe: a Mary Jane with an ultra-thin strap and a two-inch stacked heel that I never had to worry would get stuck in the pavement grates. I'm going to miss those shoes. Behind that are the spines of records – The Doors' *L.A. Woman*, Brigitte Bardot and Serge Gainsbourg, *Bonnie and Clyde* – and on the floor, obscured by the shadows, lies a black overnight bag I keep packed for emergencies... but no duct tape.

Then I remember.

The holes in the kitchen. The mouse. I know where I put it that night...

I rush to the bathroom, step around (and make a mental note to change) Button's litter, and pull open the door to the cupboard beneath the sink. There it is, beside some tampon packs and razors and a couple of discarded bottles of shampoo.

My duct tape.

My laundry detergent is in there too so I grab both, head through to the bedroom and drop them in my laundry basket. My gloves are on the dresser, so I

put them on and then feel around in my handbag for my burner phone and the battery.

There they are.

I wipe them down with a T-shirt from my laundry and drop them into the ziplock bag. The burner's charger is still over by the bed, so I grab that too, wipe it down, put it in the bag and seal it up. Then I tuck it all under some clothes, grab my keys, head out the door and move quickly down the stairs.

A woman talking on the phone enters the building just as I get to the ground floor.

'Wait, why did they say that?' she says as I smile at her. She smiles back and I turn right and rush down the corridor into the laundry room.

It's Friday night and so quiet when I get there, eerily quiet. The only sign of life is a rogue sock someone must have dropped on the floor as they left. I rush past it to the dryer by the far wall, put down my basket and reach into it for the duct tape. There's a dark space between the end dryer and the wall. That's where I need to put it.

I don't know if you've ever tried to pull off a piece of duct tape while wearing gloves, but it's pretty impossible. But a man is dead and if somebody somehow finds this phone, I do not want my fingerprints on it. So I lay the ziplock bag on top of the hamper, put the scissors next to it and take off my right glove. I freeze for a moment as I listen for movement, just in case. I can't afford to be interrupted right now. But there's nothing, just the sound of my own blood pumping and the smell of damp and mould.

I find the end of the tape with my fingernail and reel out a long piece, making sure to only touch the very ends. I reach for the scissors with my other hand and cut. My pulse quickens as I lay the duct tape sticky-side up and put the ziplock bag right in the centre. I put my other glove back on then trim both the edges of the tape so now I never touched it.

And then I pick it up and reach into the dark space against the wall, about halfway up and deep inside. I'm almost there. But as I press hard against it, making sure it sticks, a flash of Grange's body on his kitchen floor flares in my mind.

My breath speeds up.

I pull my arm out and turn to face the empty room but now I'm breathing in damp and thinking: *Am I insane? What if someone finds this phone?*

Still, that's unlikely. Nobody is going to stick their arm down there willingly. And even if someone *were* to find it, there are thirty-eight other apartments in this building with multiple visitors and there's nothing on it to lead back to me. It could belong to anyone. Maybe one of my neighbours is a drug dealer...

And at least this way I know where it is. I don't have to worry that somebody saw me dispose of it.

I just need to calm down and act normal or someone *will* get suspicious.

So I turn back to my hamper, take off my gloves and pile my clothes into the best of the three washing machines. The only one without rust. I put in the detergent, insert the coins and press 'go'. And now the air smells of a mountain breeze and the whirring of the machine is echoing off the walls as I go back out into the foyer with my laundry basket. Nobody is around and I can see an envelope peeking out the edge of my mailbox so I grab for my keys and check. There's one for me – a utility bill – and one for a neighbour that was put in my box by mistake. So I scan for her name, put it on the floor near her box and drop mine in my laundry basket then make my way back up the stairs. Mrs Benson's door is cracked open now and I can feel her watching me as I pass.

'Hey, Mrs Benson', I say, all innocence, clutching my laundry basket.

'Too cold for no heating,' she replies.

'Sure is,' I say as I head up the stairs. And she slams the door and I think: *Oh crap, it must have turned off while I was downstairs. I guess tonight is an igloo night.* I push the key into the lock and enter, scooping up Button on my way over to the radiator. I hold my free hand above it. She's right – it is too cold for no heating. But it's okay, because tonight mine is working just fine.

SATURDAY

4.03 PM

Like I said before, there are some days when I miss my mom more than others. Today is one of those days. I'm consumed by guilt and I need her here to tell me everything will be okay. But she's not here. So instead I have a folded-up plastic bag in my pocket and I'm breathing fog, heading past some trash bins and a trolley with a green and white striped umbrella that reads 'New York City Snack Shop' on the side. There's a couple in red and pink puffer jackets – they look almost neon against the dark and moody sky – buying a pretzel, his hand in the back pocket of her dark blue jeans. And that's the kind of life I want, a pretzel and a Saturday afternoon stroll in the park, not this stressful one where my hands are deep in my own pockets and my eyes are prickling with tears. I move past cast iron lamp posts with little brown birds perched on top, down a path edged in dirty ice and naked trees, telling myself: *It wasn't your fault, you were trying to do the right thing.*

But I'm not so sure about that.

Because it's 4 pm and I've been sitting on the internet all day, doing everything I could to not google Dr Grange's name but still figure out what was happening. And all I know for sure is this: those videos I posted, the ones with Grange's voice in the background, have now been reposted and reposted and reposted. And according to the comments beneath them, it's obvious to everyone that it was one of the women he hurt who snapped and killed him. And on one level that's good because at least the police will be looking in that direction, not at me, but on the other it's so bad. Because how is this not my fault? No matter who did this, I put them in that position. And no amount of distracting myself with chores like changing the kitty litter and cleaning the kitchen, no amount of nicotine can dull that edge. So I came here instead, to get some air and hope ghosts are real and that

my mother's finds me. I push my hands a little further into my pockets and now I'm looking down at a little metallic plaque that reads: *Lily's Bench. Now, Then, Forever.* It's on a green bench in front of some wire fencing not too far from *Strawberry Fields*. I lay down the plastic bag I brought to avoid the damp and sit down.

A jogger runs past me, her forehead creased, her eyes on the road so she doesn't slip on ice – I guess we're all addicted to something a little dangerous – as I take off my gloves even though it's freezing, put in my earbuds, scroll through to YouTube and search for Lily Tate.

There are a couple of interviews from the mid-nineties that I watch when I feel like this. They have this dreamy filmic look; I've watched them thousands of times over the last eight years. I tap on the second one down. And I watch as it loads and there's an advert for a new red car and then there she is: my mother. Her face. The timbre of her voice. My eyes prickle with tears and I put my gloves back on as I watch her smile at the host as he introduces her.

And as the camera zooms in on her face, this serrated mix of love and yearning bubbles up inside me; it burns and twists my insides. But here's the strange part: I welcome it.

So I guess this is the part where I have to tell you what happened to my mom. It's not that I haven't wanted you to know. It's just that when I talk about it – well, it's hard. It hurts. So I'm just going to tell it to you briefly, if that's okay.

MY MOTHER

When my mother became famous it was in the mid-nineties, which, yes, was just a few years after the birth of grunge and the rise of alternative rock. But it was also the time of *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Clueless*, Rachel Green and Monica Geller's huge apartment, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *The Nanny* and, honestly, if you look at mainstream pop culture of the time, it's pretty clear that struggle – the gritty, real, unphotogenic kind – wasn't the best PR choice. Not for a pretty-pretty-pop-princess, at least.

So imagine, you're a twenty-one-year-old girl whose mother has just died of an overdose, a girl who has never met her father but knows he's in prison somewhere, who grew up living out of a car when her mother couldn't make rent, but who has a pretty face and one rare gift: 'the voice of an angel with a broken wing', to quote the press. And then one very ordinary night while you're playing an open mic, someone comes along and tells you they can turn you into a star. All you need to do is everything they say. 'We need to smooth your edges,' they say, 'add a little sparkle, make you more aspirational, build a little myth.' You can still be you, humble and creative, just a little more, you know... palatable. Sell-able. Blonde. Nothing crazy – just a new name and a story that fits your look, your sound, your future. Because it's okay to have a dash of struggle in show business, but when it has *all* been struggle? Well, I guess they thought it was a downer.

This is back when the internet is little more than a novelty, so nobody can check up on what is said. You can step into a sparkling NEW PERSONA WITH A HAPPY UPBRINGING, BE THE UNBLEMISHED GIRL YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE, GET EVERYTHING YOU EVER DREAMED OF. ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS SAY YES.

So you do. Of course you do.

And you step into that persona like it was yours all along. And it's wonderful. Sure, you feel like a fake sometimes, because the face is yours and the songs are yours but the narrative they have you spin in interviews is fabricated. But every lie feels true after you've said it enough times. And the lies don't fill you with shame the way the truth does.

You put out two records. The first is a massive hit, the second, less so. You get married, have a child of your own, wrestle your demons, and then one day you want to make a new record. You don't have a label anymore (after your second record failed they shelved you for a little while then dropped you altogether) but it's 2015 – you don't *need* a label anymore.

And so you do it. You release your most raw work to date, songs that never fit the old version of you.

There's one about how cold it was to sleep in a car in the snow.

One about what hunger feels like to a child.

One about being a mother to your own mother.

And it's exciting. Because there's nobody telling you who to be anymore. Nobody telling you what you can or cannot say in an interview.

But then...

Why are they angry? Why do they hate me? They're just songs.

You scour the comments: *How dare she lie like that? How dare she lay claim to things she's never experienced. HOW DARE SHE?!?*

An article calls the album a 'pathetic attempt to rebrand' and 'inauthentic' and 'fake'. Then the social media frenzy starts. It all happens so quickly. Someone posts an old article where you spoke about your 'charmed' upbringing as proof of how disingenuous you are. Then come the video links to YouTube. More old interviews surface.

People are outraged.

You try to explain, but that just makes it worse.

YOU DON'T GET TO TALK ABOUT STRUGGLING IF YOU'VE NEVER LIVED IT, they type in all caps.

You can feel their hate pulsing through you and it won't stop. They call you crass. A whore. A fucking waste of space. It snowballs.

After thirty-six hours of this you're telling everyone you're fine, you don't care, but you're not fine. The posts have become retweets have become DMs and beep-beep-beep you just can't do this anymore.

Because deep down you're scared they have a point. That you had no right to tell your truth. If you did, surely you'd have been allowed to tell it to begin with. So now shame begins to swirl through your veins. And you think of your daughter and how she'll look at you after this, how people will look at her. And you hate yourself even more than the world hates you. You should have just kept up with the lie. It was better that way. Because where do you go from here? There's no way out. You've ruined everything.

And even though you shouldn't look, you just can't stop.

And the beep-beep-beeps keep coming.

And then you open your DMs and there's a message right there and you read it. Your vision blurs. Your heart all but stops. And there's nobody in the house tonight to tell you that message isn't right.

And in that moment you make a choice.

I was at a friend's house when the call came in. I'd stayed the night and my dad didn't call me to tell me. He called my friend's mother. I'll never forget the way she looked at me, the way her mouth sort of dropped open, her skin blanched and her eyes went blank. And then she had me sit down and handed me the phone and everything changed forever. All I remember about the next few hours are a handful of thoughts:

Did she think of me as she fell?

Did she want to change her mind halfway down?

Please god, don't let her have been scared.

And then the worst one: *Is this my fault?*

Because I should have been there, I should have protected her.

I'd always tried to protect her. That's why I had the login information for her Twitter account – I'd log in periodically and delete as many of the comments and messages as I could before she saw them.

So that's how I logged into her Twitter account that morning. How I scanned down through the messages. And how I saw the last one that had been opened was from @therealbeltturner.

It read: *Why don't you just kill yourself?*

With it, came the link to a tutorial on how to make a noose.

And as I read those words, the last warm parts of me turned to ice and that little flame went out.

But as soon as the story hit the newspapers, before I could even show the police what I'd found, that profile was deactivated. And when I told them about it, they nodded and looked sad for me but nobody did anything. I guess in their minds, what was there to do? Prosecute half of Twitter? But to me that message was everything because it was the last thing my mother ever read. That was what made her do it. And so I kept checking and googling and checking and googling and twenty-seven days later @therealbeltturner's account was back. And there was still nothing I could do.

But we're coming up to my favourite part of the interview now. The interviewer asks: 'What would you have been if you weren't a musician?'

And my mom laughs and crinkles her nose and says: 'I would have opened a record store and drunk coffee all day and talked to people about songs.'

My eyes burn with tears and my insides ache because I want her to have chosen that path. I want her to have never stepped out onto that stage, for that scout to have never seen her. Because then she'd still be here, and I wouldn't need to watch her on YouTube to remember the way her eyes creased when she laughed, the way she crinkled her nose; I wouldn't need to interrogate her music collection just to know the version of her I might have met as an adult. I wouldn't fear that my memories, the ones only she and I held, might become sun-bleached by time, that I might wake up one day and find that she's gone. Lost wholly and forever.

Because there are parts of her I can't find anywhere but in my memory. Parts nobody else was there for: the kind of mother she was, the kind of world she had me believe in. Like one time a kid brought old pictures from 9/11 into school, people jumping out of windows holding hands. He told me other things too and I went home sick with horror. My mother never sidestepped it, never downplayed it, she just said, 'It was harrowing, but baby, the first responders were so brave, and everybody banded together; for once the city was like one big family. Everyone caring for each other.'

And I've wanted to believe in a world like that ever since. A world where we give a shit about what happens to one another.

So I guess that wasn't so brief after all.

But the air smells like rain and I'm shivering now and Josh will be at my place at 6.30 and I need to shower and change. Because he's the one little sparkly thing in the dumpster of my life right now. I don't want to ruin that too.

I stand up from the bench and head towards Central Park's West Drive, dodging ambitious cyclists and beeping yellow cabs. There's a busker up ahead playing *Time of My Life* on the saxophone, his red velvet case laid out in front as tourists video him. I reach into my bag, searching for coins, and drop what I have into his case then head quickly towards Central Park West. I wait with a few other people for the walk signal and then cross and head down West 69th. It's suburban here; quiet, calm. I look in the windows as I pass – the flashing TV screen in one, then the darkness of another – and wonder who lives there. It's as I get to Columbus Avenue and turn left that my phone starts ringing from my bag.

I reach for it and pull it into view: *Sadie is calling...*

'Hey,' I answer.

'Hey,' Sadie says, and her voice has this timbre to it; a fragility I haven't heard in years.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

'Argh, yeah, it's been a bad week, that's all.'

A flash of Grange's body on the floor. 'Me too. Why, what happened to you?'

'Doesn't matter. Tell me about the hot guy? I need to hear something good.'

'Josh? I'm seeing him tonight. But what's going on?'

'I don't know,' she starts, then lets out a sigh. 'It might be nothing. What are the signs of someone cheating?'

5.04 PM

‘What has Kyle done?’

‘It’s probably nothing,’ Sadie replies as I pick up my pace. ‘But I don’t know, Billie. There’s this woman he works with.’

‘Wait, was she at your birthday?’ I ask, thinking of the dark-haired woman he was talking to in the window.

There’s a pause.

‘How did you know?’

‘There was this weird thing between them. I can’t explain it,’ I say.

‘I know, right?’ Sadie says. ‘Kyle says I’m just making shit up. But I can *feel* it. Like I just know something is not right. If he is, if he’s out doing that while I’m at home warming milk and changing diapers, so help me god... I’m making a voodoo doll with his face on it.’

I move past scaffolding, a blue bus and a small family all carrying shopping bags; the bus pulls to a stop and the brakes let out a high-pitched screech.

‘Have you looked through his phone?’ I ask.

‘No, not yet. He’s just always been so great, I don’t want to believe it.’

‘Isn’t it better to know, though?’

‘I don’t even know how to get into his phone.’

‘Don’t you know his password?’

‘No, why would I?’

I turn right up West 58th past Mount Sinai.

‘Maybe you just need to wait until he unlocks it and grab it somehow?’

And then it hits me. I’m doing it the legal way this time. I’m not fixing this for her, I’m not asking the woman’s name. I’m giving her normal best friend advice.

‘I can try,’ she says, letting out a big sigh. ‘Fuck, Billie, how could he do this to me? To Isobel? Maybe I’m just imagining things.’ Another sigh. ‘What do you think? Honestly. Do you think he’d cheat?’

I'm at the crosswalk now and I can see my building up ahead.

'I don't know,' I say, 'but I got a weird feeling from her too—' I stop.

My breath catches in my throat and I know Sadie is saying something but I don't know what because *fuck, fuck, fuck*. There, walking around the corner, are a man and a woman in blue uniforms.

The police.

5.22 PM

They're coming around the corner of West 58th from the direction of the river, looking up at the side of my building, heading for my security door. Maybe they're here because of Marco and his contraband cigarettes?

Please keep walking. Please keep walking.

But they don't.

They stop.

They stop right outside and start to talk and someone presses the button to cross the road and now I'm listening to a robotic voice say 'wait... wait... wait', thinking *should I turn around? Should I run? Have they seen me? Crap.*

Because all I can think about is Grange, dead on his kitchen floor, and that tracker under his car, and *shit*, is one of them looking at me now with recognition? Now I can't run. And the machine gun *tik-tik-tik* of the crosswalk sounds and everyone moves forward so I move with them, looking around self-consciously, looking anywhere but at the police.

I'm maybe five steps away from them now, rattling off statistics to myself so I remember to breathe: *Less than forty per cent of serious crimes are solved in this city. And you didn't even commit this one. It's fine. Just fine.*

'Wilhelmina Spencer-Tate?' says the man. He's around six feet tall with dark eyes and a shaved head.

I force myself to breathe normally.

'Yes,' I say, frowning like I'm confused. Which is fair really, because I *am* confused. How the hell did they find me?

Is this because Grange got me fired?

But Heather would have told me if they'd been in the office asking questions. And it's too early for that.

Did Meredith tell them about me? She saw Grange give me his card. A flash of his message to her: *Ran into the redhead tonight. We're having takeout. Told you*

she liked me! So she knew I was seeing him again, but she thought my name was Mina, and she didn't have a picture of me to show anyone. Besides, we live in a city of more than eight million people. I mean, I'm not exactly thrilled by all the facial recognition surveillance going on in this city – probably even less thrilled than most – but mainly it's only at intersections, and they'd still need to know who the hell they were looking for to find me, especially this fast. So what have I missed?

'Is everything okay? Has something happened?' I ask, looking up at my building like maybe there has been a shooting in there and one of my neighbours' doors is covered in yellow tape.

'I'm Detective Butler and this is Detective Martinez,' says the man. He flashes his badge and I take a cursory look.

'We just have a few questions,' says the woman with a smile.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

'Umm, okay,' I say, punching in the code to the door and pushing it open. 'Do you want to come up?'

Because what else am I meant to say? I don't really have a strategy for dealing with the police; I've never needed one. My missions are usually so well thought-out and so distant from me that this has never been a problem before – okay fine, maybe last time it was almost a problem.

But we're on the same side, them and me. We might go about it differently, and they might not see it that way if they found the little drives in the tea tin in my kitchen, but we are.

We're the good guys.

They look at each other. Something passes between them.

'Sure,' says the woman and they follow me up. The staircase feels narrower than usual. It's pulsing in towards me, and the stairs themselves seem deeper. This is happening, this is really happening. My heart is pounding by the time we get to Mrs Benson's door – she's watching through the crack but says nothing – and up to my floor.

Button yelps from the other side of the door as I take off my gloves, shove them into my pockets and search for my key.

I open the door, head inside and they follow. Button greets us, purring.

‘This shouldn’t take long,’ Butler says. And then they stand there, awkward, as I take off my coat and hang it on the back of the door.

‘No problem,’ I say, leading them into my bedroom/studio and gesturing to the sofa, inviting them to sit. But as they do, I’m acutely aware of last night’s washing strewn on a drying rack by the radiator – all my underwear on full display – and of what I left stuck on the wall of the laundry last night.

Oh my god, is that why they’re here? Did they find the tracker under Grange’s car and figure out whose app it was linked to? Or – *crap* – did they somehow figure out whose app was watching his security cameras?

But no, it can’t be any of that. I’ve always used a VPN. I’ve always been careful. So careful. And even if they’d somehow traced it to this building, there would be no reason to talk to me. Not yet. So it’s not that.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ I say, my throat closing up. ‘Can I get you something to drink?’

‘We’re fine,’ says Martinez.

So I put my bag on the floor, sit down on the bed and smile as they pull out notebooks and pens.

‘What can I help you with?’ I ask.

‘Do you know a man named Samuel Grange?’ asks Butler.

I need to not lie. They clearly know I do – did – or they wouldn’t be here. Wouldn’t have sought me out. Shit, they’ve probably seen Grange’s messages: *Ran into the redhead tonight...* And now they’ve seen me.

‘Yes,’ I say, trying to sound matter-of-fact. ‘But I don’t know him that well. Wait, why – has he done something?’ I look wide-eyed at Butler and then Martinez, who is staring at my feet like she’s avoiding eye contact.

‘There’s been an incident,’ says Butler.

Martinez looks up at me again and I search both their faces for more information. ‘What sort of incident?’

‘He’s dead,’ says Butler.

I fake gasp and my cheeks burn blessedly hot.

‘What? When?’

‘Thursday night.’

‘What happened?’ I say, my voice wobbling on cue. My heart thumps.

‘That’s what we’re trying to figure out,’ says Martinez.

‘When was the last time you saw Samuel Grange?’ Butler interjects, his pen poised to write.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This is definitely about the date.

If it was about work they’d have mentioned the case by now.

And the date is worse, so much worse – getting fired because of Grange wasn’t fantastic, no, but getting fired because of Grange and then going on a date with him is... well, it’s not good is it?

‘Monday,’ I say, and my voice comes out the perfect mix of fragile and shocked – just a little high-pitched and crackly.

‘Where did you go?’

I’m frowning, shaking my head like I’m refusing to believe what’s being presented to me. ‘It was sort of impromptu. I ran into him at a restaurant and we got takeout and went back to his place.’

Truth. That’s the key. Tell the truth, just not the whole truth.

‘So you’d met Dr Grange before?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, ‘I met him and his sister at a bar on Friday night and then I saw him again on the Monday, by chance. He said it was fate. God, I can’t believe it, you know?’ I say, searching their eyes.

Do they think I had something to do with this?

‘So that was Monday, January 23rd?’

‘I guess so,’ I say, tapping on my phone and going to the calendar. ‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘And where was this second meeting?’ he asks.

‘At a Chinese restaurant – it’s on East 78th.’

I can hear the pen scratching across the page as a siren blares outside.

‘That’s a long way away. What were you doing that side of town?’

My eyes flit to my mother, on the wall, watching all this.

‘It’s Manhattan, nothing’s that far away. And that restaurant was my mother’s favourite. Sometimes I go there.’

This, obviously, is a lie, but there’s no way they can prove it.

‘She’s dead,’ I add.

‘Oh,’ says Martinez.

Butler hands me something. 'You might want this back,' he says.

And as I look down at it my vision jars: *Oh crap*. My Visa card.

Where did they get that?

'Thanks,' I say reaching for it. 'I didn't even know I'd lost it!'

'It was at Dr Grange's residence. You must have left it there on Monday?'

'I must have.'

A flash of me emptying out my bag on the floor when I answered Josh's phone call in Grange's sitting room.

How could I have been so fucking careless?

Butler gives a small nod and then just stares at me a bit, like Hendy used to do. What's he thinking? Does he know something he's not saying? I hold my breath and wait for him to continue.

'How was Dr Grange's demeanour?'

'In what way? He seemed happy,' I say, shrugging.

'Towards you,' Martinez interjects. 'How did he treat you?'

This is about the videos. And part of me wants to tell them the truth, so they know who he was, but I can't. No fucking way am I implicating myself any further than I already am. I need to get myself crossed off their people of interest list as quickly as possible.

'He was lovely.' I smile.

Butler makes a note.

'The fire escapes here, the ones that lead up from the alley... you ever use them?'

'What? No. Why?'

'Any of them communal?'

I frown. Where is he going with this? 'No, not that I know of. I'm pretty sure they all belong to someone's apartment.'

He shrugs, but there's something about his expression that makes me uncomfortable. Like he's not convinced. Wait – does he think I somehow snuck out the back and killed Grange? And now I'm thinking of @norajane_8, those messages I sent to him on my own phone, not my burner. What if they ask to see my phone? What if they realise I was catfishing him?

'Where did you say you work?' he asks, flipping the page on his notebook.

‘I’m a temp,’ I say. And right now that feels like a blessing, a little buffer between me and the moment they discover I lost my job because of Grange and the Jane Delaney case.

‘Where are you working right now?’ he asks, pen poised.

‘Robertson, Ball & Sons,’ I say. ‘Just filing. That sort of thing.’

‘Where is that?’

‘West 35th.’

He makes another note and Button jumps up next to Martinez and starts purring and pushing into her.

‘Cute cat.’ She smiles.

Then Butler says: ‘Was there anything else you can think of? Anything Dr Grange said? Any concerns he’d had? Anything suspicious you saw that might be of use to us?’

I think for a moment.

‘No,’ I say, ‘he seemed... fine. I just can’t believe this.’

‘Okay, thanks for your time,’ says Martinez as she gives Button one last stroke then stands up.

‘Of course. I wish I knew more,’ I say.

‘We’ll find the truth,’ says Butler. ‘His sister has offered quite a big reward. Might make someone talk.’

Shit. Fucking Meredith. As long as nobody talks in a way that makes me look guilty, like, you know, mentions how angry I was about the Jane Delaney case. But still, maybe this is good, maybe they’ll find the person who actually did it. But if it’s good, why is my stomach clenching?

I lead them to the door.

‘We may have a few more questions,’ Butler says as I open it.

‘Sure, of course,’ I say. Then he hands me his card and I smile and look down at it, like I’m grateful.

They head out into the hallway and I close the door with a click. And then I just stand there, holding Butler’s card, listening as their footsteps pad down the stairs, creaking and moaning; to their fading chatter – probably about me and Grange, two subjects I never wanted in the same sentence, ever. Then the buzzer buzzes and the downstairs door opens and I know they’re gone.

But there's a lump in my throat and my head is swimming because *how did I let this happen?* If they get anything on me – anything – and take my fingerprints or a swab of my DNA, they could link me to Aurora's death.

I mean, honestly, they could link me to a lot of shit...

6.07 PM

What am I going to do? I think, as I run over to my bed, drop Butler's card on the bedside table and grab my phone. I need to get rid of @norajane_8 and I need to do it now. I rush over to the big window to peek out.

It's starting to rain and they're crossing 10th Avenue, looking at each other, talking; probably about how guilty I seemed.

How did I fuck up so badly?

My hands are shaking as I scroll through to Instagram. I go to my messages first, and there they are, the ones I sent to Grange. I should unsend them. But the police have probably already seen them by now. They've had access to his phone for what, thirty-six hours? And they've just come to talk to me. I don't want to do anything to draw suspicion. And so I go to *Settings* instead, and tap on *Log out*.

Then I delete the app altogether.

Now @norajane_8 is just another blonde girl on Instagram. Nothing to do with me.

Except, crap, what if there's a trace of that on my phone somewhere? I can't risk it. So I scroll through to *Erase All Content and Settings* and press *Confirm*. But now I'm dizzy and my heart is beating wildly in my chest and I need to calm down. I can't think straight.

I need a cigarette.

I rush over to my bed, reach into the drawer for my cigarettes and lighter, take them over to the smaller window and push it open. I pull up a chair, flick the lighter, and as the cherry glows red and I take a deep drag I look down onto the street. People put up umbrellas or rush for cover, a car almost hits a pedestrian, someone yells at someone else and I think: *There's something they're not telling me*. Something in Butler's eyes or in the way he asked about those fire escapes or, honestly I don't know what it is, but there's something. It's there, deep in my gut, screaming: *run*.

Calm down, Billie. They only came to see you because they found your Visa card. Right now, you're not a suspect. This is just information gathering.

And I mean, logically that seems true, but I don't know, it didn't *feel* like just information gathering. And I may not be on their suspect list yet, but that doesn't mean I won't end up there.

I take another drag and close my eyes and wait for the nicotine to do its thing so my heart calms down. One more. No, two. Then I stub out my cigarette on the windowsill, head back to my bed and set my phone up as brand new. No restore. No data transfer. Just my contacts from iCloud, my Apple ID and a few apps.

And then it's done and I should be calm but I'm not calm, not at all, in fact my hand is still shaking as I plug my newly reset phone in to charge by the bed. I close my eyes and take a deep breath and tell myself it'll all be okay as I slowly exhale. Familiar sounds trickle in: the neighbour upstairs walking around, traffic beeping from the street, laughter from somewhere in the distance, the radiator clanking and then: *bzzzzzzz*.

My eyes flick open and I turn to stare at the door.

Crap. Are the police back?

But then I remember: *Josh.*

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Bzzzzzzzz. It comes again.

So I head over to the door and press on the intercom: 'Hello?'

It crackles for a moment.

'Billie?'

I frown at the buzzer, thinking of an excuse. I can't do this, not now. I'm still wearing my oversized jeans and sweater from my trip to the Park.

'Hey,' I say.

'It's Josh,' he says.

'Josh,' I reply, my mind racing. 'I'm so sorry, I meant to call. I'm sick,' I say into the speak-piece. 'Can we do another time?'

Silence rings through the speaker for a moment. A motorbike backfires and I hear it through the window and the intercom.

Then *crackle, crackle.*

‘Are you serious?’

‘I know, I’m so sorry, I should have called you but I’ve been sleeping and I just don’t want to make you sick,’ I say, screwing up my face because I know this is bad.

It’s silent then *crackle, crackle*.

‘I’ll take my chances,’ he says.

I bite down on my lower lip.

‘Hello?’ He sounds annoyed now. ‘Fuck, Billie, it’s raining out here. Just let me up okay?’

Shit.

And now all I can hear is Derek’s voice in my head saying: *You can’t push everyone away Billie – you deserve love as much as anybody else*. And if I send Josh away now I’ll never see him again, I know that and *shit I don’t want that*, but if I let him up...

‘Billie?’

Fuck.

And the truth is I don’t want to be alone right now.

And so I make a choice.

‘Okay,’ I say and I buzz him up.

And then I pull off my jeans and put on a short tartan skirt that’s lying over the chair. But the drying rack is right there, and it’s not even my good underwear on display. So I grab it and rush it through to the bathroom, squeeze some toothpaste onto my finger, put it in my mouth and swirl it around. Spit. Smile into the mirror. Pinch my cheeks. *You can do this*.

Tap, tap, tap.

I head to the door, take a deep breath and pull it open. And there he is – Joshua Wilson. Smiling down at me.

6.33 PM

‘Hey,’ he says, a little breathless.

‘Hey,’ I reply, leaving the door ajar and heading back inside. He follows me in, closing the door behind him with a click.

‘Have you been smoking?’ he asks, sniffing the air. ‘I thought you were sick.’

‘It’s not that kind of sickness,’ I say.

‘Riiiiight,’ he says, his eyes boring into me. ‘What kind of sickness is it then?’

And I’m thinking *Detective Butler, Martinez, Grange dead on his kitchen floor, the tracker still on his car, my credit card left at the scene* and then I hear myself say: ‘Life sickness.’

But my voice does this weird crackly thing between *sick* and *ness* and letting him in was a bad idea. The last thirty-six hours are bubbling up inside me. *Don’t you dare cry, Billie.*

‘Would you like something to drink?’ I ask. This is strategic. I can go to the kitchen, take a few deep breaths and pull myself together.

‘Sure,’ he says, taking off his leather jacket as I head into the kitchen.

I open the fridge and the cold air hits my cheeks as I take a deep breath and scan the shelves – eggs, spinach, but nothing to drink aside from a bottle of chilled water – *deep breaths, deep breaths...*

But then Josh is right there behind me, looking at the shelves over my shoulder.

‘Water?’ I say, my throat tight.

‘I was kind of hoping for something to compromise your decision-making faculties, but okay,’ he says, his hands on my waist.

I reach for the bottle and close the fridge door and turn back to him and smile. But he’s looking at me with slightly narrowed eyes now; he knows something is wrong and he’s trying to decode me.

‘What’s going on, Billie? You seem... off.’

I will not cry, I will not cry, I will not cry.

I look at his mouth, his stubble; anywhere but his eyes. And then he does this thing, he reaches for a piece of hair that's fallen in front of my face and tucks it behind my ear.

Grange did that exact thing too.

And *uh-oh*.

My eyes prickle with tears. I smile hard to stop them, but it makes it even worse and now my lower lip is quivering and my breath is all staccato.

'Hey,' he says in a soothing voice, his finger gently under my chin, lifting it up. It guides my gaze to his and I take a sharp breath in. 'What's going on?' he asks.

And I can't tell him the truth – that the police were just here, that I've ruined everything, that I'm scared and I miss my mom – but I have to say something, so I swallow hard and go with the easy option: 'I lost my job'. And as I say it, a hot tear rolls down my cheek and then another one follows, and I clench my eyes shut and move my head away from his hand.

'Oh. Fuck,' he says. 'That explains it. Come here.' He takes the bottle of water and puts it on the counter then pulls me into his arms. And his sweater smells like citrus and I can hear his heart beating and just for a moment my shoulders relax.

'What happened?' he asks.

I shrug against his chest. 'We lost a case and it looked like my fault.'

'When did it happen?'

'A couple of days ago.' And there it is, another lie.

'It'll be okay,' he says into my hair.

I nod and pull away and say, 'I'm just stressed.' He moves just a millimetre closer to me and my heart starts racing.

'We can still go out,' he says, his voice croaky. 'If you want to.'

I swallow hard. We're standing so close in my little kitchen. His eyes move to my lips and my breath catches. Maybe Heather's way is the right way; at least her addiction won't land her in prison. And maybe I can't protect myself from every-fucking-thing. Because I can smell his shampoo and feel the heat from his chest and *fuck it*.

I reach up and kiss him.

And he kisses me back, hard. He's pushing me up against the fridge; it's cool against my back. His hands are in my hair. His stubble is scratching my cheek and

he tastes like peppermint and his skin smells earthy.

‘Wait, is this okay?’ he asks, his eyes an inch from mine. ‘You’re not too upset?’

I nod. ‘I want you.’

And he threads his fingers through mine and leads me to the bedroom. And all I can hear is the beat of my heart in my ears and the muted sounds of traffic floating in from outside. I sit down on the bed and he pulls off his T-shirt, his eyes on me. And then I lift up my arms and he pulls off my sweater. He reaches under my skirt for the edges of my underwear and slowly pulls them down to my knees. I step out of them, one leg, then the other. And he’s unzipping his jeans now and taking them off, reaching into the pocket and pulling out a condom. I lie back on the bed as he puts it on and then he lies down on top of me. His skin is warm and he smells familiar and his hands are in my hair; I can feel his breath on my lips, and we’re just lying there, still, looking at each other. Then he moves my legs apart with his knee, and my head feels light and everything else fades to static.

7.42 PM

'I'm starving,' Josh says. My head is on his chest and I can see Butler's card right there on the table by the bed. But I don't want to think about that right now so I push the thoughts aside and focus instead on the warmth of skin on skin. 'Are you hungry?' Josh asks.

'A bit,' I say. 'I don't really have that much in the house.'

'I saw eggs in the fridge. I can make something if you want?'

'You cook?' I ask, tilting my head to look at him, my chin on his chest.

'I watch *MasterChef*. I can figure it out.'

'Sure.' I laugh. Then he groans and pulls away from me slightly and it's cold without him here. I drag the covers up to my chin and watch him pull on his T-shirt and underwear from beside the bed. He zips up his jeans and smiles at me and heads through to the kitchen.

I can hear the fridge opening as I sit up and pull my dressing gown around me and make my way over to the record cabinet. I kneel down and flick through the records, pulling out Nina Simone, *Broadway-Blues-Ballads*. And as *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* starts to play, I grab my cigarettes from beside the window, flick the lighter and watch as the end glows red against an indigo sky.

I take a deep drag and look out onto the street. It's still raining and the neon sign for the Thai place across the street is glowing pink in the dark, reflecting off wet pavements and black trash bags outside. There are people going about their lives, black and red and patterned umbrellas moving back and forth like nothing of consequence is happening right now. It's just another night. And if any one of them looked up and saw me, I'd just be some girl on West 58th Street, smoking out the window of a non-smoking building. That would be my greatest sin. There's something comforting in that.

Because maybe that's all I am to Martinez and Butler too.

And as soon as they figure out who did this – which will probably be soon, because none of the women Grange harmed are professional criminals so they *will* have left a trace – the case will be closed. They’ll stop probing. I’ll be off the hook.

I take another drag and the radiator rattles while the upstairs neighbour turns on the TV. Voices. Laughter. Drawers clatter in the kitchen and I can smell frying butter now; maybe cheese. And I breathe out a cloud of smoke and tap ash out the window.

And that’s how I stay for a little while, smoking my cigarettes and trying not to think. It’s just as I light my third one that I hear: ‘How hungry are you?’

I look back and Josh is holding a plate and some cutlery. And as I look into his eyes I think: *I want this. With him.* I mean, not right now, but soon. I want to go back to AA and get a new job and do all the right things and sit on Reddit and be like that Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song, *Our House*. The one Graham Nash wrote about Joni Mitchell. I even already have one of the cats for the yard.

But I don’t say that. I just smile and stub my cigarette out on the windowsill and reach for the plate and say, ‘An omelette?’

‘You should eat more protein,’ he says, sitting down on the sofa. And I *want* to care about things like how much protein I eat. ‘Hey, I have to coach early tomorrow morning all the way over near my place so I can’t stay all night. Are you going to be okay?’ He eyes me and takes a bite.

‘Of course, I’ll be fine – you just caught me at a weak moment.’ I smile and he smiles back, and something flips in my abdomen. And for the first time in a while I feel like maybe that’s true – maybe I really will be fine.

And then the record ends and Josh puts down his plate, goes over to the record cabinet, pulls out the Cowboy Junkies record from last time he was here, chooses Side D and puts it on. And as the needle drops and their cover of *Sweet Jane* starts to play, I remember why I did all this. For Jane. And well, just like Nina, my intentions *were* good. So if there is a god, I have to believe he’d apply some leniency here. I have to believe I’ll get another chance to do better.

11.12 PM

'I'll talk to you soon,' Josh says as he squeezes my hand and then heads down the stairs. I close the door behind him and turn back to my apartment. The air still smells of frying butter and my phone is still sitting there beside the bed but I'm not going to look. Not until tomorrow morning. I need a good night's sleep.

I brush my teeth, floss, run a brush through my hair, and then I flick off the bathroom light, check that the front door is locked, scoop up Button and get into bed. She nestles into her favourite spot by my legs as I turn off the light beside me and close my eyes. But as soon as it's dark, my pulse speeds up again. Now that Josh is gone the thoughts are back. The expression on Butler's face when he handed me my Visa card. Detective Martinez could barely meet my eyes. There's something I'm not seeing. Something they know that I don't. I can feel it.

But what is it?

I roll over and grab onto a pillow, squeezing my eyes shut. I think of Josh and the warmth of his skin and... *fuck it.*

I sit up, flick on the light and reach for my phone. Just one little Google search. Just one, to calm me down and then I can sleep.

So I type in: *D-r S-a-m-u-e-l G-r-a-n-g-e* and watch as it loads.

At least I don't have to worry about googling Grange's name anymore; now that the police have told me he's dead, it would be weird if I *didn't* google him.

I scan down through the search results. The top one is the article I read yesterday on the subway. But then there, three links down, is something new: *Police have new lead on surgeon's death.*

But this is good! This is so good. They've found who did it!

I pull the covers up to my chest, Button mews and readjusts herself, and I tap on the link and scan the text.

Police say the murder of Dr Samuel Grange, 42, who was found dead of multiple stab wounds in his East 82nd Street home on Friday morning, may be

linked to a series of videos uploaded to Dr Grange's social media accounts on Thursday morning.

Relief pulses through me, but sadness too: they know it was one of the women in those videos.

'This was a highly sophisticated, well planned and targeted attack. A tracking device has been found under Dr Grange's car, his security system was disabled by a wi-fi jammer and we believe the perpetrator has been watching Grange through his security cameras. We think it was a professional,' said a police source.

Fuck.

Dr Grange's sister, Meredith Grange, is offering a reward of fifty thousand dollars to anybody who provides information that leads to an arrest. If you have any information, or saw something or somebody suspicious in the weeks leading up to Dr Grange's death, please contact Detective Butler at the 19th precinct.

Double fuck.

They found the tracker. They know about the security app. And those things have made them draw the wrong conclusion.

They think whoever was watching him killed him.

What if they can somehow figure out it was me? Through IP addresses or something?

But I used a VPN. I was careful. And it was always through my burner. Always.

What if there was a CCTV camera near where Dr Grange was parked the night I put that tracker on?

What if somewhere out there footage exists of me leaning down beside his car? Footage just waiting to be uncovered? What if I didn't cover my face with that umbrella as well as I thought I did? I mean, it was a minor risk back when I was just spying on him, but now that he's dead, well, it would be catastrophic if something like that emerged. I mean, right now they know I went on a date with him, that I was at his house. Soon they'll know he got me fired and why. They'll realise that maybe *I'd* want those videos public.

My head thumps and my thoughts tangle.

I'm going to get blamed for this, I can feel it.

But I need to calm down.

Deep breaths, deep breaths, deep breaths.

But shit, I can't just sit here breathing deeply and waiting for something else to go wrong. Because now that the police are looking in the wrong direction, I have to do something or they'll come for me soon. So I reach for my laptop and fire it up. This is not the time for tiny screens.

And as I watch the Apple logo glow white, I think back to the news story. Most of what they mentioned in that article *was* me, but one part of it wasn't. And so as soon as the desktop flashes to life, I pull up a private browser and type *wi-fi jammer* into the search field.

I've heard of jammers before, of course – devices that block a wi-fi signal, thereby messing with security systems that rely on a stable connection – but I've never used one before. They're illegal, and yes, technically the things I do are illegal, but I like to think of mine as borderline. In any case, I don't know how easy jammers are to procure, and that might tell me something about who did this.

But according to Quora they're freely available via a couple of supplied links.

I click on one.

Up comes an image of a small, black box with a series of antenna-like spikes coming out the top.

Okay, so any one of the women he hurt would have known about his security system, where the cameras were, that there was an app – and they all had a reason to hurt him, especially after seeing those videos. So it could be any of them. But which one? I need to figure it out. And no, I don't want to throw them under the bus, but I also can't go down for this. So if the police come for me, I need to be able to show them a strong alternate suspect. But there are so many, maybe more than I even know about, so how do I narrow it down?

And then I remember. His security footage. The last sixty days. Maybe there's something – or someone – in there.

MIDNIGHT

They say you're usually killed by someone you know, and I think we can agree that in Grange's case that sounds about accurate. So yes: the security footage. Maybe whoever killed him came around in the weeks before he died. Maybe my failed witness is in there somewhere.

I click on a new tab, pull up Gmail and log in with: *M-r-J-J-0-0-7-0-0-7-@-g-m-a-i-l-.c-o-m.*

Password: *J-u-s-t-i-c-e.*

The list of emails loads.

The first thing I notice is that Grange changed his passwords.

A series of notifications – Gmail, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn – have been forwarded through. Which makes sense, all his accounts have been compromised. I'd be changing my passwords too.

I scan quickly through the others, searching for the zip file I sent to myself last Tuesday while I waited for Carla at my temp job.

It's there, right at the bottom.

I take a deep breath, stroke Button, download the zip file, double click on it and up come all the files – sixty days' worth of footage. But as I scan down through the dates I do a double take.

Because: *wait, that's weird.*

The first file, the one at the very top, is dated Monday January 23rd and all I can hear in my head is an echo of Butler's voice asking about the date I last saw Grange. *So that was Monday January 23rd?*

What the fuck is going on here?

Because I deleted everything from that day as I drove away in the cab. All of it. Every last file.

My stomach twists as I press play. *Did I miss one? Am I in there? Is that why the police were looking at me like that? Have they seen what I did?*

The footage is a bit grainy and I squint down at the screen – it's the doorbell camera. And then a figure wearing a long dark coat and carrying an umbrella comes in closer and rings the bell. But then it's gone again. I rewind and press pause at the clearest moment but nothing. The figure looks too big to be a woman but his face is covered by a scarf and half obscured by the umbrella.

Horror floods through me.

I'm hit by a flash of the noise I heard while I was there in Grange's sitting room. And that feeling as I walked down the street – the hairs on the nape of my neck standing on end.

Someone was there, watching me.

Oh crap. Because I felt that again last Thursday night, the night Grange died, when I was going through the security door of my building. Was someone watching me then too?

And if so, why?

And are they coming back?!

But the video is still paused on my screen and as I stare down at the grainy image I construct a scenario in my mind: Whoever that is tried to get in after I left. They rang the bell, but Grange was roofied so he didn't answer. But they didn't stick around long. Did they see the camera by the door and realise they were being videoed and flee?

And then come back with a wi-fi jammer three days later to disable the system?

Shit.

But maybe this is good? Surely the police will look at this footage. Will decide it was that figure on the screen, who is clearly a man, not me or Jane or my failed witness, who killed Grange just three days later?

But then again, it's just a guy walking up to a door. It could be a mistake. Maybe he had the wrong address. Do I want to risk that?

Because: the tracker, my Visa card, the fingerprints they can't-can't-can't take.

My eyes flit to the clock in the corner of the screen – it's just after midnight. But as I look back to the video, my gaze catches on something to the left. Just

behind the video window, only partially visible, is the MrJJ007007 Gmail inbox screen.

I move across to it and tap. Maybe there's something in there, some clue to tell me why someone was at his door in the middle of the night.

And then there, nestled between forwarded messages from Amazon and Grange's work, is a name I recognise: *Ramone James*. An email I haven't read.

How did I miss that?

This is why it's bad to be stressed – you make mistakes.

I glance across to the timestamp: it came in on Thursday. That was the day I uploaded everything. The day I felt watched at home. The day Grange died.

A flash of me logging out of his apps, out of Gmail, as soon as I'd uploaded it all. That's why I didn't see it come in.

The subject reads: *WTF?*

I tap on it and scan the body of the message: *Why aren't you answering my texts? You need to take that shit down! If the other guys see it there will be problems. You know how jumpy they are after JR. What are you thinking? Be smart.*

Static fills my brain. Because what the *actual fuck* is JR?

SUNDAY

7.03 AM

I don't know how it happened, how the mind works, how that one little piece of information resurfaced, but it did. After hours and hours of thinking back to the discovery file – *JR, JR, JR* – and tossing and turning, I finally got to sleep at 2 am, certain my life was over. But at 7.03 am I woke with a start, adrenaline pulsing through me as I thought of something I'd seen in Grange's files, or at least, something I *thought* I'd seen: *JR*.

Which is why right now, before coffee, I'm jittery, plugging the flash drive full of his information into my laptop, holding my breath as I type 'JR' into the search function.

It comes up straight away. Just like it was in my mind's eye.

JR

It's a little blue folder.

My pulse thuds as I double click on it.

Inside are five images. I click on the first one.

It's a screenshot. Dark background. Light text. The same one from Grange's text messages.

Why would he have saved that?

I scan quickly through the comments but I've seen them all before and none of them mean anything to me. So I click on the second file. It's another screenshot of the same forum. But this one has a green, hand-drawn circle around one specific comment.

Brother82: Just make sure you trust your brothers implicitly. The whole pod. Even if you've known a guy for years he might screw you over when shit comes down.

I move back to the first file and scan down the comments again – what have I missed? And then I see it. *Brother82*. Right in the middle. His comment here

reads: *My only advice is it's all about trust.*

And I have no idea what these screenshots are or why Ramone sent them to Grange or why he saved them or why Brother82 keeps posting about trust. But I *do* know that it's creepy as fuck that he calls himself Brother82 and isn't one of Grange's passwords *Brother88* or something? It's like they're part of some dark little club. And now I'm thinking of all those other men, the email group where I found the videos I uploaded: are they all 'brothers' too?

But there are three other images saved in this folder and I need to know what they are. So I click on the next one.

It's a photograph – of a girl. Or a woman – maybe nineteen or twenty years old. She has long dark hair and she's naked from the waist down and there's a man posing with her – *What's he doing?* – but I can't see his face.

I open the next image.

It's the same girl, but the man has changed – this one is bald. I tap on the third one. It's a screenshot of a dating profile. But this one is entitled: *Jenna Rodriguez.*

JR.

Blood roars in my ears as I open a private browser and type in: *J-e-n-n-a- R-o-d-r-i-g-u-e-z, N-e-w- y-o-r-k.*

It takes a moment to load but then there it is.

The answer.

College student found dead on side of road.

My vision warps at the edges as I scan down through the text.

The body of a college student found at a bus stop on the side of the road in Queens last week has been identified as Jenna Rodriguez. Friends say Ms Rodriguez was last seen at a nightclub... Police are urging anyone with information to...

My heart clenches. Because there's a picture of her next to that article: dark and shiny hair, smiling face, dimples. And her eyes might be closed in the pictures from Grange's computer but there's no doubt in my mind it's the same girl.

A deep ache rolls through me; a flash of what might have happened to her that night. I swallow hard as I stare at the folder, at Jenna's face staring back at me from the screen.

Why did Grange have these hidden away between invoices and PDFs?

And why are those screenshots of Brother82's comments from the forum in there too?

Then I get hit by a paparazzi flash of realisation: *Was Brother82 one of the men in the pictures with Jenna?*

Is that why he was venting about trust? Did he know Grange had these? Was he worried about what he'd do with them? Was Grange keeping them as a safeguard to make sure he wasn't harmed or blamed for this if shit went down? Did he tell them that?

A siren flares up outside, the radiator clanks.

Wait... that figure in the grainy doorbell footage. The one who was there the night I was there. Was that Brother82, or one of the men Ramone was talking about when he'd texted Grange: *You know how jumpy they are after JR?*

If they knew Grange had these, maybe they were already watching him.

Oh god. Did Brother82 or one of the others kill Grange because they believed *he* was the one who uploaded those videos to his social media? That he'd grown a conscience? Were they scared these images of Jenna Rodriguez – the ones with those other men in frame – would be next?

A wave of hot guilt rolls through me. *I don't want to be the reason someone was killed. Even if that someone was a shithead.*

But the air feels thick now, too thick to breathe and all I can think about is that night after I left Grange's place; walking down that dark street, the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. And the sound that came from the window...

Shit, shit, shit. Whoever was at Grange's place that night saw me. He saw me leave. Did he see me going through Grange's computer?

Does he know who I am? Is that why I've felt watched?

Do they think I've seen these pictures?

And how the hell am I going to let the police know about all this without screwing myself over in the process?

I look around the room, trying to untangle my thoughts. But all I see is my mother's face looking back at me. Then Button on the windowsill, the morning sun rising behind her.

I need to know who Brother82 is.

But how?

The upstairs neighbour's TV turns on and I can hear voices. Music now. And it's distracting.

Think, Billie. Focus.

I think of that email that came in from Ramone, the one with the woman in the change room, the one still sitting in my MrJJ007007@gmail.com inbox. But that won't tell me anything. Everyone was blind copied in.

Shit.

Except... wait. Grange must have gotten these pictures from somewhere.

What if I can find the original email and see who sent it? Maybe that will lead me to who Brother82 really is, or the other man in the pictures. Because the more I think about it, the more certain I am that one of them killed Grange. This is the answer I've been looking for.

My mouth is a desert as I stare at my reflection in the screen. Because I know what I have to do, but I don't want to do it, not from my personal laptop. But it's the only way.

So I take a deep breath and pull up Gmail.

I know from the security alert forwarded through that Grange changed his password, but people usually recycle passwords and there are two others he used a lot.

I reach into the inner pocket of my bag, past my cards, and pull out the piece of paper I wrote all his passwords and codes on. I scan them carefully; I can't afford a typo. And there it is. I was right. His password for Facebook and Instagram is: *Brother88#*. I'm guessing that's the one he used here too.

So slowly, carefully, I type it in.

And then I click: *Next*.

I hold my breath and the screen flashes and now there's a little red box around the password field and small print that reads: *Wrong Password*.

Shit.

I scan down to the other password he uses a lot: *fuckingpassword717*. If it's not that, I'm screwed. I take a deep breath and slowly type it in, click *Next*, and watch as the screen loads and *oh my god, is it working?* My blood turns electric as a new screen appears.

2-factor verification

I let out a big breath then glance back down at the paper, at the codes, and carefully enter in the second number: *5-4-4-4-0-0-1-2*

Adrenaline swirls through my veins. I can barely look. What if he changed the codes? Can you change them? And then...

I'm in.

But it's not great form logging into a dead guy's email – who knows who might be watching this account – so I need to work quickly. I tap on the search field and type in *Sluts* and wait for the list of emails to appear... but nothing comes up.

Every single email I saw has been deleted.

A chill washes over me. I go to *Sent*.

And type in: *Ramone James*.

Even if recipients are blind copied in, their email addresses will be visible to – and searchable by – the sender. Maybe I can find the full list of recipients that way.

But again: nothing.

Shit.

Frantically I tap through to his *Deleted* folder and search again, but there's nothing in there either.

My vision blurs. What's going on?

I construct a mental timeline. Did Grange panic when I uploaded those videos last Thursday, knowing that was just the tip of the iceberg? Did he delete all the evidence from his emails just in case? He must have. Because even the last one from Ramone is gone, the one telling him to 'take that shit down'.

Shit.

I've shown one truth to the world but helped them hide another.

And now I have nothing.

Because if I'm right and Brother82 or one of the others did this, they probably deleted the folder with Jenna's pictures from Grange's hard drive to cover their tracks – if Grange hadn't already deleted it when he was panic-deleting everything else. I have no idea who the men in those pictures are, Grange isn't around to identify them and I can't show them to the police without having to explain how

I got them. And even if the police read Grange's emails, they won't find what I found. Any of it. It's all gone. Deleted. Pouf.

So there goes my alternate suspect.

And I'm back to numero uno.

'Meow?' comes Button's little voice as she jumps down from the windowsill and runs over to me. She hops onto the beds and comes up to sit beside me. But all I can think as I stroke her is: *What the hell did I walk into?*

Then: *Crap, that forwarder. I need to remove that forwarder.* So I click through to his settings and go to delete it but *FUCK* – it's already gone. He found it. Is that why he changed his password?

Or, hang on – what if the police found it?

Icicles form in my veins. Frantically, I delete the new sign-in using a backup code email from all folders, log out of his account, clear my browser history, pull out the flash drive and drop it into my laptop case. Then I reach beside my bed for my cigarettes and lighter and go to the window, pushing it up. The air is cold on my cheeks as I flick the lighter, shading the flame from the breeze as horns beep and the world wakes up outside. But my hands are shaking and as I take a deep drag, all I can do is tell myself things like: *It's okay, you can do this because now you know what's going on. All you need to do is find Ramone James...*

Because the evidence might be gone from Grange's email, from his laptop, but maybe there's still something on *Ramone's* computer. Some evidence as to who Brother82 is...

Am I grasping at straws? Yes, I am. I know that. But what's the alternative? Call Butler right now and show him what I have and hope he just blanks the fact that it was *me* watching Grange's security cameras, *me* having his emails forwarded, *me* with a copy of his hard drive, but *I promise I didn't kill him, the guy ringing his doorbell did, it was because of these pictures and screenshots that yes, I stole, and no, I can't prove where I got them or who's in them.* It's too big a risk and last time I did everything by the book it all went to hell. So I need to do this my way; I need to fix it before it's unfixable. And there's only one person I can think of who still has access to everything that might help me find Ramone James.

And so I balance my cigarette on the windowsill and quickly text Heather: *Can we catch up? It's urgent. x*

MONDAY

10.02 AM

Things I know about Ramone James after spending the whole of Sunday googling him:

- 1) He's a property developer.
- 2) He has no social media accounts.
- 3) Nothing else. Zilch.

So no, I have no idea how I'm going to pull this off.

Right now, I'm staring at a computer screen at work, a sharp pain above my left eye and the outline of my haggard reflection looking back at me as Carla files her nails with a *shhh-shhh-shhh* behind me. I'm sitting in the main, open-plan office space now – I finished the filing, which sounds good but isn't, because now I'm on data entry and Carla can see everything I do. So I can't scroll through news sites incessantly anymore. Can't see if they've found anything else.

My phone lights up from the desk beside me and my eyes jump to it.

Is this it? The moment the police call?

But the screen reads: *Heather is calling...*

Please do not be cancelling tonight. I need you.

As I reach for my phone and press the green button and say 'hello', I see Carla's expression change and I know I'm supposed to have sent it to voicemail. I mouth 'sorry' to her, and then head past reception.

'Just a sec,' I say, my voice low, as I pull open the door and head into the hallway, but Heather is already talking. Bubbling out information like it's burning her insides.

'Oh my fucking god, Billie, he's dead,' Heather says. Her voice is a low, clipped whisper.

‘Who?’ I ask, like I didn’t see his dead body there on the kitchen floor. Like the police haven’t already sat on my sofa with their notebooks and pens poised.

‘That doctor guy. Grange. The police came here and everything.’

Crap.

‘What? Why? What happened?’ I ask, my throat drying up. Because if they’re there talking to Hendy, they’ll find out I was fired over Grange’s case. *Before* I went on a date with him. And yes, I knew this would happen eventually, but I’m not ready yet. I need more time.

‘I don’t know, nobody knows. But they were here talking to Hendy for a really long time. They only just left,’ Heather whispers back. I imagine her there in our old office, looking out the open door, watching everybody gossiping.

‘Wow,’ I say, staring blankly at the whitewashed wall.

‘No, but babe, there’s more.’

Oh good.

‘This is total top secret but I called my brother when they arrived and he called a friend at the 19th to ask about it.’ Her voice gets even softer. ‘They’re pretty sure a woman did it.’

‘What?’ The floor spins beneath me: this is wrong-wrong-wrong.

‘I know. They found a woman’s shoe there.’

A flash of Martinez looking at my feet...

‘Like she must have lost it while she was running away,’ Heather continues. ‘I bet it was that Jane Delaney woman. Or one of the others. It makes sense right? After those videos went up?’

My heart bangs like a kick drum and everything spins around me.

Because there was a shoe left there.

And my Visa card was found at the scene.

And I was so angry the night we lost the case.

And I knew his address. I’d looked it up so many times.

And that hole in the bottom of my stocking; how dirty my foot was the next morning. I thought that was from the bar, but what if it wasn’t?

This is it. This is the bad thing I was thinking about on that Friday morning when I woke up in Josh’s bed. The almost-memory from the night before that I couldn’t quite reach.

Did I go there that night? While Heather was busy falling in love? *Oh my god... I must have.* What if someone saw me? I might be on a neighbour's CCTV or something. *Fuck.*

After all these years of getting away with things I *have* done, I'm going to go down for a crime I didn't even commit. And it's a big one.

'Not that I blame her,' Heather continues. 'Like I've been soooo at the end of my rope this week – people can be real dicks. I actually feel bad for her. I wish she'd been more careful. Like, they found a cigarette stub at the scene. Do you think she *wanted* to get caught?'

The ceiling lowers a few inches and my vision blurs.

'A cigarette stub?'

OH GOOD.

Because I was smoking on Thursday night. I could smell it in my hair. Am I totally self-destructive?

'Are we still on for tonight?' I ask, struggling to make my voice sound normal.

'Definitely,' she says. 'The show starts at seven thirty – so see you at seven-fifteen?'

'Perfect. I have to get back to work.'

And then we hang up and I head back to my computer, sit down and start entering in client information.

'Are you okay?' Carla asks from beside me.

'Mmm-hmmm,' I say, and it comes out high-pitched.

But as I stare at my computer screen I'm thinking: *I was there. That's my shoe. That's my cigarette butt.* They don't know it's from three days prior to his death. If I don't do something extreme – and soon – then I'm totally fucked.

7.20 PM

I always thought that if I ever got caught for doing what I do, there would be some glory in it. That people would understand why. They might even applaud it. But this? Stabbing an Upper East Side surgeon in his home? I can't go down for this. That's not who I am – I'm a lot of things, but I'm not *The Bad Guy*.

I come out of the subway and walk down West 3rd Street, past the dark green news stand with the latest cover of *People* magazine and electronics in the window and little packets of snacks on revolving stands. I'm not far from Minetta Street where it's rumoured Bob Dylan penned *Blowin' in the Wind*; and from The Bitter End, where my mother first performed.

My phone buzzes in my coat pocket and I reach for it. The screen reads: *Hot-Josh is calling...* but I can't talk to him right now. Not like this, with my freedom on the line and my sanity so wrung out it might snap. So I drop my phone back into my pocket and let it ring out as I make my way past two tourists staring down at a map on a phone, past the bright windows of the 7-Eleven, and across the street. There's a small chalk board on the pavement with a list of the acts on tonight.

The bouncer smiles at me as I move past him, go inside and scan for Heather. It's dark in here with yellow exposed bulbs hanging from the ceiling and a dark wood bar stocked with blue and green bottles, and lots of people talking over the music – it's Kikagaku Moyo's *Dripping Sun*. I move through the crowd towards the stage. Arranged in front of it are sofas and tables and chairs and even though I'm scanning I can't see Heather anywhere. I reach for my phone to check the time – 7.20 pm – and there's a message from her hanging in the middle of the screen.

Heather: *In the corner.*

I look up and scan the edges of the room. There is she is, sitting on a dark patterned sofa, hunched over her phone, typing something, re-reading it, then I'm

guessing pressing *send*. Because then she puts the phone on the table in front of her and looks around the room.

She catches my eye and waves and I weave through tables, sofas and people and head over to her, dropping my phone in my bag.

‘Hey,’ I say, slipping off my coat and sitting down. There are two espresso martinis on the table, chocolate-coated coffee beans perfectly placed in the centre. Heather is wearing a dress: black, low cut, and her eyeliner is expertly winged. It seems like a lot of effort for me. A lot of effort for a comedy club.

‘Hey,’ she says, ‘I got you a drink.’ Her eyes dart back to her phone.

I reach for one of the martinis and she picks up the other one and we clink glasses.

‘What time do they start again?’ I ask.

‘In like ten minutes.’ She smiles, her eyes darting back to her phone again.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah, totally.’ She nods. But I know Heather. She’s not okay. ‘I just texted the guy,’ she blurts out. ‘I told him we were here if he wanted to come and meet us for a drink. You don’t mind, do you? It just seemed less desperate than begging him to see me alone.’

‘Yes, of course.’ I shrug, but now I have a time constraint. I can’t be asking her for favours that aren’t entirely above board once we have an audience.

And let me be clear: what I’m planning to ask is not above board. Not at all. Heather can’t just look up information on anybody she pleases – she’ll have to be careful and cover her tracks. And I already feel guilty for even asking her to do that. If I could think of any other way, I’d take it. But I can’t. So the least I can do is seem interested in her new guy.

‘How’s it going with him?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know. It *was* going well,’ she says, taking a big sip of her drink. ‘Like, Billie, that first night we just lay there and talked for hours about *everything*. Guys don’t do that unless they really feel something, do they? I mean, I was already in bed with him, it’s not like he had to fake anything. And he really seemed interested. In me, my work, my friends,’ she said. ‘Even you. I just don’t get it—’

‘Me? Why were you talking about me?’

‘He’s just a nice guy.’ She shrugs. ‘I was really worried about you. Like, we’ve lost cases before but I’ve *never* seen you like that. He wanted to know what was going on. And he felt so bad for you, Billie. Like one hundred per cent caring and normal – I could see it in his eyes. But now he’s doing that silent thing boys do,’ she says, reaching for her phone. Tapping. Scrolling. ‘Why do they do that? It’s so mean.’

Someone is on stage now, fucking around with the microphone. I need to hurry.

‘Maybe he’s just busy—’ I start, leaning in and getting ready to launch into my request, but she cuts me off.

‘Oh. My. God,’ she says, her mouth open.

‘What?’ I ask and she just stares down at the screen.

‘That absolute cunt.’ She looks up at me now, her eyes pink with tears or rage or something.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘He blocked me.’

‘Are you sure?’ I’m acutely aware of a woman on the neighbouring table who is definitely eavesdropping.

‘Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, I *knew* he was married or something. I could feel it. I mean, why else would you be so secretive? He freaked out when I tried to take his picture.’

Crap. Crap. Crap. This is not exactly going to plan.

‘Slow down,’ I say. ‘I thought he was coming to have a drink with us?’

‘No, I *asked* him to. And he blocked me,’ she says, her voice shrill like I need to keep up. She’s holding up the phone now and I catch a quick glimpse of *User cannot be found*. ‘Why does this keep happening to me, Billie? Is there something wrong with me?’

I need to calm her down. She’s never-ever-ever going to look up Ramone for me in this state.

‘No, of course not. Maybe he didn’t block you,’ I try. ‘Maybe you have the wrong username or the wi-fi in here is bad?’

‘This is because I messaged him on Instagram,’ she says, scrolling and stabbing the screen. ‘He didn’t exactly *know* I had his Instagram – but I mean, big fucking

deal.’

‘Wait, how did you know what his Instagram was then?’ I ask, innocently.

‘I saw a notification come in that first night,’ she says, her voice going up a few tones. And I guess my expression shifts just a little because then she says: ‘What? This isn’t my fault, Billie. Why does it matter how I know? Unless he’s shady and has a fucking wife or girlfriend or something. No wonder he went off to buy me roses. He probably called her to say he was working late at the same time. I’m so stupid.’ *Tap. Scroll. Tap. Scroll.*

This is getting out of control and I need her to focus because I need that address or my whole life is over.

‘One, two, one, two,’ comes a voice over the speakers and I look up. The comedian is standing to the side of the stage so I’m guessing that’s the host behind the mic. The background music turns off.

‘You know what’s so scary?’ Heather says. ‘If he’d been answering my messages this wouldn’t have even happened. I’d still think he was amazing, but blocking me? Please. Like I don’t have a stalker account? Does he think this is 2013?’

And then she takes a deep breath. Cocks her head. And holds her phone up so I can see.

‘See? There he is. Still alive and well.’ Her eyes narrow. ‘How can I figure out who his wife is? I’m going to screenshot all our messages and send them to her.’

But as I focus on the handle my vision blurs and *oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.*

I reach for her phone and stare down at the profile and the host says something but all I catch is ‘funniest guy this side of 8 pm’.

Because as my eyes flit from the images to the profile picture and then back to the handle again, all I can think is: what the actual fuck is going on?

Because the handle reads: *@NYgent91*

7.31 PM

Of everything I saw going wrong tonight – Heather saying ‘no’, the police turning up here with handcuffs, that figure from Grange’s security footage following me home – this just wasn’t in there. Not even for a split second. I search the screen for information. There’s an image of a sunset and a coffee cup and *wow it’s really hot in here.*

I stare down at Heather’s phone and all I can think is: banishings spells, burning sage, Sadie’s tears and *he did it to me too...* How is this even possible? Keiran Astor is supposed to still be in prison.

Oh my god. Was he there that night?

The night I got drunk?

‘I don’t even remember meeting him,’ I say as my eyes move from picture to picture, looking for one of him. Because I know I was trashed, but how did I not recognise him?

‘That’s because you didn’t. I was going to bring him over to you but he was all “I want to keep you for myself” and I don’t know, it seemed romantic, Billie. And also, boys always like you more than me and I didn’t want that to happen again. But god, I feel sick. He just didn’t want anyone seeing us together. That’s why.’

And then my heart slurs mid-beat because *oh shit*, there, third image across, is a picture of the snow in Central Park and I tap on it, my heart racing. There’s one hashtag: *#Free.*

My eyes latch onto the date; it was posted last December.

He’s been out for over a year.

A chill runs through me as I hand Heather back her phone and she’s looking at me, eyes wide and sad, saying something. My ears are ringing and she’s mouthing, ‘What should I do?’

‘You don’t have any pictures of him at all?’ I ask. ‘Something you could show his wife?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘I mean, I have one of his arm.’ She swipes through her photos and then hands her phone back to me.

The comedian gets up on the stage now. ‘How is everyone tonight?’ He has a low and gravelly voice and he’s standing a bit too close to the mic so the ‘t’ on ‘tonight’ is distorted. But I can’t tell you what he’s doing because my gaze is glued to Heather’s phone. To the picture.

I’ve seen this image before – on the morning after it all happened. There’s an elbow and a sliver of beard and the bartender’s bun in the mirror. But this time I zoom in close and my breath catches. Because there in the mirror stands a man. And yes, it could very easily be Keiran Astor.

Except he’s got a beard now. And he was wearing a fucking hat.

A wild panic rolls through me, because: *oh crap, he read her message.*

He knows we’re here. What if he comes?

‘Hon, I need to make a quick call,’ I say, handing her back her phone. I stand up and grab my coat, put it on quickly, then pick up my handbag with a shaky hand. And she just looks up at me, wounded, like I’m letting her down. I focus on my breath – *in, out, in, out* – and then I hear: ‘Well, hello Red.’

It’s the guy on the stage. He’s talking to me. ‘How can you hate me already?’ he asks.

Shit.

I need to get out of here. Now. So I ignore him and push through the crowd, back towards the bar. I can hear him making a joke, probably at my expense, as I scan faces and backs of heads and statures – *please don’t be here already* – and flashes from that night six years ago play on the cinema screen of my mind.

Me sitting in the car outside that bar. His black Range Rover parked outside. The heat rising inside me. ‘Aren’t you the prettiest little thing?’ His eyes searching for my nipples as he reaches out to touch my hair. ‘What can I get you to drink?’ His back is turned. My heart thudding as I pour those four shots into his glass. The glow of his tail-lights. The call to the police...

I’m at the exit now and a whoosh of icy air hits my cheeks as I step out onto the pavement and look around. My breathing is short and shallow and nothing feels real except for this: *He knows.*

I don't know how he knows, but he knows. Why else would he be looking for me? And I know he's looking for me because he didn't end up in that bar talking to Heather by mistake.

He came there for *me*.

And then I think: *Sadie*.

If he's figured out it was me, does he know my link to Sadie? Is she okay?

It's freezing out here and I'm breathing fog as I reach into my bag, fumbling for my phone as I rush across the street. I dial Sadie's number.

Please answer. Please answer. Please answer.

'Welcome to hell,' comes an air-hostess tone. 'Please dial one for baby Satan, two for the unslept mother, or three for the absent fucking father.'

'Hey,' I say, and my voice cracks.

'Hey,' she replies.

I press my fingertip against my ear as I pass the glow of the 7-Eleven and head towards the nice safe shadows near the news stand and the West 4th Street basketball courts.

'So I tried,' she says. 'To get into his phone. No luck.' She's talking about Kyle but honestly, we have bigger problems.

'Hon, is he out?'

'What? Kyle? Of course he is – I mean, it's not like he has a wife and baby.' I hear what I suspect is a microwave pinging in the background.

'No. Keiran Astor,' I say, a loud whisper into the phone as I frantically scan 6th Avenue for a cab. I can't risk the subway right now. Too many people. Too many lights. Too exposed. 'Is he out of prison?'

The line rings with silence.

'I don't think so,' she says, her words coming out slowly. 'I thought he had another year?'

'Aren't you registered with VINE? They should have notified you if he was released.'

Silence rings down the line.

'Sadie?'

'No, I'm not. Sorry, I know you said I should but honestly, I didn't want to know anything else about him. I never want to think about him again. It makes

me spiral.’

I watch people trickle in and out of buildings, cars edging their way down the one-way street – *beep-beep* – a man smoking a cigarette walking past me, the streetlights and neon signage reflecting off the wet pavements, and all of it seems to be happening in slow motion. The whole world seems to be made of liquid.

‘You sound weird. What’s going on? Why are you asking?’

‘It’s just, I think I just saw him,’ I say, wrapping my free arm around myself to stay warm.

‘Oh god no, are you sure? Are you okay?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say, looking around. I can’t shake the feeling that I’m being watched now. A flash of last Thursday night; I felt like I was being watched then too.

What if I was wrong? What if that flicker in my security door was Keiran?

But how did he even find me?

And how long has this been going on?

‘Well, where is he now?’ Sadie asks, her voice getting a bit frantic ‘Can you still see him?’

‘Wait,’ I say, ‘he’s just come outside.’ And I’m lying not because I want to – I really don’t – but because there’s no point freaking Sadie out too.

‘What’s he doing?’ she asks.

‘It’s okay,’ I say, forcing relief into my voice. ‘I was wrong. It’s not him. Thank god.’

‘Are you sure?’ she pushes.

‘Yeah,’ I say, ‘It’s definitely not. Sorry Sades, I just freaked out.’

‘I’d freak out too,’ she says.

My teeth are chattering now. It’s coming from the deepest part of me and I have a strong suspicion it’s fear, not cold. I look back to the door of the club and think of Heather sitting inside, waiting for me. But then there it is, a cab letting someone out, just outside the cinema on the corner.

‘I’ve just seen a cab,’ I say as I jog towards it, almost slipping on some ice. ‘Can I call you later?’

‘Sure,’ she says. And we hang up

'58th and 10th,' I say breathlessly through the open window. The driver nods and I get inside. It's warm in here. But as we start to move and the headlights and tail-lights and neon signs that read 'PIZZA' and 'ATM' all blur together, as we swerve between lanes, I fumble with freezing fingers to send Heather a text: *I'm so sorry, SOS, have to go. Chat soon.*

She types right back: *WHAT??? ARE YOU SERIOUS???*

I don't want to be an asshole, but I still need Ramone's address and I didn't even ask and *how is everything going so wrong all together, all at once?* Because I don't know who to be more scared of: the police, who might arrest me for something I didn't do, Ramone James or Keiran Astor. But I do know this: right now... right now, I just need to go home. So I type back *I'm so sorry* and as I lean back on the head rest, I think: *If that flicker in my security door was Keiran, then he knows where I live.*

8.33 PM

‘It’s just up ahead,’ I say, my eyes on the red digits of the meter as the cab approaches my building. ‘There, on the corner.’ I scan the streets for *him*, but all I see are people in puffer jackets and beanies, all sheltering from the cold, stepping around ice and slush, holding hands, wearing gloves. We pull to a stop and the driver reads out the total. As I reach for my card to pay, I instinctively glance up at my window. What if he’s up there?

‘Have a good night,’ the driver says and that’s my cue to leave. So I force a smile, get out of the cab and slam the door as the wind catches my hair and stings my face. He drives away and it’s just me now. I reach into my bag for my keys and rush towards my security door, but before I can tap in the code I hear, ‘Billie?’

Crap.

I swing around, my nose stinging from the cold, and my gaze snaps to a man’s silhouette standing in the doorway of the bodega. He’s wearing a black coat and a red beanie, huddling from the wind.

Derek.

He walks quickly towards me, his perfect white teeth glinting under a streetlight.

‘Hey,’ I say, shivering again. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘You’ve not been answering any of my texts, not been coming to meetings. I know the signs, Billie – you’re isolating. So here I am.’

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The notifications. They’re still off.

‘Sorry. I’ve been super busy,’ I say.

‘How’s your dad?’

‘Huh?’

A look of recognition flashes across his face a moment before I remember: that was my excuse for last week.

‘Is there anything you want to talk about?’

‘I’m okay,’ I say, nausea rolling through me as I look over his shoulder. What if Keiran is watching me right now?

‘No you’re not,’ Derek says. ‘Look at you, you’re a nervous wreck.’

True.

‘You’re grey.’

Probably also true.

‘Can’t focus. It’s textbook. When was the last time you ate?’

‘I don’t know – earlier?’

He puts his hands on my shoulders and *uh-oh*, my breath smells of espresso martini and he catches a whiff, lets out a big sigh and says: ‘I won’t lose another one of you. I just won’t. I’m coming up.’

‘Huh?’

‘Upstairs.’

Instinctively I look back up at my dark apartment window.

And I want to say ‘no’. I just want to lock the doors and windows and sit on Google and figure out what the fuck is going on so I can fix it.

But also: Keiran Astor is out there somewhere.

Maybe Derek coming upstairs with me is a good idea.

‘Sure,’ I say.

And then I punch in the code and head in and up and Derek’s feet bang on the wooden stairs behind me.

Mrs Benson must be asleep because she’s not watching and her apartment is quiet and soon we’re at my door, and I’m holding my breath, putting the key in the lock and twisting. I reach for the handle and push the door open, feel along the inside wall and flick on the light.

My stomach twists as I look around. I half expect Keiran to be there, staring back at us, grinning like a maniac. But he’s not. It’s just Button, sitting neatly on the floor looking up at me sleepily and saying ‘meow’. I exhale and pick her up as I head inside and Derek follows me in, closing the door behind us.

‘Hey, baby,’ I say as she purrs and licks my nose.

And then Derek takes off his gloves, puts them in the pockets of his coat, hangs it on a hook behind the front door and rubs his hands together as he heads over to

my bed.

I know what he's doing, if you're wondering.

He's done this before.

He's looking for booze.

I watch as he kneels down and looks under the bed, pulls out shoeboxes and opens them up. But there's no vodka hidden there or in any other special spot in this apartment; mainly because I'm not an alcoholic. I put Button down, take off my own coat, drape it over the edge of the sofa and then sit down on the chair by the window as Derek moves to the dresser.

And just beyond the sound of drawers opening and closing, Heather's voice filters back: *He kisses me and puts me in a cab and says he'll be right behind me...*

That makes so much sense now.

Keiran needed her gone so he could come back to the bar for me.

Josh's voice echoes in my mind now: *Do you have any idea what kind of creep you were talking to, who you would have gone home with if I hadn't saved you?*

I bet that was Keiran.

What would he have done to me if Josh hadn't intervened?

And wait, then what? So Josh stepped in, Keiran left and went to meet Heather after all, brought her roses so he had an excuse for taking his time, then talked with her all night.

And oh crap.

Of course he did.

Because now Heather's words from tonight are echoing in my mind. 'He really seemed interested. In me, my work, my friends... even you.'

OH FUCK FUCK FUCK.

He went there to gather information on me.

And Heather saying: 'He freaked out when I tried to take his picture.'

I bet he fucking did.

As Derek opens the main closet and rummages between my sweaters, I reach into my bag and fumble through it for my phone.

I scroll through my messages to Hot-Josh. The last one reads: *1 missed call.* So I type in: *Hey, sorry, out with a girlfriend but chat soon? Btw she mentioned some*

creepy guy from the night we met too... what did the one you saw me talking to look like? X

And then I press *Send* and look up just in time to see Derek march past me and into the kitchen. And *oh shit*, ice shoots through me as I think of what's hidden in the tea tin. I stand up and follow him through and watch as his eyes land on the empty fridge door. He lets out a sigh, looks around, reaches above the fridge, finds the laminated copy of *Just for Today* and sticks it right back where it was last time. And he does it all without even saying a word. Then he just opens the fridge and looks inside.

'What's this?' he asks, reaching for the bottle of chilled water.

'Just water,' I say as he twists open the lid and smells it.

He puts it back inside and moves on to the freezer. But there's no vodka in there either, just three ready-made meals.

'See?' I smile. I want him to leave now.

But he doesn't. He pulls open the cutlery drawers – what the hell would I be hiding in there? – then looks up at the cupboards.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He pulls open one and looks inside a cereal box. Nothing.

And then he opens the one with the distressed blue tin that reads: *teabags*.

I watch in slow motion as he pulls off the lid.

I get my excuse ready. *Oh those flash drives, they're work files. I keep them there for safety. Yes, yes, the newspaper article is part of that too...*

God, I get I'm not your favourite, but if you're up there, please just don't let him read the headline.

He reaches for the tin, opens it, looks inside, tips it onto its side slightly and NOTHING RATTLES. I watch as he puts the lid back on and then places it back in the cupboard and looks at me.

'Are you okay?' he asks, as my eyes dart to the tin in the still-open cupboard. My palms are sweating now.

'Sure,' I say, eyes on him. 'It's just been a bad week or so. I lost my job.'

'Well, you know what we do when we fall down, right?'

I nod, the walls spinning. 'We stand right back up again,' I say.

‘Exactly. But you need to come back to meetings. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I say, my voice strained. ‘I will. Promise.’

And then I walk him to the door and he pulls on his coat and gives me a big smile.

‘We can do this together,’ he says. ‘But you need to learn to reach out.’

‘Thanks so much,’ I say, ‘for everything.’

And then he walks out the door and heads down the stairs and I run back to the kitchen. I yank open the cupboard, pull out the tea tin and rip off the top. And holy fucking shit.

It’s empty.

9.12 PM

I put the lid back on the tin and look around me, my pulse thudding. *He was here.* Keiran Astor was here in this apartment, just wandering around. Looking through my underwear and my records and my kitchen cupboards. Finding my secrets and taking them with him.

Fuck.

What am I going to do?

Because the information on those drives is just information, totally benign, unless someone knows what they're looking at. Unless someone knows what I do. Because if they know that, that I'm the common thread, that each person featured on those drives met some serendipitous version of justice, then they can also figure out that every one of those targets was connected to my law firm. That's how I found them.

But how would Keiran have even known those drives existed?

Except maybe he didn't. Maybe he broke in looking for me, wanting to really hurt me, and just happened upon them. But now that he has them, what's he going to do with them? Tell the police? Tell each and every one of my targets what I've done?

And when the hell was he here?

I strain for a memory, for some sign that he was standing in this room. An open drawer. A faint smell. But there was nothing. No sign.

How did I not sense it?

Then a chill rolls through me – what if he'd hurt Button?

My eyes land on the window; the peeling paint, the innocent-looking blind. Is that how he got in? Through the window? But surely someone would have seen him?

I rush over to it and check the lock just in case, my eyes grazing the fire escape as it catches the light from inside.

A flicker of my conversation with the police: *Those fire escapes that lead up from the alley, they're pretty hidden. You ever use them?*

They thought that's how I snuck out, but that's how Keiran got in. That has to be it. How else would he have gotten past the security door? He must have broken in through a neighbour's apartment while they were at work. Or did he wait for someone to leave, for the security door to be open, and then creep in that way?

I swallow hard, imagining the scene. But my thoughts are coming too fast and my heart is beating even faster. Why didn't anyone stop him?

I pull down the blinds and then rush to my bedside table. I pull open the drawer and grab my cigarettes, lighter and shower cap. If ever there was a time for stress-smoking in bed, this is it. I cover the fire alarm, get under the covers, flick the lighter with a shaky hand, light the cigarette and take a deep drag.

Beep-beep.

My phone echoes through the room as I take another quick drag.

I reach for my phone. It's a message.

Hot-Josh: *Big guy, beard, hat. Why? You trading me in?*

I type back quickly: *Yep. Definitely trading you in ;)*

And then I press *Send* and swallow hard.

Because: *Shit.*

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I was right. Keiran did come back to the bar for me.

I was talking to Keiran-fucking-Astor and I was so drunk I didn't notice, I was fooled by a beard and a fucking hat – or I did notice but I don't remember. Either way: What the hell is wrong with me?

No wonder I had a bad feeling when I woke up that Friday morning. So I guess this answers it then: it was big-bad.

Definitely big-bad.

I take another drag and as the nicotine hits my system, my thoughts begin to untangle. A wave of calm washes over me.

Because right now, Keiran Astor knows where I live, where I work, what my routine is, what I've been doing, and I have no idea what he's planning or how to find him.

The only thing I do have going for me is that he doesn't know I'm aware. So I need to use that. I need to find him before he does whatever he's planning to do.

I reach for my computer and fire it up, taking another drag of my cigarette as the Apple logo glows white. The desktop loads, and I pull up a private browser and type in: *K-e-i-r-a-n A-s-t-o-r*.

It's been a long, long time since Sadie and I pored over his electronic presence. A flash of us sitting on my bed, the air thick with candle wax and sage as we analyse everything about him. I scroll down through the links, but there's nothing here. *Fuck*. I think back to his Instagram page, to that image of Central Park, then to that empty tea tin in my kitchen cupboard. So he's definitely here in this city somewhere, but where?

And then I think: his parents.

He's probably staying with his parents. Maybe I can find them on social media – something about their newly returned son on there. A clue.

I go to the search bar and type in: *Miles Astor, Jasmine Astor, New York* and hold my breath as my computer thinks and then the page loads and there they are: the results.

There's an Instagram page listed third from the top so I click on it. It's her. His mother. I recognise her. She looks almost the same as she did the first time Sadie and I googled her: blonde, soft lines around her eyes. I scan down through the grid of images, searching, searching, searching.

It's filled with happy snaps. Five family shots by the Christmas tree and all wearing Christmas hats around at table. Champagne at New Year's. But shit. Keiran isn't in any of them.

Not a single one.

Why? Why is he not here?

Do they not know he's out? Oh shit, have they cut him off? Oh good, another thing for him to be pissed off about.

My arms prickle with goosebumps. What am I going to do?

Because Keiran Astor knows everything – everything – about me and I know nothing about him. I have no idea what he's planning on doing with those drives. Or to me.

And that would be bad enough if it was my only problem. But it's not.

It's just a matter of time before the police are back here with their questions and their DNA swabs and a picture of my shoe and questions about my old job and why I was fired and didn't mention it. And I still don't have Ramone's address or anything to tell them. To make them look at someone else.

Now I get it. I really do. This must be why people move to Ohio.

TUESDAY

9.05 AM

The muffled sounds of the street seventeen storeys below float in as I rifle through my handbag for the second time. I must have missed something the first time so I'm slow now, methodical. I check each pocket thoroughly, holding it open to the light of a small and opaque window with cobwebs in the corners.

I'm in the cubicle right at the end of the bathrooms at work and I've been here for maybe twelve minutes. I reach past my lipstick, a vial of my perfume oil, some wrinkled receipts, a couple of pens and another lipstick, feeling along the bottom... But nothing.

I pull out a small ziplock bag yet again, emptying the tampons inside it onto my lap and feeling along the inside of the plastic – *nothing* – then put them back in, zip it up and drop it back into my handbag. Next, I reach into the inner pocket and pull out Dr Grange's business card, the SIM from my burner phone, the piece of paper with Grange's passwords and backup codes written on it, my cards (Visa, Mastercard, debit card, licence and a shitload of coffee loyalty cards), and my actual phone, placing them all on my lap. I feel around the inside pocket, searching for something foreign, squeezing the seams just in case, but there's nothing there. *Shit*. And I just don't get it: where is it? Because it has to be somewhere...

My gaze snaps to my phone screen now. I'm going to have to call Heather today to apologise and ask her my favour because my little Grange problem hasn't just gone away. But right now I'm dealing with my other problem. My more pressing problem.

A toilet flushes, a door opens and a faucet turns on. I clench my eyes shut and try to focus.

Think, Billie, think.

Where would *I* hide it?

Because as I waited for the elevator this morning, I had an awful thought: maybe the reason Keiran knows where and when to find me – which bar I'm in, where I live – is because he's been tracking me. And not just on foot.

The hand dryer outside whirs, and chatter floats in.

And how would *I* do that? How would *I* track a target? Well... with a tracker, like the one I put on Grange's car. But as I don't have a Porsche, it'd need to be one of those small ones eBay sells to track children or the elderly. The kind that uses a GPS chip, not Bluetooth.

But I can't find one in my bag or my coat pockets (already checked) and my vision is hazy from lack of sleep and I don't want to do this anymore. I want my dull little sober life back. I miss my AA meetings and reciting the serenity prayer and wondering if I have an iron deficiency. *This is why I stopped all this.* But my stomach is twisting because deep down I know it's not really my choice anymore. I'm hurtling towards rock bottom, one I can't bounce back from: it's prison or death or something else terrible I haven't thought of yet. And it's gathered too much momentum now – I can't change direction. No matter what I do Keiran will still have those files. He'll still be coming after me. And it's only a matter of time before Detectives Butler and Martinez come after me. And probably that guy with the umbrella from Grange's security footage, too.

I put everything back into my bag, take a deep breath and head out to the sink. My mother's blue eyes stare back at me from the mirror. But there are dark smudges beneath them today and my hair needs a wash so it's pulled into a low bun.

You can do this.

But can I? Really?

I take a deep breath and head back out to my desk.

Carla isn't here yet and so I sit down in peace, fire up my computer and log in.

I type in my password and then I just sit there, my hand hovering over the mouse and my mouth dry, focusing on my breath. On staying calm. But every time I blink all I can see is him. His face.

He's out there somewhere.

Looking for me.

And if he could find me at that bar and figured out where I live, then he probably knows where I am right now. He could be outside, waiting for me to finish. Nausea rolls through me.

What is he going to do?

‘Morning.’ My breath catches and I turn quickly. It’s Carla.

‘You’re jumpy this morning,’ she says as she puts her bag down.

I give a half smile and say, ‘Too much coffee,’ then turn back to my computer as she fusses around. Drawers are opened and closed. Her bag is fumbled through. Unless I want to walk out right now – which I don’t because he’ll just track me wherever I go – I need to pretend everything is normal.

So I reach for another client record, navigate to the correct screen and press down on the keys. *Tap. Tap. Tap. Return.* But as I stare at the screen I have a flash of memory from that night.

A blur of orange light... sitting at the bar... wait... male hands... my phone. Is he going through my phone? I stop mid-tap.

Oh god.

Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.

What if I was wrong?

What if those hands didn’t belong to Josh?

What if that memory wasn’t Josh trying to order me an Uber?

What if it was Keiran?

What if he put something on my phone?

9.21 AM

My throat tightens as I reach for my phone on the desk beside me.

Carla is right behind me so I focus on keeping my movements casual as I go to the search function and type in *C-y-d-i-a*, one of the ways you can detect whether someone has installed spyware on your phone. But: nothing.

So I try a couple of the others.

Again: nothing.

I run through the checklist of signs in my mind. My phone isn't hot. It's not using more battery than usual. I chew on my cheek and swipe through the apps. But there's nothing I don't recognise...

And then I see it and a shiver runs through me and the room sways a little, like it's doing a waltz.

There, on the second screen, sits a little green, grey and blue glow.

The *Find My* app.

'So,' comes Carla's voice as she turns to me. 'I have a surprise.'

And honestly, I don't want any more surprises. But I can't say that, so I look up from my phone, smile and say: 'Really?' My voice comes out high and brittle.

'Yes. I know you're looking for something more permanent,' she says. 'I spoke to one of the partners about you. He thinks we might have a position.'

'That's great,' I say, but all I can think is: *please leave me alone so I can look at that app.*

'He wants to meet with you this morning.'

Shit.

'Oh, great,' I say with a smile, turning back to my phone.

'Well, come on,' she says.

'Now?' I ask, looking back at her.

'Now,' she replies, standing up.

The room swirls around me and I say, 'Sure,' but I reach for my phone anyway because I need to know. I tap on the app and stare down at the screen and the first thing I see is a map.

And below it reads: *People.*

Then just below that are five words that have my breath catching in my throat: *Dogwalker can see your location.*

My vision liquifies: *What the actual fuck?*

'Are you coming?' asks Carla.

'Yep,' I say, reaching for my pad and pen.

But as I stand up and follow her down the hallway, all I can think is: *I don't even have a dog.*

9.32 AM

The word *Dogwalker* glows like a hologram in my field of vision as I try to keep up with Carla. Everything inside me is screaming: *Delete it. Run back to your desk! Do it now! Now!*

But that would kind of draw attention to me, so I just keep following Carla down the carpeted hallway, trying to remember how to breathe.

We pass an office with an open door and a woman talking on the phone. Carla smiles reassuringly back at me over her shoulder and I do my best impression of a smile back.

Then we're at a door and she's knocking and all I can hear is my own heart thudding.

'Come in,' floats a voice through the frosted glass door, and so we enter.

Sitting behind a big desk is a man of around fifty-five with salt and pepper hair and tortoiseshell-framed spectacles.

'This is Wilhelmina,' Carla says, introducing me with game show hostess hands, 'the temp I was telling you about.'

'Wilhelmina,' says the man, standing up. I move towards him and I'm aware of Carla saying, 'I'll leave you to it,' and closing the door behind us. I'm also aware of him saying, 'Hi, I'm blah-blah-blah', as he reaches out a hand for me to shake. My palms are clammy but I reach out and shake his hand anyway, thinking: *Focus, Billie, focus.*

'Sit,' he says, motioning to the chair, and I do.

He has my resume in front of him and I watch him glance down through it as I scan the walls behind him.

There they are, the obligatory law books, the framed certificates just like Hendy's. And only a week ago all I wanted was an interview just like this, but now it seems futile.

‘Carla says you’ve been doing good work.’ He smiles at me, and his eyes do this thing. They go all slithery and patronising. If you’ve ever been looked at that way, you’ll know what I mean.

‘It’s been great working here.’ I smile back.

‘You’ve had two jobs since you left college?’ he asks, peering at me over his spectacles.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘The first was in criminal law.’ And for one insane moment I want to add *but there was too much temptation to do this thing I do that you would not like AT ALL*, but I don’t say that, of course, I say, ‘But I wasn’t sure that was for me.’

‘Why did you leave your last job?’ He frowns.

Images of Jane Delaney then my failed witness then Grange on his kitchen floor flicker through my mind.

And I try to focus on what Blah-blah-blah is asking but I can’t. Because all I’m thinking is: *Male hands, my phone. Is he going through my phone? Dogwalker...*

Everything around me fades to silence, like I know I’m on the verge of figuring something out. It’s there, just beneath the surface, but I can’t touch it yet. Because something just doesn’t make sense.

Keiran started tracking me the night I was drunk. While I was right there and vulnerable – and he’s known where I was every moment of every day ever since. He knows where I live. How to get in.

So why hasn’t he hurt me yet?

What am I missing?

And then: *Oh shit.*

That was also the night I lost my shoe.

The shoe that ended up at Grange’s house.

What if the reason he hasn’t hurt me yet is because that’s not his plan?

What if everything is NOT going wrong simultaneously? What if it’s all connected?

What if I didn’t go to Grange’s house that Thursday night at all? What if there’s another reason my shoe and my Visa card found their way to Grange’s townhouse?

A reason like: Keiran Astor put them there.

And then *holy shit*, the pieces all fall together. He didn't come to that bar to hurt me – he came there to gather evidence he could plant.

Is Keiran trying to frame me?

But no, I'm not thinking straight – that would mean Keiran killed Grange and that's insane.

Isn't it?

But Blah-blah-blah is still looking at me, waiting for a neat and tidy answer to the question of why I left my last job while I'm thinking of those cigarette butts found at the scene and how I was smoking that night and how easy it would have been for Keiran to collect those up and drop them off at Grange's house. I heard a noise when I was in Grange's living room. What if that figure on the security footage wasn't Brother82 or one of the other men after all? What if it was Keiran? Did he track me there? Would he have done it that night – when I had zero alibi and people had seen me and Grange together – if he hadn't seen that camera?

All those times I felt watched... was that him?

But if he had what he needed to frame me, why break into my apartment?

Oh crap, is there more?

'I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well,' I say suddenly as I go to stand up. I have to clutch onto the chair because I'm dizzy, so dizzy. Am I going to be sick? I take a deep breath and stumble out of the office and down the hallway.

'That was quick,' says Carla as I grab my phone and run – *run* – towards the bathrooms. I swing open the door and there are two women standing chatting by the sinks and I run past them into a stall, bang closed the door and kneel over just in time. I vomit into the bowl. Take a deep breath. Then vomit again.

Behind me I can hear footsteps – feet scurrying towards the door, it opening and closing, as I blow my nose, sit down on the floor and tell myself *just breathe*. And as I sit dead still, looking down at my phone – which is now the enemy – it lights up with a message.

Heather: *Do you think I should contact him again?*

And all I can do is stare at the door. But then I think of last night and Derek: *Well, you know what we do when we fall down, right?*

And as I sit there, crumpled on cold tiles, I whisper the answer to myself: 'We stand right back up again'.

10.04 AM

I take a deep breath and head back to my desk and Carla eyes me warily.

‘What happened?’

I shake my head and say, ‘I’m so sorry – I had to rush out of the interview because I knew I was going to be sick. It just hit me without warning. Maybe it’s food poisoning?’

Her face contorts as she looks me up and down as though trying to assess the precise extent of my sickness. ‘Maybe you should go home.’

I nod and stand up, putting on my coat and turning off my computer. Then I reach for my bag and phone and head for the door. But as I move past reception I think: *If Dogwalker was in my Find My app then his phone number must be in my contacts.*

As I close the glass door and pause in the hallway, I scroll through my contacts to ‘D’. And there it is. *Dogwalker*. And right below it: a phone number.

This feels like a win, but I don’t know why. It’s not like he’d answer if I called – or would he?

Either way, he won’t be seeing where I am anymore.

Because as I get to the elevators and press the down button, I go to my *Find My* app and remove him.

Ping.

The doors slide open. Three other women and a man shuffle aside so I can get in. And as we head down past 12, 11, 10 I think *what if he’s outside?*

When the doors slide open on the ground floor I’m the last one to leave the elevator. My heart is beating wildly but I can’t stay in here forever. So I stride into the foyer and look around, straining to see beyond the glass doors. It’s not busy at this time of the morning but there are still people arriving for appointments, leaving to run errands. I’m at the security desk now, and the big glass revolving doors are ahead of me. And I could just walk through them.

Risk it.

Except now I'm thinking of Carla's words on my first day: *Wait, are you a smoker? Make sure you head to the back of the building...*

And so I weave around the security desk to the back of the foyer and a single glass door that leads outside. As I move towards it, I pull out my phone and order an Uber.

Two minutes.

I reach for the door and as it opens I'm hit by a gust of cold air and the smell of cigarette smoke and laughter. There are three people out there, all huddled together and smoking. And just behind them, I can see my escape route.

It's a single gate onto the street.

I double check the app and the pin is showing just to the left, on the main road.

A notification comes in: *Jackson is approaching...*

I rush through the gate, turn left, breathe in a swirl of petrol and some sort of fine dust and look around, scanning the licence plates. There he is. I reach out my hand and he sees me and does a U-turn and pulls up at the kerb.

I get inside and, as we drive away, I finally exhale.

11.01 AM

I peek past the blind on my front window and scan the street through the black bars of the fire escape: there's an old woman pulling a trolley and pedestrians on phones rushing past her. But I can't see *him* out there. He wasn't there when I got out of the Uber and rushed upstairs seven minutes ago either.

My laptop is charging by the bed and Button follows me like it's a game as I rush over to it, putting it in its case and then rolling up the charger.

What else will I need?

I don't know where I'm going or how long I'll be gone for – all I know is that if I'm right and Keiran Astor is trying to frame me for Grange's murder, then he will have done a good job and the police will be back – and soon. I unzip my work dress, throw it in the clothes hamper and pull on some jeans, a white T-shirt and a navy hoodie, and then I look around.

Essentials, what are the essentials?

Button. Toothbrush. Underwear.

I open the closet and reach for my black overnight bag and tug on the zip.

There are things I *expect* to see when I pull it open, things I keep in there for moments of panic just like this: my passport, a bit of money, a prepaid credit card, a change of clothes in a plastic bag, a pair of running shoes and a plain black cap. But there are other things I do not expect to see.

Things like a sharp, well delineated sparkle. Like an edge of some sort, glimmering back at me.

Crouching, I pull the bag open a little more so I can see.

But: *no*.

NO! NO! NO!

There, staring back at me, is a large kitchen knife.

I fall back to the floor, the air suddenly too thick to breathe. Because the blade is covered in something dark and mottled – *oh my god, is that dried blood?* I cover

my hands with my sweater and pull it out to inspect it closer.

It is.

It fucking is.

My eyes shift from the knife to the window – *that's* why Keiran broke in. He wasn't looking for more things he could use to frame me. He was here to plant the murder weapon.

He must have found those drives and the article on Aurora by mistake, while he was searching for the perfect hiding spot. Taken them with him in case he could use them – and he *can* use them.

I mean, if the police saw everything on those drives and knew what I'd done before, if they added that to the motive Hendy is sure to have given them, and the physical evidence now in my apartment and at the crime scene, if they took my fingerprints and found that I'd been at Aurora Hughes' home the night she was killed – fuck me, even I think I look guilty.

I was right. He *is* trying to frame me.

And holy shit, he's going to pull it off.

Has he tipped off the police?

I imagine the 'concerned' call coming in from one of Grange's supposed neighbours: 'There was a redhead there that night...'

I run into the bathroom and grab my toothbrush and toiletry bag and put them in the overnight bag with my laptop and charger. Then I run to the kitchen for some food for Button, and then my eyes snap to the box I use for recycling. I think of the guy on the subway with his cat in a box. I empty it out onto the floor and run back to my bedroom, put the food inside and call to Button. 'Come on baby,' I say, but my voice sounds shrill and worried, and if she could frown I'm sure she would. She stands dead still, watching me.

I head over to her, pick her up – *meow* – and put her inside and, bless her, she doesn't struggle. She just lies down; she trusts me. Then I close half the top down and reach for my winter coat. I put it on, my heart hammering like I know something bad is coming, something worse than I could ever imagine. I put my keys in my pocket, my handbag in the black overnight bag, and then sling it over my shoulder. I head to the window and peek out one last time, just to make sure he's not out there. Waiting. But as I scan the street my breath catches.

Because: a police car. It's just pulled up.

I pick up Button and head for the door. But then I remember something. What if I don't come back? I rush through to the bedroom again and grab my mother's locket.

I throw a final glance at her record collection, close the door with a click, then race down the first flight of stairs. I need to hide, but where?

I'm almost at the third floor when I hear the buzzer sound in my apartment behind me.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

But I keep moving, down to the second floor as the buzzer goes again.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I look down the hallway: there's a storage room at the end. I've never been in there but I know it exists. I run towards it and pull at the door handle but it doesn't move. It's locked and fucking hell I don't have time to start fiddling around trying to open it with a credit card. I'm out of breath and I don't know where to turn. I can hear them buzzing on other people's doors now.

My vision blurs and I look around desperately but there's no way out. And all I can hear is the buzzing, and my heartbeat and the sound of my life imploding...

And then comes another noise. A familiar noise.

The creaking of a door.

Adrenaline is swirling through me now. I swivel to look.

And there she is. Mrs Benson. Watching me through a crack in her door.

Then *bzzzzz*.

The downstairs buzzer goes again and this time someone lets them in. Heavy footsteps are coming up the stairs. And *this is it. This is how it ends for me. No glory. No victory. No justice.*

But then I look to Mrs Benson and her door is wide open and she's motioning to me to come in. Quickly. I run towards her and go inside. And just before the police get to us, she closes the door behind me and Button.

Click.

11.21 AM

Mrs Benson's apartment is bigger than mine and we're standing in the living room/kitchen area right now. There's a burgundy fabric sofa with a pink and grey knitted blanket over it, a flatscreen TV with a re-run of *Friends* playing on mute, and a wooden cabinet full of ballerina figurines. The kitchen is straight in front of me, with various types of cookware hanging on the wall, and the air smells like some sort of flower. Lavender.

We both turn to look at the door as the sound of footsteps banging up the staircase gets louder and louder.

My heart thrashes around in my ribcage as she whispers, 'This way', and takes me down a short passageway to a small bathroom with white towels embroidered with small mauve flowers, and clean mirrors. I put Button's box on the floor and then Mrs Benson leaves me there.

That's when the banging on her front door starts.

It echoes through the apartment and I can feel it reverberating in my chest because I know what it means. I stand dead still, barely breathing, trying to hear what's going on. What if they tell her what they suspect me of? Will she just hand me over?

I hear footsteps, then the front door creaks open.

'Hello?' she says.

I imagine her there, peeking through the crack like she always does, and I strain to hear the conversation.

There's a low-pitched mumble, probably Detective Butler: 'We're looking for your neighbour, Ms Spencer-Tate. Red hair? Fourth floor? Have you seen her today?'

Then Mrs Benson. 'No – she'll be at work.'

Button meows from her kitty box.

I lean down and stroke her and she purrs and pushes her head up against my hand.

Another low murmur from outside but I can't catch what they're saying. My heart is a hummingbird: are they going to talk to *all* my neighbours? How the hell will I get out of here if everyone knows I'm wanted by the police? But still, it's before noon on a Wednesday, and this is New York City so almost everyone is at work – everyone except me and Mrs Benson.

My stomach clenches.

The laundry.

What if they look in the laundry? What if they find the burner phone?

What if Mrs Benson lets them in and they look through my bag and find the knife?

I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on my breath and now I can hear footsteps. My hands are shaking when the door opens, but when my eyes flick open, it's just Mrs Benson standing there, small and stooped, holding a little white business card. My eyes flit to it.

That'll belong to Detective Butler. I have one just like it.

'They're gone,' she says, and I realise we've never had a conversation before. 'But they'll be back. I can tell. Is there somewhere you can go?'

I nod. Though the truth is I have no idea where to go.

Aside from the cost, hotels in this city require ID on check-in so I can't do that. Heather lives with two roommates in a two-bed with no living room and also, I can't exactly explain the situation to her. And if, or should I say 'when', Keiran realises he no longer has my location showing in the *Find My* app, he may well get back in touch with her to find out where I am. I can't go to Sadie either – I can't put her at risk like that. Can't lead him to her and little Isobel. *Oh shit, what if he already knows where to find her?*

And what if the police call my dad?

A fresh wave of doom washes over me; I'll never hear the end of *that*.

'What about that nice boy. The one who stayed over?'

Josh.

And I mean, she's not wrong. He *is* the only option right now.

She heads back to the other room and I reach for my phone and scroll through to Hot-Josh and look down at his last message: *Big guy, beard, hat. Why? You trading me in?*

The sound of *Friends* starts to play from the other room as I tap on his number and press *Call*.

It rings once, twice.

‘Billie?’ My insides flip. But it sounds like he’s smiling. And something warm moves through me.

‘Hey,’ I say, ‘how are you?’ It comes out a bit awkward, too formal.

‘I’m okay.’ He pauses and I can hear the frown, the confusion at why I’m being weird. ‘How are you?’

‘My apartment has flooded.’ The lie sounds even worse with the echo from the bathroom tiles. ‘I don’t have anywhere to go.’

‘Oh,’ he says, and my cheeks flush – I don’t like asking for help. ‘Wow, shit’s really not going right for you these days. But of course, come over.’

‘It’ll only be for like one night.’

‘It’s fine. Do you remember where it is?’

‘It’s branded on my psyche.’ I smile into the phone.

‘As it should be,’ he jokes back. ‘What time do you think you’ll be here?’

I’ll need to give it an hour before I leave, just to make sure the police are well and truly gone – except, what if they don’t go, what if they set up shop outside the building?

‘In a couple of hours?’ I say.

‘Great. See you then.’

And then we hang up and Mrs Benson must have been listening because she comes straight back into the bathroom.

‘You’re a good girl. I can tell,’ she says. And then she picks up Button’s box and we head through to the living room and I stare at the door and strain to hear whether there are still police moving up and down the stairs.

‘Some hot chocolate?’ she asks as Chandler Bing makes a joke and everyone laughs.

‘Sure, that would be great,’ I say, thinking *What if she knew who I really was? What if she knew what was in my bag?*

She reaches for a saucepan, opens the fridge for the milk and pours some in. Then she grabs a tin of hot chocolate and adds in several heaped teaspoons. ‘Did you get your heating fixed?’ she asks casually over her shoulder as she stirs, as if the police bursting into the building is just a thing that happens sometimes.

‘Sorry, what?’ I ask, then I remember that night, just after I’d hidden my burner phone, I was coming up the stairs and she said something about it being too cold for no heating. ‘No, mine was fine. Is yours okay now?’

She frowns. ‘Mine was never broken either. But that man came to fix yours?’

A shiver runs through me.

‘Which man?’

‘The one with the beard and overalls,’ she says, frowning. She looks worried now, like he was a security risk.

So I say: ‘Oh right, yes. I forgot.’

Keiran.

That’s how he got in and out of the building.

Not through the window but through the front door. Past the letterbox with my name and apartment number on it.

That’s why nobody stopped him. It was broad daylight. And he looked like he was meant to be here. Someone probably thought they were helping me out.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Mrs Benson is reaching for a couple of mugs and pouring hot chocolate into them, and the world is spinning double time. My phone flashes at me from the countertop and my gaze snaps to the screen; it’s ringing with a number I don’t recognise. I bet that’s the police. And so I don’t answer. I just watch it ring out.

But now my stomach is clenching a little more than before. What if the police trace my cell phone? Then it won’t matter where I hide, they’ll be able to find me. And my real phone is an iPhone, a newer model, so it’s not like I can just pull out the battery and make it untraceable. Besides, even *attempting* that would make me look guilty. Like I had something to hide.

No, if they go to the trouble of tracking my phone, they need to find it. They just can’t find me with it.

So I reach into my bag and pull out a pen, scroll through to my phone for *Dogwalker* and in clear red numerals I write out the number on my palm. Because

I can't take my phone with me.

12.03 PM

I edge open Mrs Benson's door, my pulse beating hard as I step out into the hallway and creep up the stairs. I twist my key in the lock and push open my door. Rushing over to my bed, I can see Butler's card on the bedside table and I try not to look at it as I plug my phone in to charge and run back downstairs, past Mrs Benson's apartment and down the hallway to the laundry.

There's a dryer going when I get there – a low, warm rumble – so someone will be coming back soon. I need to hurry.

I rush over to the dryer by the far wall and reach beside it, feeling for my burner phone. For the duct tape. For that ziplock bag it was in. The wall is rough and cold beneath my fingertips. *Where the hell is it?* What if they found it? But then: relief.

I clasp onto it and rip it from its spot on the wall, put it in my coat pocket and, checking the hall is totally empty, head back upstairs to Mrs Benson's place.

She's cradling Button in her arms when I get there, and Button is purring.

She looks up at me as I close the door.

'You can leave her here, if you need to,' she says. 'I wouldn't mind.'

I don't want to leave Button but also I don't know if Josh is allowed pets in his apartment and she'll be safe here. And I'll be back. And even if I'm not, if the worst thing happens, Sadie can come and get her.

'That would be great, thanks,' I say.

And then I glance over to her window.

There is only one way out of our apartment block, aside from the fire escapes outside, and that's out the front door. Given that Butler would have figured out by now that I wasn't lying – I really *don't* have access to the fire escapes – he won't be watching them. If a police car is positioned outside, it'll be at the front entrance. Waiting. However, Mrs Benson's apartment, unlike mine, *does* have access to the alleyway.

I move over to the window and peer down to the cement and dumpster outside. There's nobody down there – should I risk it?

Do I really have a choice? It's that or stay here for the rest of time and wait for them to return. Because they *will* be back. Probably with a warrant.

I have to try.

'It's high,' comes Mrs Benson's voice from behind me as she looks out too.

I nod, zip open my bag, pull out the black cap and put it on, tucking my hair into my coat.

I push open the window and put my bag outside first, then step out onto the icy fire escape. The bars are freezing cold beneath my hands but I don't want to put my gloves on yet – I need my fingers free and agile to work my way down from here safely. My stomach flips as I look down. *It's only the second floor*, I tell myself, but that feels pretty damned high right now. I take a deep breath, grab onto the rails and, with my bag slung over my shoulder, I make my way carefully down to the next level.

Only one to go.

I can do this.

I try to release the fire escape ladder to get me the rest of the way down, but it sticks. And shit, I have no choice. I hang from the bottom rung and then I just let go.

Crunch.

My ankles crack as I hit the ground and my hands are grazed by gravel but *I made it*. And I don't know whether I'm more terrified of seeing the police or Keiran's pale blond head right now, but my pulse is wild as I look left and right. But there's nobody there. Nobody watching. At least, nobody I can see. Just a pedestrian talking on the phone as he moves past the alleyway and the sonic flare and lights of an ambulance speeding past.

Some of my hair has come loose so I tuck it back into my coat and readjust my cap then rush to the corner and peek around. No police cars.

But there *is* a cab. I can see it waiting at the lights, and its tangerine vacancy light is on.

I raise my hand to call it over and the driver sees and swerves up to the kerb.

'Where to?' he asks through the open window.

'Coney Island,' I say as I get in and slam the door.

'Gentle,' he says.

'Sorry.'

As we drive away and I reach for my gloves, I scan the street for anyone who might have seen me. Then the driver flicks the radio on and a song begins to play, it's *O-o-h Child*.

And I love that song, I really do, and I want to believe the lyrics, but right now, I'm not sure that I can...

1.24 PM

I went a whole year with nothing really happening in my life. Days turned to weeks turned to months and it all just plodded along. And now, in twelve short days, my life has turned to rubble. I mean, the last time I was standing here, in this exact spot, staring at my own blurry reflection – green dress, red hair – was the night after it all happened.

All I was worried about back then was my job, my future in law and Jane Delaney. And now there's Keiran and the bloodied knife in my bag and the police coming after me and the reflection staring back at me from Josh's elevator doors feels like a total stranger.

How did this happen so fast?

I watch the little numbers glow as I move upwards.

Ping.

The doors slide open and my pulse speeds up. I turn right and head towards the window that looks out on Coney Island's skyline. The same one I looked out that first morning. But there's no fog today – today it's as clear as hell at sunrise.

And then I'm here, in front of a white door with a gold 18 hanging on it, knocking.

There are footsteps on the other side. I swallow hard and plaster on a smile, and then the door swings open and there he is. Josh. His golden-brown hair is flopping around like it's freshly washed and his eyes sparkle like mine used to sparkle once upon a time and I want that back.

His gaze meets mine and something moves between us and I have this impulse to just tell him everything, right here, right now, but I can't, so: *flooded apartment, flooded apartment, flooded apartment.*

'Hey,' I say.

'Hey.' He smiles, reaching for my black bag and taking it from me. I almost don't want to let go of the handles – there's a knife in there – but I do. And I

brush past him. The air around him smells familiar now, like boy shampoo and citrus, and he closes the door after me.

His eyes move to my hands. 'Wait, where's your cat?'

'I left her with a neighbour,' I say, as he takes my bag over to the kitchen counter. 'I didn't know if you were allowed pets.'

'I'm not, but we'd have worked it out,' he says, moving to the blender. I watch as he pours half the mauve contents into a glass. 'Would you like some?' It feels weird seeing him in the daytime.

'I'm okay, thanks,' I say.

He pulls open the fridge to put the rest inside like he doesn't feel weird at all. There are photographs and pieces of paper on the fridge door, all held in place with magnets. Echoes from a normal, law-abiding life. And I feel displaced here amid the white walls and brushed steel appliances that haven't changed at all since that Friday morning I left before sunrise. Because I *have* changed. Back then I was all by the book and now I'm hiding my hands so he doesn't see the red numerals on my palm; so he doesn't ask what they are. Because I'm not sure how many more lies I have in me.

I watch as he downs the rest of whatever was in the blender like he's starving, then he puts his glass in the sink and comes over to me.

'Let me take your coat,' he says, helping me out of it and then hanging it in the closet by the front door.

'Help yourself to anything you want in here,' he says, pointing to the kitchen, then he picks my bag up again and we head towards the bedroom. 'Bathroom is in there,' he says as we pass, pointing to a door in the short passageway.

'There's an ensuite through there too,' he says, pointing to the other side of the bedroom as he puts down my bag. 'And there's a gym downstairs and a pool if that's your thing?'

'Thanks,' I say.

He comes over to me and puts his hands on my waist. 'It's good to have you here.'

Something blooms just below my ribs and my cheeks glow.

He reaches for the heart locket around my neck: 'Ah, you brought my favourite necklace back?' He grins and our eyes meet again as he tugs on my

necklace just a little.

But then: *briiing, briiing, briiing*. His phone starts to ring from his pocket. He reaches for it, frowns down at the screen like *oh shit* and then answers it.

‘Benji?’ he asks, stepping away from me. ‘Wait, slow down,’ he says. ‘What? Where? Where are you?’

I watch as he rushes over to the bedside table, grabs a pen and starts writing something down on a slip of paper.

‘Okay, does your mom know?’ He pauses, listening. ‘You’re going to need to tell her,’ he says, stern. ‘I’ll be right there.’

Then he hangs up and looks over at me. ‘One of the kids I coach has been arrested. Ummm, I shouldn’t be too long,’ he says, glancing over at the TV and his comic collection like maybe I’ll steal them while he’s gone. ‘Shit, I hope I won’t be long. How long do these things take?’

‘I’ll be fine. I have job hunting to do anyway,’ I say as I look at the phone number scrawled on my hand.

But the truth is my insides are twisting now. What if Keiran saw me come here? What if he comes inside?

Am I safe?

‘Well,’ Josh says, coming over and kissing me on the top of the head. ‘Make yourself at home.’

And then he heads out into the living area. I hear him rushing around, the jangle of his keys, the closet opening and closing as he puts on his coat, and then the front door closes and he’s gone.

And I’m alone.

And so I do the only thing I can do. I sit down on the bed and reach for my burner phone. I take it out of its plastic bag and slide off the back. The ocean hisses from outside as I feel around in the inner pocket of my bag for the SIM card and pull it into view. Then I slip it into the SIM tray, put the battery back in, and plug the phone into its charger.

1.36 PM

I look down at the numeric scrawl on the palm of my hand. If I call from my burner phone, a number he doesn't recognise, maybe he'll pick up. But if he picks up, what then?

Do I try to reason with him? Lure him out? Pretend I can prove what he's done? Ask to meet?

My stomach growls with hunger as I reach for my burner phone and turn it on. Plugged in, it has just enough charge to function. And hey, no time like the present.

So, with shaky fingers, I copy Dogwalker's number from my palm into the keypad.

And then I hold my breath and, *holy shit*, it rings.

It really rings.

'I'm sorry, the person you are trying to reach has a voicemail box that has not been set up yet, please try your call again later.'

Fuck.

I hang up.

But what was I expecting? I chew on my cheek as I look around the room.

Think, Billie, think.

Because everyone is findable. Even me, it seems.

So what have I missed?

But my stomach growls again and I'm kind of dizzy. *I need to eat.*

I head through to Josh's kitchen and pull open the fridge, scanning the shelves: protein shakes, bacon, a few bags of spinach, orange juice, some ready-made meals and some red apples. I grab an apple and take a bite as I close the fridge. There are photographs on the fridge door of Josh smiling with different people and I scan the faces looking for someone who might be a parent, a snapshot into a potential future, wondering *Would they like me if I met them?* But I can't see anyone with

grey hair and now I'm staring straight at a gas bill, held in place with two little magnets. One of the magnets is from a dentist – a big cartoon smile – and then my knees buckle.

WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?

There.

Top right of the gas bill.

Adrenaline zings through my veins.

Because the second magnet is in the shape of a paw.

A purple paw.

My throat tightens as I scan the text again, thinking *I must be wrong*. But I'm not. It reads: *59th Street Veterinary Clinic*.

The ocean keeps whooshing in from outside and I'm searching for reasonable explanations: Josh has a magnet from Button's vet on his fridge because... but there are no reasonable explanations.

And my brain is all: !!!!!!!

Because he doesn't even have a pet.

And he lives all the way out in Coney Island.

What the fuck?

I look around me at the pale paint and elegant fixtures, and everything looks sinister now. And I don't know what to do so I put down the apple and start pulling open drawers, looking for – I don't know, something, anything.

But all I find are scissors and cutlery and matches so I open the next drawer. It's all tinfoil and baking paper and plastic wrap and tea towels. I pull open the third drawer now, and am met with the metallic shimmer of pots and pans and mismatched lids. *Shit*. So I turn back to the fridge and scan it again but there's nothing else there, nothing aside from that purple paw. I run through to his bedroom and start pulling open drawers there, feeling beneath T-shirts and jeans and socks.

I check beneath his underwear but there's nothing there so I slam the drawer shut and frantically look around. There's a charging cable sitting on the floor by the bed, plugged into a wall socket. Where is his laptop?

Maybe that will tell me what I need to know.

I pull open his cupboard and look around. It's all sports shoes and jackets on hangers. I reach up to the sweaters on the upper shelving and feel around beneath them. And finally, I feel something. It's small and rectangular and I pull it into the light.

His passport.

I stare down at it and slowly open it to the photo page. Part of me expects it to read Vladimir or Hayden or Ricco or some other entirely different name. But it doesn't. It reads: *Joshua Wilson*.

My skin cools.

Am I overreacting?

It's just a magnet on a fridge. What if somebody gave it to him? Coincidences happen – except, there is this twisting in my gut...

I take a step towards the kitchen again. Maybe I missed something in there. I get a flash of his eyes – soft and kind – just before he left; his hands on my waist. The heat of his chest. His phone ringing.

No, I'm being crazy. Josh is good. He's on my side.

I'm almost at the kitchen now, remembering his words as he left: *One of the kids I coach has been arrested. Ummm, I shouldn't be too long*. And then I remember something else.

His eyes.

They'd darted over to the TV and the comic collection...

1.48 PM

The TV is mounted on one of those movable metal fixtures that allow easy access to the back so I pull it away from the wall and check behind it. But there's nothing there, nothing but wires and empty outputs.

But the way he looked in this direction, it was like he was weighing something up.

I push the TV back flush against the wall and look down behind the shelving that the comics are on: tumbleweeds of dust and a rogue yellow cable.

I kneel down by the comics and start to leaf through them, flashes of red and black and green.

And then I get to one that reads *X-Men* in red and white on the front with four muscular figures and the slogan *God Loves, Man Kills*. But I can't flip past it the way I could the others. Because this one is heavy. Thick. I pull it onto the floor and it lands with a *ke-thud*.

I feel the pages; there's definitely something in there.

I pull the comic out of the plastic sleeving and open it up and there, nestled in between the pages, sits a phone.

My ears roar as I stare down at it, my pulse a jackhammer. I mean, this looks suspicious, right?

Because *I* have a second phone. I know it's never a good thing. Especially if you hide it.

I tap on the screen and it flashes to life, and *holy shit*, what's going on?

Because there's a picture of Button as the screensaver. And I recognise that picture; I recognise this phone.

This is Aurora Hughes' phone.

I struggle to process what's going on. Why would Josh have Aurora's phone?

I stare down at it, searching it for answers, and that's when I see the other thing.

There on the home screen is: *one missed call*.

I blink hard and read the number, it ends in 7725.

Icy dread rolls through me as I take it over to my burner phone.

I change my burner number often so I don't know it off by heart but this one does look familiar.

I go to *Contacts, My phone, My card* and then there it is. Confirmation.

There's my number and it ends in 7725 just like the number that called Aurora's phone.

My eyes snap to the red digits still on my palm, then back to Aurora's phone.

If this is the phone I just called, the phone belonging to Dogwalker, then that means it's Josh who's been tracking me through my *Find My* app. Josh's hands I remembered going through my phone. Not Keiran's.

But why?

A flash of him in my kitchen on Saturday night, the sound of his heart beating as he hugged me tight and I breathed in the citrus of his sweater and he told me it'd all be okay – while secretly, *what?*

And now our entire history recalibrates. A single drop of indigo ink in a clear glass of water changes everything.

Because I thought we met that night in the bar by pure chance.

That he saved me from Keiran.

But what if he didn't?

Oh crap. Are they working together?

What if saying he saved me was just a way to win my trust so he could get closer to me? So my guard would be down?

What if he's gone to get Keiran right now?

But wait – that makes no sense at all.

I take a deep breath and try to untangle my thoughts.

If Keiran wants to frame me, job done. So if Josh was working with Keiran, he'd have ghosted me by now. And also, Keiran Astor has nothing to do with Aurora Hughes.

Something else is going on here.

I tap on the phone and try to get into it but it's locked and there's a passcode set.

Crap.

Except, I know the code for Aurora's phone: her birthday. And it's worth a shot so slowly I type in: *1-1-1-1-9-3*.

The app icons all sway into view and I'm in.

I tap through to the call log first, gently, like I don't want to upset the phone, then scan through the numbers. He's only made a handful of calls and the only ones received are from my burner phone and one other number.

My gaze moves to 'Voicemail'.

There's one message in there.

I press play and listen as a man's voice says, 'Hi – this is a message for Aurora Hughes. I'm calling from 59th Street Veterinary Clinic. I got your information from PetLink.net. Please would you call me back as soon as possible. My number is—' I drop Aurora's phone from my ear, my heart threatening to crack a rib, as I open a search window and google: *P-e-t-L-i-n-k*.

The ocean roars outside as I wait for the page to load and then a little red logo with a cat and a dog appears beside the word *PetLink*.

It's a pet microchipping registration site.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Button is microchipped.

I imagine the scene: the vet scanning her when she was sick, seeing that she's supposed to live on the Upper East Side, that she's supposed to belong to a woman named Aurora Hughes. And there I am, saying I'm her owner, that I live nearby and my name is Billie. A flash of his face when he handed her back to me – he *was* kind of sour and bad tempered. And no wonder. He'd probably called Aurora to check everything was okay and landed in her voicemail.

And Josh got the message.

And called him back.

But even so, how did Josh find me? I didn't give that vet an address. I'm not a total rookie. A phone number, sure, but not an address.

Except, wait. I did mention I got his card from Marco's bodega. I was being nice. Chatty. Letting him know his marketing had worked. This is what happens when you let your guard down.

My entire being feels like it's vibrating. This is a lot of hassle to go to, just to track me down. And why would Josh do that? How did he even know Aurora?

And then all heat leaves my body.

Because maybe it's not Josh who wants to find me. Maybe it's somebody else. Somebody he's working for.

But who?

My mind whirs... Maybe someone who knew I was there the night Aurora and Rubin died?

Someone who knew I'd taken the contents of Rubin's computer? One of the less minor players in that securities fraud scheme he was caught up in? Someone who didn't want whatever I took ending up in the wrong hands...

That's why Josh stepped in that night at the bar to save me from Keiran. He's not some hero, he just couldn't afford to let anything happen to me. He wouldn't get paid.

And *oh my fucking god.*

The room spins around me now. *He probably doesn't even like the Cowboy Junkies.*

He was playing me...

How could I have been so stupid? Everyone knows 'J' name guys are shady.

I tap frantically, violently now, through his iNotes (empty) and his emails (no longer linked up) looking for clues. Who is he? This man I thought I really fucking liked? Then I get to his photo gallery, scanning down through the images.

There must be something in here somewhere, something to tell me who hired him and why. What was the plan once he won my trust? To get back the files I took?

And then what?

Kill me?

Oh crap, that's it, isn't it?

But now my blood turns to ice, because there, in the middle of his thumbnails, is a close-up picture of a licence plate and *shit*, it reads: S-A-M.

I tap on it and glance at the date stamp: 20 January.

That's the day I was fired. The night I put the tracker on Grange's car.

Josh was there that night.

He saw me do it.

And I guess it makes sense – he was already watching me. Not hard to follow me there. But let me repeat: *shit*.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He can link me to that tracker on Grange's car and that won't look good if he tells the police.

And what else has he figured out about me?

My eyes dart to the left and *is that a video?* I press play.

It's from a distance, taken from the other side of the road, but it zooms in and I recognise the townhouse, the lights in the lower window. I recognise it because I've looked it up on Google Maps so many times. It's Grange's townhouse. And that's the window I looked through when I heard a noise. Josh must have followed my little blue dot there to see what I was doing.

I watch the video, though nothing much is happening so I'm not sure why he bothered with it. But then there, on the edge of the frame, is a figure.

My throat closes up as I press pause and zoom in even closer.

THAT'S KEIRAN ASTOR.

I check the date stamp: 23 January. *They were both there the night I went home with Grange. A memory of Hot-Josh is calling... flashing from my phone screen. He was right outside when he called.*

But wait, hang on, if Keiran wasn't the one tracking me through my phone, he must have followed me on foot. How did I not see him as I left my apartment, on the subway, outside that restaurant, as we walked back to Grange's place – somewhere?

Oh god, that's how he found Grange.

My breath is fast, so fast now; my mind fogged up like a window. And I can hear Sadie's voice in my head: *Deep breaths, deep breaths.*

Then Derek's: *One day at a time. One hour at a time. One step at a time.*

And then mine. The part of me that got me through everything else until this point: *Just focus on what you do know.*

Okay, so:

1) I have a bloodied murder weapon in my bag.

- 2) Both Josh and Keiran have been following me.
- 3) Josh knows I put a tracker on Grange's car and probably other things too.
- 4) Someone has my drives and can prove everything I've done.
- 5) As I've just searched Josh's apartment, I'm thinking that someone is Keiran.
- 6) I'm totally fucked.

But at least I *know* Keiran is after me now. At least I *know* Josh has been watching me. And neither of them know I'm the wiser. That has to play in my favour, right? I scan up through the images and, oh look, another licence plate. One I don't recognise this time. Who does that belong to?

And then right beside it is an image of an envelope.

It's addressed to Keiran Astor.

Josh must have followed him home – and now, finally, I know where to find him.

I pull up Google Maps and type in the address and tap on *Street View*: so that's where Keiran lives.

It's a small, weatherboard detached house in Long Island, just past Queens, about fifty minutes away. Maybe a bit longer. But I can get there. I can get my drives back and put this knife back in its rightful position and then I will figure out what to do about Josh.

My blood whirs as I put the phone and the comic book back where I found them, pack up my black bag and run to grab my coat.

Because I need a cab.

3.17 PM

The driver mutters something in another language as we pull over to the kerb, and I'm pretty sure from the way he's frowning at the sky – ominous, dark – it's about the snow. This is the destination I gave him, though it's two blocks over from the address on the envelope. My plan was to walk the final stretch because it was only just starting to snow when I left Josh's place. I didn't know it'd get this bad, this quickly.

'Thanks,' I say, as he stops and I reach for the prepaid card in my bag. I pay and unplug my burner phone from the charger, drop the pre-paid card and the phone in my pocket, the cable in my bag, get out and put up my umbrella. But when I slam the door shut, I barely hear the bang for the wind and the soundproofing of the snow.

The cabbie drives off, and I hold the umbrella in close to obscure my face from the few people around on a Tuesday afternoon, and zig-zag over to Keiran's address. My teeth are chattering by the time I'm there, squinting as I scan the numbers on the letterboxes.

24... 26... 28

And then: 30.

It looks just like the picture on Google Maps.

The lights are all off. And there's no car in the driveway. There are no cars in his neighbour's driveway either. He's out. They're all out. Which makes sense.

If he has a job, which he must have if his parents aren't bankrolling him anymore, he'll still be there. At least, I fucking hope that's the case.

I creep around the back, adrenaline sparkling in my veins as my eyes dart to the back door; that will be locked. I scan the windows. I don't want to break one, and not just because of the noise – there can't be any evidence of somebody else being here when it all comes down on Keiran. I choose a window by the kitchen to try first. It's not too high up – I should be able to shake it loose and climb in. And if

not this window, another. Because yes, people close their windows when they go out but it's rare that they lock them all.

So I press my gloved hands against the glass and shake it up and down, up and down, up and down. I can feel a thin layer of sweat forming on my scalp even though it's freezing, but I know this works – I've done it before – so I just keep moving, and moving until...

Click.

The latch gives way.

I push it open and look inside. The window is right above the sink. I freeze for a moment and listen for movement, just in case. But there's nothing. So I put my bag in first and then hold onto the windowsill and try to lift myself up. But, *crap*, I'm heavier than I thought or my arms are weaker. I try again, holding my breath, straining. I get one leg through. Then the other.

I'm breathless by the time I'm standing there in the middle of his kitchen, scanning countertop to coffee machine to sink, thinking it's probably cold in here but it feels warm compared with outside. It smells of damp rags, or clothes that were put away while they were still wet. But there's something else too. Something that smells kind of familiar – a sickly masculine spice. Does Keiran still wear the same cologne?

A flicker of memory from last time we met; well, the last time I remember.

'Aren't you the prettiest little thing?' His eyes searching my camisole top for my nipples...

Josh is probably back in his apartment by now. Reading my note: *I had to head back to my apartment. It's all good now! Thank you so much!!!! xxx*

I bet he's freaking out because now he's lost track of his mark. Because he won't get paid now.

Asshole.

I put my bag and umbrella down on the kitchen counter and take off my cap. But I leave my gloves on. Slowly, I unzip my bag and pull out the knife. Where should I hide it?

There's a cupboard beneath the sink. I pull open the door and I'm about to set it down beside the sponges and spray bottles of cleaning fluid, but wait, that

doesn't feel natural. If he'd kept the murder weapon he'd have cleaned it off, right?

I stand up, turn on the faucets and run the blade under the water, using a dishcloth to wipe it down. I need it free of any visible residue so it doesn't look suspicious, but not *so* clean that there won't be any DNA left on it. I wipe it down gently with a tea towel, then open a drawer. I place the knife right at the back, close it again and look around.

Now, where would he put my drives?

I glance towards the other side of the room. There's a lounge, an old cabinet and some kind of makeshift workout area – a blue yoga mat rolled up in the corner, a small pile of exercise bands and a barbell with three large weighted discs on either side. And just beyond all that, there's a door.

What's out there?

I tiptoe towards it. I don't know why I'm creeping around when there's nobody here but I can't help it.

The front door is to my left with a big window beside it, and across from that is a set of stairs. His bedroom must be up there. And that's where you'd keep important, valuable things, right?

I look back in the direction of the kitchen window I came through and my throat tightens; I've planted the knife, I should leave. But if he's at work he won't be back for a couple of hours, and I can't just leave my drives here so he can tell the police whatever he wants once he has nothing left to lose.

I creep upstairs listening for footsteps, for breathing, for anything. But there's nobody here and I can feel my muscles slowly relax. His bedroom is the first door I peer through at the top of the stairs to the right. I go inside and look around: a bed covered in cream sheets, two side tables, a bookcase filled with the colourful spines of novels, the signed baseball bat I recognise from Instagram in a special wall mount, a flatscreen TV and a set of pale wooden drawers. I head over to the drawers and start going through them.

Is this what he did when he was in *my* apartment?

But there's nothing in there aside from sweaters and grey-white T-shirts and underwear and socks.

I go to his closet and quickly scan the clothing. Jackets, jeans hanging up and then my stomach spasms because, *oh god*, a set of grey overalls. I think of Mrs Benson and the heating guy and didn't she say he was wearing overalls?

A lump forms in my throat.

There are some boxes at the bottom of the closet and I lean down and go through them. Maybe my drives are in there. But no, it's just shoes. Receipts.

I move over to his bed, kneel down and look under it.

But there's nothing there aside from dust and balls of lint and hair.

Crap.

I sit back up and look around me: there's an ensuite bathroom. I stand up and head through to it – light wood and beige tiles – and open the cabinet. There's an electric razor and some shaving cream and some loose condoms. My stomach recoils at the thought. And then there, beside some painkillers, is a blister pack of white tablets that reads: *flunitrazepam*.

Roofies.

The generic type; the ones that don't have blue dye in them for safety.

Much like the high-dose type I used on Grange.

The floor spins beneath me as realisation hits.

Of course.

Keiran Astor roofied me.

The same way he roofied girls back when I first found him.

I imagine him putting Heather in a cab, saying he'll be right there, then heading back into the bar and me sitting there, drunkenly fucking around on my phone, feeling sorry for myself. And he was already skilled at dropping things into drinks.

That's why I couldn't remember anything.

Why I was so sick the next day.

But now I'm thinking of that message I sent Hot-Josh. The love-heart one I found on my phone the next morning. I wasn't sober enough to do that; not if I'd been roofied. Josh must have sent that message to himself so he had my number. So he had an 'in' with me.

How could I have fallen for it?

But focus, Billie. Drives.

So I close the bathroom cabinet and head back out into the bedroom, looking around for likely hiding places. They have to be here somewhere. But where? And that's when it hits me: there's no computer in here. No charging cable either. No passports. Nothing valuable aside from that stupid baseball bat. That means there's somewhere else he keeps important things. A safe?

But I don't see a safe and there wasn't one in the closet.

I step back out into the hallway and see a doorway on the other side. Maybe another bedroom? I rush over to it, reach for the doorknob and twist.

But it's locked.

My pulse flares. *This is it.* This is where he's hiding them. What I need right now is a credit card. And I have mine downstairs in my bag but... *wait.* I reach into my pocket and pull out the prepaid card I used to pay for the cab. This is better. It won't matter if it snaps.

I insert it into the edge of the door between the latch and the wall and jiggle it up and down, up and down, up and down until I hear the blessed sound of a *click.*

I twist the handle and push the door open.

And as I scan the room inside, taking it all in, there's only one thought echoing in my mind: *Holy mother of fuck.*

3.46 PM

It's small and dusty, with one square window covered by a thin mustard curtain that probably emits a golden light when it's sunny. But right now it's snowing outside and all colour has been muted. To my right is a white wooden IKEA desk with a series of drawers and a jar full of pens and pins, and to my left is a wall with a corkboard hanging in the centre. It's covered in scribblings and post-it notes and other bits and pieces.

I move in towards it to take a better look.

What is this?

It feels like Hannibal Lecter should be singing *Psycho Killer* in the background as I scan the snippets of information. But then my stomach drops because there, right in the middle, is: *500 West 58th Street!!!!*

It's written in blue ink on a pink post-it note.

That's my address.

Obviously I knew he had my address – he didn't take my drives and plant that knife through astral projection – but somehow seeing it there in his handwriting with all those excited exclamation points makes my stomach twist.

I scan the rest of the corkboard, trying to piece things together, and that's when I see the photograph of Hendy. It's at the top left.

Next to it is one of Derek.

Then one of Heather.

Then a printout of Grange's biography from the internet with his picture next to it, circled in red.

And then, just below those...

Holy shit – that's me.

It's a picture, worn at the edges, like he printed it out a while ago and kept it folded in his pocket or his wallet. There are drawing pins all through the forehead.

And I know exactly where he got that picture from. It's from the spring of 2017, just before the summer when I went to that bar to find him. In the original version, the one that isn't cropped, Sadie was there too. Smiling next to me. She posted it on her Instagram while I was still on social media.

I was tagged. That's how he found me.

But her profile was private and so was mine.

In order for him to get this image, he'd have had to catfish both of us, and do it well. Who did he pretend to be? How did I not know?

Everything inside me clenches as I imagine him trawling through Sadie's Instagram page – the daughter of the man he'd killed – blaming her and her family for the fact he was on probation to start with. Seeing us together, recognising me and realising I had been at that bar on purpose; that I had something to do with what had happened to him. That I *made* it happen.

Then clicking through to my page.

I had images of my mother up there before I deleted it all. If he had access to my page, all it would have taken was a cursory Google search to find my full name.

My eyes dart back to the board; there are things on there I don't even understand.

He's been planning this for a long, long time.

I imagine him sitting in that prison cell, seething, the blame now on *me* for everything, not just for his incarceration. From the looks of this house and his absence from his mother's Instagram feed, I'm pretty sure I was right, he *has* been cut off from his family and his inheritance. And he's had six long years inside to plan this. To get advice from his fellow inmates, to make sure he was prepared, so that the next time we met *I* would be the one sent to prison.

I guess that girl who messaged Sadie all those years ago was right: there is something *really* wrong with Keiran. Really, really, really wrong. He's a fucking psychopath.

And *of course* he wanted revenge. Big revenge. I had personally harmed him. I had to pay. Grange was just collateral damage.

But *fuck* – now the air is squeezed from my lungs – this means he definitely knows about Sadie.

What if he thinks she was in on it and goes after her next? My eyes dart feverishly around the board, looking for signs of her, but then my gaze catches on something else.

Bottom left.

A printout from the firm's website, under *Our Team*. This one isn't a photograph, but it reads *Wilhelmina Spencer-Tate: Paralegal*.

He'd figured out my name years ago from Instagram. But this... this is how he found me now.

They only put my name up there two months ago.

Did he find it then? Or did it take him time to google me again?

A shiver runs through me as I rearrange the pieces in my mind to make some sort of sense.

He had his plan. He knew my name.

I turned up in his Google search one day.

He found me. He followed me. He waited for an opportunity.

And then, the night we lost Jane Delaney's case, I gave him one. He followed me to that bar, removed Heather as a safeguard, roofied me so I wouldn't recognise him and so even if I did, I wouldn't remember, and took what he needed.

And then Josh stepped in...

So he left.

But by then he had my Visa card and he had my shoe. And when he went to Heather's place he learned from her pillow talk that I'd been fired because of a case at work. Because of Samuel Grange. So when he followed me to Grange's front door the following Monday, once he realised who that was, he knew he'd found the perfect victim. Because now he had the final piece to his puzzle: a motive.

Motive. Means. Opportunity.

My eyes snap back to the pictures of Heather and Derek and Hendy. If he'd been dreaming about this, planning this for years, did one of *them* almost end up dead instead of Grange? Were they all potential targets?

An icy chill runs through me now as I remember the night I went to Grange's place. If Keiran was watching, he'd have seen Grange go to his Porsche; known

which car was his. How easy would it have been for him to know when Grange was out three days later, when it was safe to break in and wait for him to return. And as long as it was late enough, I'd be at home sleeping. I'd have no alibi. That flicker in the security door the night Grange died: Keiran was there, making sure I went straight home.

I need my fucking drives and I need to leave.

I turn to the desk and pull open the top drawer. There's a small black device inside and I pull it out and inspect it. I recognise this: a black box with a series of antenna-like spikes. It's a wi-fi jammer. Which of course Keiran knew he needed, because I was right: he *was* that figure with an umbrella on Grange's security footage. And then there, right beneath it, is a laptop.

But my drives.

Where the hell are my drives?

I reach further into the drawer to feel around but they're not there. I've just pulled open the second drawer when I hear it.

A noise.

A creak.

What the fuck was that?

I hold my breath and stand dead still, straining to hear. Is that the wind, the snow, or the creaking of stairs?

I tiptoe over to the door, listening again, but nothing. My shoulders release. But I should go. Yes, I want to find my drives but I can't risk him coming home and finding me here. I can take his laptop with me – he might have information about me on there – but I'll need to do something about this wall. Because if the police see this, I'll definitely be implicated. And I want nothing tying us together. *Nothing*. But then I hear it again.

Creeeeak.

4.01 PM

Slowly, I peek out the door. There's nobody there. It's just me and the ghosts of my past. I step out into the hallway and head towards the stairs – I'll get my bag and stuff all the papers in there. And then I'll leave. Call the police. Tip them off. *But what if they arrest him and he tells them about me?*

And then: *Ow.*

My vision blurs; pain sears through the back of my skull.

I gasp. I can't breathe. An arm wraps around my waist, grabbing me. I buckle over, my thoughts wild. His bedroom is right there in front of me but I can't get away. My hair, someone's grabbing my hair now, yanking my head backwards.

'You fucking bitch!' comes a voice and then time slurs. Adrenaline spurts through me as I try to look but all I can see is the sliver of a beard and I know.

It's him.

He's dragging me backwards and I can't breathe and everything is white around the edges. I pull away but he pulls back and he's so much stronger and bile burns my throat. He's pulling me into that little room.

'This might be even better than sending you to prison,' he says into my ear and I can feel his breath. And my arms are pinned to my sides just above my elbows.

But my hands.

I can move my hands.

So I reach back to his groin, grab his balls and squeeze and twist as hard as I can.

He lets out a high-pitched groan and his grip slackens and *this is my chance.*

I run.

I don't know where I'm going but his bedroom is right there and my lungs are burning and so I go inside and slam the door. My hands shake as I turn the lock.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I can hear him outside and he's banging now. 'You might as well open up, Mina or Billie or whatever the fuck you're called these days, there's no way out,' he yells, rattling the doorknob. It twists and shakes.

I run over to the window and pull the curtains aside; maybe I can crawl out onto the roof.

But he's right.

It's a long drop down. I don't know that I'd make it without breaking a bone and then he'd definitely catch me.

Fuck.

My breath is shallow as I stare at the door. Because the banging has stopped. An eerie silence fills the room; my pulse thuds in my ears.

Where has he gone?

What is he doing?

I look around the room. *What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck?*

And that's when my eyes land on the baseball bat.

I run over to it and pull it from the wall.

Grasping it in both gloved hands, I hear heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. They're getting louder.

He's coming back.

And all I can do is grip the baseball bat and stand by the door and listen.

But my insides have turned to oil because *what if this is it? What if this is when I die?* I'm not ready.

Then I hear it – a jangle then the sound of metal clinking.

HE HAS A KEY.

Please god help me, please god help me, I'm trying to be a good person.

I train my eyes on the door as the doorknob twists. I hold the bat up high and get ready to swing, but the door doesn't open.

Instead, there's the metallic sound of another key being inserted.

He must be trying a few. And it's just a matter of time before he finds the right one. *What do I do?*

How do I get out of this?

Because yes, I have a bat, but he knows that's in here. He'll guess I'm going to use it. But he'll expect the blow to come from up high; approximately five feet and

six inches off the ground.

So I crouch down on the floor, my throat dry, my hands tight around the wood.

And as I watch that doorknob, waiting for it to twist open, a flash of Sadie's tears flickers through my mind. *If something happens to her it will be my fault.* And then that message from the girl on Instagram: *He did it to me too.*

And a burning heat flows through me now; nothing hurts anymore and my breath is slow and steady.

And then: *click*. The lock releases. The doorknob twists. And the door flings open. I see him there – he's holding something big and metal in front of his head. A metal disc from the barbell downstairs. He's using it as a shield; but he could kill me with that...

So I swing low; I aim for the side of his knee.

There's a crunch and a crack and his eyes go wide. He falls back with a yelp. I swing again, harder this time. I hit him in the same spot. *Crack*.

The veins in his neck are all rosy as he grimaces; his cheeks are bright red.

And then he falls.

Right down the stairs. There's a loud bang as the weighted disc hits the ground.

But this is good.

I can escape now.

I run to the stairs as he hits the bottom, taking him in. A flash of that night at the bar: *Aren't you the prettiest little thing...*

He looks kind of the same but different too. There's the beard, yes, but he's older, and a lot bigger – like he's been working out for years – and there are deep lines on his forehead.

My eyes snap to the window behind him, the door.

And *fuck*. How the hell will I get out of here? He's between me and freedom. So I tighten my grip on the bat and get ready for the next fight.

But... wait. He's not moving.

He's just lying there, crumpled. Blood pooling around his temples, the metal disc catching the light just behind him.

Ice rolls through me as I wait for him to moan and wake up and do something.

But he doesn't.
He just lies there.
And: *uh-oh*.

4.12 PM

I stare down at him: *Move, please move, please don't be dead.*

I don't want to be a murderer.

My eyes catch on the window. He fell in full sight of any passersby. *What if someone saw what happened?*

But there's nobody out there, just falling snow, and nobody's knocking on the door in concern and I don't hear sirens in the distance.

My scalp is covered in sweat and *what do I do now?*

I think of my bag downstairs on the kitchen counter, but I don't want to walk past his body. I look back to the little room.

I have pockets. I'll make do.

And so I drop the bat and turn around and rush back in there.

I start with the corkboard, pulling off anything that links to me or Sadie. I remove my address. The website printout with my name and position. And I remove anything I don't understand but I leave Grange's photograph and biography...

Next, I pull down the pictures of me and Derek and Hendy, pushing them deep into my pockets, but as I get to Heather, I pause. Something twists behind my ribs.

Because yes, I could leave right now with everything from this board and Keiran Astor's computer. And there would be nothing to link any of this to me. I could remove myself from the equation entirely. But then what about Jenna Rodriguez?

Her parents?

Her friends?

She'll get no justice.

What about Brother82 and Ramone and those other men; what if they do it again?

They will do it again.

A familiar heat flows through me. I can't let that happen.

I can't be the person who lets that happen. I won't be.

My heart thrums in my chest and everything snaps to high definition as I scan the board. I need to do what Hendy always taught me to do: I need to change the narrative.

I need to remove myself from the mix entirely, but leave enough information for another story to emerge instead.

And so I leave Heather's picture there. Not because I am an asshole, but because now my eyes are snapping to the laptop on that table behind me – an Apple – and a plan is forming in my mind. Keiran wanted to frame me, so I'll frame him right back.

I sit down and power it on, and as I take off my gloves – I can't do this with my gloves on – the apple glows while I mentally run through the steps required to reset an administrator password.

Soon I'm tapping on the wi-fi icon to the upper right of the screen, noting down his network name, navigating to his keychain and typing *K-e-i-r* into the search field. The software does the rest and there it is: *Keiran's Wi-fi Network*. I double tap on it, tick *show password*, enter the administrator password I just set, and up comes a long series of letters and numbers.

I snap off the back of my burner phone, pull out the SIM card, put that in my pocket, wipe down the battery and put it back without the SIM. I close the back and then tap and scroll and tap and scroll until I get to *Erase all data (factory reset)*.

I tap on it.

Choose: *Reset phone*.

It tells me that all my personal information and downloaded apps will be deleted and that I can't undo this action. It asks me if I'm sure. I'm sure. Very sure.

So I choose: *Erase everything*.

And the screen turns to black.

It takes a few long-assed minutes but then the screen says 'hello' and it's a brand-new phone. Nothing sitting in there waiting to ruin things when the police

find it. Not unless they really, really, really look... maybe. I'd like to think that if they called in some deep-dive FBI lab they could figure it out, but honestly I don't even know exactly what's possible and what's not. And it doesn't matter, this is a calculated risk because I do know this: why would they bother? It's not like the police have a lot of spare time on their hands. And it's not like Keiran Astor is innocent here; he did kill Grange. Once they know who to look for they'll find him on nearby CCTV. And he's a convicted criminal with the murder weapon in his downstairs drawer and a wi-fi jammer in his upstairs drawer and the victim's photograph sitting on a corkboard in a small dingy room. And then there's the other stuff, the stuff I'm going to leave behind to help them along, just in case.

I set the phone up using Keiran's wi-fi login credentials and the Google account connected to MrJJ007007@gmail.com.

I turn off location services.

When it asks me what sort of protection I'd like I say *Not now* – I don't want a lock screen or a password.

I need people to be able to get into this phone.

Next, I download a VPN.

Then: Instagram. Because I'm thinking of that message exchange between me and Grange.

I log into @norajane_8's account.

Email address: *M-r-J-J-0-0-7-0-0-7-@-g-m-a-i-l-.c-o-m.*

Then the password: *J-u-s-t-i-c-e.*

Now, it was Keiran Astor who was messaging with Grange on that Monday, the very same night he was recorded by Grange's doorbell camera. Was he trying to lure him to a location so he could break in?

I imagine how it will read to anyone looking on:

Grange: *Hey sexy, have we met in person?*

Keiran: *Hey, yes we did! It was a few months back, how have you been? What are you doing right now? ;)*

Grange: *Hey sexy, doing nothing, just waiting for your message. Where are you?*

Keiran: *We could meet up?*

Perfect.

Next, I download the tracker app.

Email address: *M-r-J-J-0-0-7-0-0-7-0-0-7-@-g-m-a-i-l-.-c-o-m.*

Then the password: *J-u-s-t-i-c-e.*

Now, it was Keiran Astor who was tracking Grange. He knew where he was at all times. It was easy to figure out when he could break in.

I download the security app he would have needed to watch Grange's cameras.

And then, finally, I pull up Gmail and make sure MrJJ007007@gmail.com is logged in.

Now all the emails forwarded from Grange are displayed. I click on the one entitled *WTF*, the last one from Ramone, and press the star next to it, just in case someone misses it.

That's the important one. The one where Ramone mentions 'JR'.

And I need the police to see it. To ask themselves who Ramone is and what 'JR' means and whether whoever was getting 'jumpy' had something to do with Grange being killed.

But how will I let the police know what 'JR' means?

I sit chewing on my cheek, thinking: *Could I put her name on the board behind me?* But that would be in my handwriting. Could I google her on this phone? Maybe, but why would Keiran be googling her?

In fact, why would Keiran have done any of this? He'd never even met Grange. Why would he be stalking him, why kill him? He needs a motive...

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Oh my god, I'm going to get caught aren't I?

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe...

Why would he have done it? Why? Why? Why?

I look around the room, back to the corkboard and Grange's picture and the circle around it and Heather's little face. And flashcards of the last two weeks are flickering in my mind: the blue trash can in Hendy's office, those drives in my plastic bag, Grange's handshake that night at the bar, the roofies in his drink, Josh's hands in my hair, @NYgent91, and then: the black image with pale text.

The forum.

That's it.

And I know exactly what to do.

Because I may not have found the drives Keiran stole from me and no, I'm not pleased about that, but maybe nobody will make the connection. It's all just 'information' unless you know I'm the thread that links them, and Keiran's not here to join those dots. But there is one drive I still have, the one in my computer case. The one with all of Grange's files on it.

The one with the file entitled 'JR' and those photographs of Jenna.

And so I stand up and run out into the hallway and towards the stairs and hold my breath because I'm just going to have to walk past him and not step in the blood, and I don't want to see him dead up close. But when I look to the bottom of the stairs, my insides freeze and my breath stops.

Because there's someone else here.

Someone leaning over Keiran Astor's body, checking for a pulse.

4.35 PM

I hold my breath as I slowly step backwards. I need to get back into that room before he sees me.

I watch him as I move. He's checking to see if Keiran is still breathing now, but then, *holy shit*, something changes. He stops. He freezes. *Oh god*. And then he looks right at me.

But that's not even the worst part.

No, the worst part is: *It's Josh*.

'Billie,' he says, his eyes meeting mine. 'Thank god you're okay.' And he's looking up at me like I should be glad to see him. But... I removed him from my *Find My* app. So how did he know I was here?

'What happened?' he asks.

I can hear my own heartbeat as my eyes dart to the door behind him. I could run for it, but then I'd be fully visible to anybody who walked past. I could climb back out the window I came in through. But how am I going to get past him?

And also: My bag with my laptop and my passport – things that prove I was here, that I have logged into Grange's email address – is still on the kitchen counter. I can't leave without that.

'Billie,' he says, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace, 'please don't be scared of me. I'm on your side.'

And I'm sorry but this is too much.

'I found Aurora's phone, Josh, you can't lie to me anymore!' I yell. 'I know everything.'

Our eyes lock. He's definitely physically stronger than me. And he's between me and the front door. So fingerprints be damned, I do the only thing I can – I pick up the bat.

'Shit. She was my sister, okay?'

‘Stop lying, Josh,’ I say, my eyes burning with tears, because how am I going to get out of this? ‘How long have you been following me?’

‘God, a while, but that’s because I thought you hurt her. It’s okay now, I know you didn’t. I’m here to help you.’

And something passes between us, an invisible jolt. *He’s telling the truth.*

The pieces fall together quickly now: the newspaper report – a female assailant seen fleeing the scene; Rubin Hughes tragically killed chasing her down. Button was missing. Josh had Aurora’s phone. He was looking for clues. And then one day the vet called...

But then: A flash of my kitchen; the way he comforted me. His hands in my hair. Him leading me to my bed.

‘And so you came over to my house and fucked me and cooked me an omelette? What is wrong with you?’

‘Please put down the bat.’

‘No.’

‘Billie, there’s a dead guy down here. Let’s just deal with that first, okay?’ And he’s right, of course, but something aches inside me; he really thought I could hurt her.

‘I was trying to help her, Josh,’ I say, my voice flimsy.

He frowns up at me. ‘I know you were,’ he says, gently. ‘You *told* me, that first night at the bar. Well, you told the bartender. But I was right there and I heard you say it.’

‘Say what?’

‘You said, “I’m a good person. I tried to save them.” He wasn’t listening to you so I said “Who?” And you said “Jane.” And then you said “Aurora.” You were seriously fucked up that night, Billie – I saw him drug you,’ he says, motioning to Keiran’s dead body. ‘So I knew you weren’t lying.’

My ears ring. ‘You saw him drug me?’

‘Why do you think I stepped in? Taking you home with me was not the plan – I had to. And it’s not like you would have told me the truth if I’d asked you – you’d just have made something up – so I had to figure it out myself.’ He pauses and something in his eyes changes. ‘But I’m pretty sure I know now. I saw the pictures of her bruises.’

My thoughts whirl: *The pictures. My missing drives. Frying butter. Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood.*

'You took my drives?'

'You can have them back, okay? Just put down the bat and come down here, please. I really need help.'

I hesitate and his eyes are back on mine. On a gut level I *do* believe him, but what if I'm wrong? What if he's lying to me again?

'Billie, think about it – if I wanted to, I could go the police right now. You'd be fucked. But instead I'm here trying to help you and it's kind of stressful,' he says, his voice gruff. 'So can you please stop making this even harder?'

Then he leans down and starts going through Keiran's pockets. And I can tell that he's never done this before. He's definitely telling the truth. So I slowly head down the stairs.

'What are you looking for?' I ask as I step over Keiran's body.

'His phone. There might be things about you on there. He was following you, you know?' Josh says, pulling Keiran's phone from his pocket. 'Who was he?'

But before I can answer he's looking around, saying, 'Fuck, our DNA and fingerprints are probably all over this place. We're going to need to cover our tracks somehow.'

'Hang on,' I say, as I head over to my bag, grab my make-up wipes, the burner phone charger and the drive full of Grange's files.

Josh eyes the wipes as I come over to him. 'Great,' he says as I hand him a few.

'I'll be right back. I have to finish something.'

And then I take the stairs two by two.

I run down the hallway, back into that dusty room, wipe down the burner charger and plug it into the wall. Then I sit down in front of Keiran's laptop. It's still on but it's locked now. I type in the new password I just set and plug the flash drive into it. Then I pull up Google and navigate to the forum.

I search for Brother82 and find his most recent post, right at the top: *My only advice is it's all about trust. And so I click reply and type: Man, you can't just have me do your dirty work and then not pay me. I will tell everybody so they don't make the same mistake with you. We are a community here!*

Then I click *reply* again and type: *PS. I have these of Jenna Rodriguez now. Got them from your friend's computer. Got a lot of other things too.*

I choose *add a photograph*. I navigate to the 'JR' folder on Grange's drive and select three of the five images – two of Jenna passed out with those men and one of her dating app profile – then click *add* and *post*. Next, I reply one more time, but this time I tick the 'invisible' box and enter in my old email address, which is now Keiran's: *M-r-J-J-0-0-7-0-0-7-@-g-m-a-i-l-.c-o-m*. I type: *???*. And I press *send*. Then I grab Keiran's new burner, tap through to the *MrJJ007007@gmail.com* inbox and check that it worked.

It did.

At the very top sits a message from that forum that reads: *Thank you for being a part of our community. All replies from Brother82 will be directed straight to you.*

It's the perfect breadcrumb, something to lead the police straight to the forum and that post. To help them joint the dots. And a simple '???' message won't alert Brother82 ahead of time.

But, just to be thorough, I pull up the forum on the burner and take a screenshot of the post.

And then it's done.

Now *this* is how Keiran and Brother82 met. On this forum. By fate. Keiran was fresh out of prison, full of anger and needing cash, and Brother82 needed someone to deal with Grange. Whatever emails they may have exchanged through this forum would have been deleted from their inboxes if they had any sense. And any posts from when they first made contact would be long gone from the servers by now – it's been more than forty-five days.

All except for the ones from today.

The ones that had Brother82 come straight over.

Brother82, who Ramone can, and will, identify to save himself.

Please god, if you're up there, let this work. Please let them get justice for Jenna. Please let them find that forum too – because what if there are others like her?

Then I put my gloves back on, pull out Grange's flash drive and put it down on the desk. I take one of my oil-busting make-up wipes and clean down both the flash drive and the burner phone, drying them thoroughly with my sleeve, then I take them downstairs.

‘Josh!’ I call. ‘I need your help.’

He comes through from the kitchen.

‘Hold up his hand for me.’

‘Which one?’

‘Umm...’ I don’t know if he was left-handed or right. I think it was right.

‘We’ll do both.’

I manoeuvre the burner phone and flash drive, pressing them up against his fingertips and palm while Josh holds his wrists in place and watches me.

He doesn’t even ask what I’m doing – smudging layers of Keiran’s prints over them – but maybe it’s because he knows. And then I run up the stairs again. I leave the phone on the desk, pick up Keiran’s laptop and charger and take them back downstairs, skirting the body, looking around for Josh. He’s standing by my bag now.

‘I’ve cleaned down anything I know we touched and smudged the rest. If it’s too clean it’ll look suspicious.’

I put Keiran’s computer and charger into my bag.

‘What about the bat?’ he asks. ‘Should we take it?’

‘Then it’ll be missing,’ I say, staring at it.

He takes it over to the sink and I watch as he carefully cleans it off, focusing on the handle.

‘Where was it before?’ he asks, looking around.

‘Upstairs,’ I say. ‘I’ll do it, I know where it was.’

So I take it back up the stairs into his room. I lift the bat up and put it right back where it belongs on the wall, signature side out. And then I run back downstairs.

The metal weight is back on the barbell and Josh is waiting for me at the bottom, holding my bag.

‘How did you get here?’ I ask.

‘I hired a Zipcar. I’m parked just through there,’ he says, pointing to a snow-covered hedge. ‘You can lie in the back and cover yourself with our coats. Just in case, you know... cameras.’

‘Great,’ I say, as I grab my cap and umbrella from the kitchen counter.

And then we run for the window.

6.07 PM

‘Josh, are you okay?’ He’s sitting on the side of the bed, his face the colour of chalk. And I’m pacing around the room, desperately trying to figure out whether I’ve forgotten anything as I feel around in my pockets: SIM card, bits of paper from that corkboard, what’s left of my soul. We’ve been back at his place for seven minutes and this is the first time either of us has spoken.

‘No,’ he says, his voice tired. ‘Not really.’

‘I’m sorry I got you tangled up in this.’ My voice comes out small, because I *am* sorry. But I’m also so grateful he was there.

And I’m thinking I bet he wishes he could go to the police now. But now he can’t. Because now he’s part of it too.

‘It’s okay. You tried to help Aurora. So I wanted to help you too.’

Then he stands up and comes over to me and I look up at him; he looks the exact same as he did in my kitchen, in my bed. I can smell the earth in his skin; he smells familiar now. And I think maybe he’s going to kiss me. But instead he reaches into my inside coat pocket and pulls something out.

It’s a small white disc.

‘What’s that?’ I ask. But I know what it is: a GPS tracker. I’ve used one or two before. I got them off Amazon.

‘Sorry. You removed me from the app and I was worried he’d hurt you. I needed to know where you were.’

So *that’s* how he knew I was at Keiran’s place.

‘Billie, can you tell me what happened?’ he says, moving away and sitting down on the bed again.

‘When?’ I say. Everything aches.

‘The night Aurora died. I need to know.’ And there’s something so broken about his voice as he says her name. I recognise it and my eyes prickle with sympathetic tears.

‘Okay.’ I sit down next to him and clasp my hands on my lap.

He turns to look at me and there it is – the pain in his eyes, the pain I saw that night we met up at the White Horse Tavern.

An echo of his voice that night when I asked why he stopped playing professionally: *Life? Nothing turns out the way it was supposed to.* And it makes so much sense now. It was her. He couldn’t cope with her death. That’s why he stopped.

‘I was her friend. And I knew what he was doing to her. I really wanted to help her,’ I start, and I hate that it sounds so formal, but I don’t know how to talk about this without just giving him the cold facts. Because I know it’s going to hurt him. ‘So one night, when I knew they were going out, I went over there. It was all I could think of. I was going to get a copy of whatever was on his computer and find something on it to get him out of her life.’

‘Like what?’

I shrug. ‘Everyone has something, Josh – especially someone like Rubin Hughes. I knew his business dealings were shady. And anyway, I had to try.’

Josh nods.

‘I was copying his documents across and I was meant to be gone before they got back.’ I take a deep breath, images from that night flickering in my mind. ‘But they came home early. They were yelling – well, *he* was yelling. I heard them head into the bedroom. And I could have still got out without anyone seeing me. But then—’ I swallow hard. ‘Then there was a bang and the fighting stopped.’

I look over to Josh and he’s watching me, and I know he needs to hear this next bit but I don’t want to tell him because I care about him. I don’t want to hurt him.

‘Go on.’

‘I ran upstairs to the bedroom to see what had happened. And he was there, standing over her and she was bleeding everywhere.’ A flash of all that blood on the carpet beneath her head. Her eyes wide open, not blinking. Rubin Hughes standing over her.

‘I knew she was dead. I was in shock and I wasn’t meant to be there so I just ran. I could hear him coming after me, but I ran down those stairs as fast as I could and Button was there by the door and I just couldn’t *not* take her.

Sometimes that's how you make a choice. Not the thing you should do, but the thing you just can't *not* do. So I picked her up and kept running and I was halfway across the road, too scared to look back...' My mouth dries as I remember the blur of lights and horns. 'But then I heard it. The screech of tyres and a big bang. And I'd crossed by then but when I looked back I could see him crumpled in the road. And I couldn't have anyone asking me questions, taking statements, so I just ran.'

He nods and lets out a sigh. I reach for his hand and squeeze it.

He clenches his jaw. 'I knew he was doing something to her, you know. She wasn't herself anymore. I should have run him down myself.'

'I'm so sorry, Josh.'

'So that's something you do, right? Like, that wasn't the only time?'

Instinctively, I pull back my hand.

'Like the doctor?'

I nod. 'You know I didn't kill him, right?'

'Of course. I was watching, remember? You were in your apartment all night.'

'Good.'

He pauses.

'I saw those videos, the ones on the internet. And I knew you were the one who'd done it. It made me really fucking admire you, Billie.' He smiles and our eyes meet for just a second but then he looks away. 'My money is on that guy from today. I bet he did it,' he says, nodding. 'He was there at the doctor's house the same night I was, following you. There that first night we met. What was his problem with you anyway? I couldn't figure that part out.'

'He did do it. He was trying to frame me. But I left quite a few clues to make it clear to the police that it was him.'

'Hang on, why would he be trying to frame you?'

I swallow hard. 'He hurt some people very badly a few years ago. And he figured out what I did to him because of that.'

'What did you do to him?' he asks, looking intently at me.

'I sent him to prison,' I say.

'So... everyone on those drives?'

'I just make the truth come out. But we have some stuff to sort out now.'

‘I know. So we have his phone. I’ll take that to the garbage dump, and Aurora’s too.’ He pauses. ‘It’ll be weird, you know – it’s like my last piece of her.’

I can hear the call of a seagull outside, just like that first morning, and my insides ache for what he and I could have become if we’d met under different circumstances.

But I have to get back to my apartment now because the police might come past again. I need to feed Button. Act normal. So I stand up and grab my overnight bag.

I pull out my passport, handbag, toiletry bag, toothbrush and the spare set of clothes in a plastic bag and put them on the bed. Now the overnight bag only contains my computer, Keiran’s computer, charging cables and other miscellaneous and potentially incriminating things.

‘Can you wipe the information from everything in here and then get rid of that too?’

‘What about those drives? Do you want them back?’

‘No.’ I shake my head.

I put my passport, toiletry bag and toothbrush into my handbag then pull out the piece of paper with all of Grange’s passwords and codes on it. As I tear it up, something twists in my chest. Then I pull out all the pieces of paper from my coat pocket, the snippets from the corkboard, and take the whole lot through to the kitchen. I run them under water until they’re pulp, squeeze them all together, and drop the ball of pulp into the trash.

I pull the SIM card from my pocket, bend it in half until it snaps and put that under the water too.

Then I head back into the bedroom and start to strip off. ‘This is all just in case. Just in case the police come past my place,’ I say.

‘What if they come here? What’s our story?’ A flash back to the last time I was almost naked in this room, creeping around looking for my shoe. A sadness falls over me.

‘The only reason they’ll talk to you is to make sure I was with you all afternoon. I was. We were having sex.’

‘Missionary,’ he adds, smiling.

I take off the rest of my clothes and put on the spare set – dark blue jeans, a black polo-neck and a pair of running shoes. Then I put the clothes, cap and shoes I was just wearing in the now-empty plastic bag. Because I don't know if there is anything on them to link me to Keiran or his house or what just happened, but I do know I'm not taking any chances.

'Give me those,' Josh says, motioning to the bag, 'I'll deal with them too.' I hand it to him and as I do I think: I've never trusted anyone the way I'm trusting Josh right now. And I get I don't really have a choice in the matter but I can also see why people do it, and I just want to hug him.

But then I remember my necklace.

I snap it open and pull out the last roofie.

'What's that?' he asks.

'Roofie,' I say, as I take it to the bathroom and flush it down the toilet. 'Can I ask you something now?' I say, coming back into the room.

'Shoot.'

'How did you find me in the first place?'

He gives a small smile. 'I thought you were going to ask me if I ever gave a fuck about you.'

'I wouldn't be that clichéd.' I smile even though deep down that's exactly what I want to ask.

'Well, the vet said you were a pretty redhead and that you'd mentioned you lived near West 58th – that's where you got his card. From some store. So I just went to the subways nearby every day at peak hour until one day there you were, so I followed you back to your building. Then I saw Button in the window. And I knew I'd found the right girl.'

'Oh,' I say.

He's quiet for a moment and so am I.

Then he says, 'Billie, just so you know, I did. I did give a fuck. I mean, I do. I know I kept things from you and it's better we leave it here and don't see each other again, just in case, but if things were different...'

My eyes sting with tears. Because no matter how nicely he frames it, I know what he's thinking as his voice trails off. He's thinking: *If you were different, this*

might work. But now that I've seen it all, I'm not sure I want you. And honestly: fair.

So I don't force him to finish the sentence. I'm not sure I can stand hearing it anyway.

And you know, *gratitude*.

Because it may not be an indelible love story we get, but in a world where I'm always the one doing the saving, in a way Josh is saving me right now. That has to count for something. So I move over to him and put my hand on his knee. 'Josh – thank you.'

His eyes meet mine and something passes between us but then he looks away. So I say: 'Can you get me an Uber home? I don't have my phone.'

'Sure.'

I go to put on my coat and then he says: 'Shit, let me get you another one – there might be something on that.'

I nod and drop it to the floor while he goes to the cupboard. He holds one of his coats out for me to put on – it's too big – and as he helps me into the sleeves, it feels like *A Whiter Shade of Pale* is playing somewhere deep beneath my ribs because how am I never going to see him again? How is it over? And all I want right now is to go back to the beginning and do it again. But life's not like that. It's not like a record. You can't skip tracks and you can't play it till the needle breaks. Nope. You only ever get to listen to it once. And I know this, of course I know this, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt a little every single time.

7.59 PM

My teeth are chattering and I'm purple with cold as I punch in the security code and pull open the door. Outside the snow is still falling but it's warm in here and it's good to be home. And as I take the stairs I can just make out some sort of commotion upstairs: the hum of voices, footsteps. I head to Mrs Benson's door and I'm about to knock on it to get Button back when I hear: 'Ms Spencer-Tate' and I look up. And there's Detective Butler, holding a notepad and talking to one of my neighbours – the hot one with the dreadlocks. My neighbour looks at me apologetically.

'Hi,' I say, not having to fake my surprise as I head up to him. I'm on the third floor but I can see up to the fourth and my door is open. 'What's going on?

'We have a search warrant,' Butler says, holding up a piece of paper that looks hellishly official as I take the final flight of stairs. I glance over it as he says: 'Where have you been? We've been trying to reach you.'

Stick to the plan.

'I was at my boyfriend's house. I forgot my phone,' I say, frowning. 'What are you looking for?' But I know what they're looking for. That knife. It's a big city; it's going to take a moment for the police to turn up at Keiran's place and find him and piece it all together and link it to Grange and tell Detective Butler. I'm in for a long night.

'Who forgets their phone?' he scoffs.

'Me,' I say, my eyes darting behind him. There are four men in my apartment, all pulling open drawers and looking through my things.

'We had a tip come in, Ms Spencer-Tate.'

Of course they did.

I mentally scan the contents of my apartment but my drives aren't there, my burner isn't there, my computer isn't there, my roofies are gone, @norajane_8 is no longer on my real phone, even the clothes I wore to Keiran's house aren't in the

vicinity. It's almost like maybe there is a god. And maybe, just maybe, he doesn't hate me after all...

'We're going to have to ask you a few more questions,' he says. 'You'll need to come down to the station.'

'I don't understand. Am I in trouble for something?'

'Not yet, no.'

'Can you at least tell me what this is all about?'

'Martinez can drive you,' he says, glancing over my shoulder. I turn to follow his gaze and there's Martinez, coming up the stairs behind me.

This is bad. Very, very bad. But then again, nobody has read me my Miranda rights just yet. That has to be good, right?

Still, I'm not taking any chances.

'Okay, of course,' I say, turning back to Butler. 'I'll help however I can. But do I need to call a lawyer?'

Something in his eyes changes. He'd prefer I didn't.

'If that's what you'd like to do.'

9.37 PM

We're in a little room – me, Butler, Martinez, and the lawyer my dad called for me.

'It's all a misunderstanding, Dad,' I'd said to him.

'Where are you right now?'

'At home, but they're taking me to the station to question me.'

'Which one?'

Now here we all are, sitting on opposite sides of a table with microphones built into it. Butler has just pressed the record button on a video device and the little light is glowing red. My pulse holds a constant rhythm above the low murmur of Butler recording the date and the names of everyone present. And then he says my name: Wilhelmina Spencer-Tate.

'Wilhelmina,' Butler says. 'Is it okay if I call you that?'

'Sure, but most people call me Billie.'

'Okay, Billie, what is your date of birth?'

'March 7th, 1999.' Just like the Prince song.

'Tell us how you knew Dr Samuel Grange.'

I look over at my lawyer. He told me not to answer *anything*. That it wouldn't help me. That the police already had enough evidence to show my connection with Grange – that he got me fired and yet I still ended up in his home – and anything I say right now will just be used to build a case against me. And he'd be right if I didn't know for a fact that at some point, news of Keiran Astor will leak back into this room and into Detective Butler's ear. I'd rather keep them busy asking me questions until they can release me than have them charge me and send me for arraignment before that information comes to light. So I told him I wanted to help the police and to only step in if it was imperative.

I look back at Detective Butler and there's a sparkle in his eye.

And I know why: this is a trap. He thinks I'm going to start at the moment I ran into Grange at that bar. But I'm not.

'I first met him at a bar on the Upper East Side,' I say, playing into it, and his expression grows smug. 'But I went there to find him. Because I'd been working on a case he was involved in.'

The room rings with silence.

Butler clears his throat. 'You lost that case, didn't you?'

'We did,' I say.

'And were you angry about this?'

'You don't have to answer that,' says my attorney.

Butler looks through his papers. 'You also lost your job as a result of that case, didn't you, Billie?'

'I did.'

'And that job was important, wasn't it? They were going to put you through a law program?'

I nod. 'The whole thing was bad. That's why I went to find him. I wanted to see for myself.'

'Sorry?'

I take a deep breath and stare at the table for a bit, like I'm measuring my words, which I am in a way. Then I look back up at Butler. 'When you're a paralegal you never actually meet anyone involved in your cases – you just read the testimonies and put the evidence together and file what needs to be filed. It seemed to me like he was this monster who had gotten away with so much. And that just felt so wrong, you know? But after the way the case played out I have to confess that I had my doubts. Maybe I'd been wrong and he wasn't guilty after all. I had to see for myself. I had to know.'

'Or you went there to get your own sort of justice.' Butler states it like it's fact.

The floor sways beneath me. *Deep breaths, deep breaths. Don't let him see that he's right.*

'Please remember that my client is here voluntarily,' my attorney cautions.

'What? No,' I say, ignoring my attorney. He glares at me, a world-weary fuck-this-job-and-silly-little-girls-who-won't-listen-to-me glare. 'I went there to prove to myself I hadn't made a massive mistake. But I had.'

‘How so?’ Butler continues. There’s a challenge in his tone and I’m faintly aware of Martinez noting all this down.

‘He was sweet,’ I lie. *A memory of his fingers deep inside me.* ‘Charming.’ *His voice hissing ‘Just relax.’* ‘If I’m really honest, I was instantly attracted to him.’ *That little flame inside me ignites: he’s just my type.* ‘On paper I had believed for so long that he was evil and guilty but when I met him and got talking to him I realised he couldn’t have done what that woman accused him of. Then I just felt really guilty.’

‘If all that’s true, why didn’t you mention any of this last time we spoke? The case, you getting fired. Your real reason for running into him?’

I look down at the table. ‘I was in shock. I panicked. I was scared you’d think the wrong thing. I’m sorry. I wish I’d told you the truth.’

Butler looks at Martinez, then back at me. Something flickers behind his eyes.

‘Let’s just rewind a moment. How did you find him there, at that bar?’

And I can’t exactly tell him about zooming in on Grange’s Instagram post to read the address on the menu, so I say: ‘Jane Delaney had mentioned they went there a lot. I was just taking a chance.’

‘And when you met him, did you tell him who you were? Or why you were there? Or that you worked on Jane Delaney’s defence?’

I shake my head. ‘No.’

‘And what did you tell him your name was?’ His eyes sparkle.

Crap. They must have asked Meredith about me.

‘Mina,’ I say.

‘Why give a fake name?’

‘I don’t know, it was spur of the moment. And I’m not dumb – I knew it was dangerous to be there talking to him.’

‘And yet you went back on the Monday night to find him again?’

‘No, that’s not how it went. I didn’t need to do that – he gave me his card,’ I say, pulling the card from my bag to show him. ‘See? I could have called him anytime, but I didn’t. I knew it was a bad idea. I knew we couldn’t actually date. I mean, he didn’t even know my real name. But I don’t know – a lot of the supposed events took place in that Chinese restaurant and on impulse I wanted to see it, perhaps it was for closure or something. You need to understand, I felt like

I'd been wrong about him, that my instincts had been wrong, and it had cost me my job. This was a big deal for me. I was trying to make sense of things. Trying to figure out how I'd messed up so badly. Then just as I was leaving, there he was. I literally bumped into him on the street outside,' I say, thinking of Grange's words. *It felt like fate.*

'We know – we've spoken to the hostess there. She said you left together.'

This is good. If they're asking the hostess where we went, that means that maybe there's no CCTV for them to rely on. And no CCTV means no footage for them to happen upon that shows me near Grange's car on the Friday night.

'He wanted to go back to his place, and I knew it was a bad idea because of the case. But also I'd been fired so it felt like maybe there was no conflict of interest anymore, you know? And to be honest I really wanted to. I know it sounds clichéd, but it felt like fate, like it was meant to be. But yes, you're right, I shouldn't have gone.'

Butler's eyes narrow. 'And then what happened?'

'We had a few drinks, talked a bit. Kissed. And then I went home around 10.30 or 11 pm.'

'And after that?'

'Nothing. I really wanted to see him again but it just felt doomed. Like once he figured out where I'd worked and my connection to the case the whole thing would blow up anyway. So I never contacted him again.'

Butler stares me down.

'There were some videos uploaded to his social media pages before he was killed. Do you know anything about those?'

I look down at the table again and frown. 'It just doesn't seem like him. At all. But yes, I do. A girl from my old work told me about them.'

'What was her name?'

'Heather Robinson,' I say, watching Martinez note down her name. I don't want to get Heather into trouble, but she's a key link between this case and that board at Keiran's house. They'll see her picture, yes, but I need them to ask her questions so they recognise her and figure out who she is. Where she works. Why Keiran might have gotten close to her – not for information on me but for information on Grange. Just like he was hired to do. 'She was only looking at his

pages because she was trying to protect me. She didn't know how nice Dr Grange really was.'

'So let me get this straight,' Butler says, frustration oozing from his voice. 'What you're saying is that you had nothing to do with uploading those videos. Nothing to do with killing Grange. You tracked him down, met him under false pretences and went back to his home, but everything else was all a big unfortunate coincidence?'

'I just went and met a guy I'd heard a lot of bad things about and realised he wasn't the monster he'd been made out to be. He won the case because he'd done nothing wrong.' I shrug.

'Okay,' Butler says, leaning in towards me. 'You know what I think happened?'
Uh-oh.

'What?' I ask, like I'm genuinely interested.

'I think you were angry. I think you went to find Dr Grange to make him pay. I think you uploaded those videos. But then you decided that wasn't enough, you wanted your job back too, so you went back to find more. But he came home and found you there, you panicked, there was a struggle, and then you killed him. I'm not saying it was on purpose. But you did it.'

'No! That's not true! I know you don't believe me but I would never have done something like that. And besides, I was at home the night it happened.'

'Were you?'

'Yes.'

'Can anyone attest to that?'

'My neighbour, Mrs Benson. She saw me come home.'

'You could have snuck out.'

'I didn't.'

Butler lets out a big sigh, like I'm forcing him to do something he doesn't want to do.

'Billie, do you recognise this shoe?' he asks, showing me a picture of my lost Mary Jane.

And he knows I do. He would have found the other one in my closet.

'I do,' I say.

'And where do you think we found that?'

‘Probably at Grange’s house,’ I say. ‘I changed into running shoes before I left, it was too cold for those and also the soles slip on the ice. But when I got home I couldn’t find it. I must have dropped it or something. We’d had wine. A lot of wine actually. Where was it?’

Butler ignores my question. He’s pissed off now. I can tell because he has the same look in his eye Hendy used to get when I’d annoyed him with my ‘naïvety and idealism’.

He lets out a big sigh then says, ‘Tell me, Billie, do you smoke?’

I think of Heather calling me when the police went to my old office: *This is total top secret but I called my brother when they arrived and he called a friend at the 19th to ask about it... They found a cigarette stub at the scene...* That information isn’t public. I can quash it right now.

‘Sometimes, why?’ I say. Guileless.

He gives a little self-satisfied smile.

‘Like, I was smoking with Grange at his place if that’s what you mean?’

His smile drops.

‘Did you or did you not upload those videos to Dr Grange’s social media accounts?’ he barks, and even Martinez flinches.

‘That’s enough,’ says my attorney.

I know why Butler is pushing this point so hard: if he can just get me to admit to this – something illegal but comparatively small – then his theory about me going back to get more information and ending up killing Grange instead holds a lot more water.

‘I already told you, no,’ I say, being careful to stay calm and helpful and not in the least bit defensive because this is being videoed and I need to seem like the rational one.

‘I mean, how would I even do that?’ I frown up at him. ‘I’d have to have had access to his social media accounts and where the hell would I get videos like that? They weren’t in the files at my old work, if that’s what you mean.’ I frown deeper. Confused.

‘So who do you suppose uploaded them?’

My attorney goes to speak but I talk over him.

‘How would I know?’ I ask.

‘If you had to guess?’

‘Well, I thought Dr Samuel Grange was a good man.’ I shrug. ‘I still find it hard to believe what was in those videos – can’t that stuff be faked? But look, I’m sorry – I really want to help you but I have no idea how they ended up online.’

Butler lets out a big, annoyed sigh and reaches for his notebook, roughly flipping through the pages.

‘And where were you this afternoon while we tried to call you?’

‘I already told you – at my boyfriend’s house,’ I say. ‘Well, the guy I’m seeing. We’re not exactly exclusive... I don’t think.’ My cheeks flush as I think of Josh.

‘Could he confirm that?’ There’s something in his gaze that unsettles me.

‘Of course. His name is Josh Wilson,’ I say, reaching for my phone and tapping on it. ‘Do you want his number?’

‘Yes, please,’ Martinez says.

And so I read out Josh’s number and think *please don’t buckle under the pressure, please don’t buckle under the pressure, please don’t buckle under the pressure.*

There’s a knock at the door.

Martinez gets up to answer it. There’s whispering. Is it about Keiran Astor? Or just that they haven’t found anything in my apartment?

She comes back to the table and whispers something into Butler’s ear.

He looks at me, his eyes full of purpose now.

‘We may have more questions,’ he says. ‘Wait here.’ His eyes move to my phone, still in my hands. ‘And I’ll need your phone, if you’re okay with that?’

There’s a challenge in his eyes and I know I could probably refuse but he has the authority to take it anyway and I’m still being videoed, so I hand it to him with a smile and say calmly, ‘Of course.’

Then he turns towards the recording device and says, ‘This interview has been paused at 10.03 pm.’

Click.

11.19 PM

I'm tired, really tired by the time Martinez, Butler and my lawyer come back into the room and turn the recording device back on and say all the things they need to say to start the interview up again. Butler pushes my phone across the table to me.

'Here – you're not on social media?'

'No. My mother died because of hate on social media. I avoid it.'

He lets out a deep breath and looks down at his notes, flipping through the pages. Something has changed. I can feel it in the air between us; the electric charge is gone.

'There's a security app on your phone. What's that for?'

'My best friend signs me in when she goes away.' I shrug. 'Why, what does that have to do with anything?'

'It was the same one Grange used.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Well, I don't know anything about that.'

'We know. We tested it.'

Then he pushes a picture of Jenna Rodriguez across the table and right now, all of this feels worth it. They found it. They pieced it together.

'Do you recognise this girl?'

I look down at the photograph and something twists in my chest as I shake my head. 'No.'

He nods and pulls the picture back. 'And have you ever heard the name Ramone James?'

'Umm, yes. That was Grange's friend. I met him that night at the bar. He had curly hair.'

'Did you see him again?'

'No, but like I said, I only saw Dr Grange those two times.'

'Okay,' Butler says.

‘Unless you’re going to charge Ms Spencer-Tate, I’d say we’ve been more than cooperative,’ says my lawyer.

Martinez and Butler look at each other.

Then Butler nods and says, ‘This interview is terminated at 11.31 pm.’ And then he flicks a switch and the little red light turns off.

We all stand up and my lawyer leads me outside. Once we’re in the hallway I turn to him: ‘What happened?’

‘They think they’ve found the guy.’ He smiles.

And that’s how it happens. That’s how I get my second chance at life.

THURSDAY

9.45 AM

Wednesday passes in a blur. I call in sick. I have that zombified timbre to my voice, the crackly maybe-I've-been-vomiting-all-night sound.

'Feel better soon,' Carla says. I hang up and light up a cigarette, stroking Button as I stare out the window at the thick layer of snow blanketing cars and piled high at the edges of the sidewalk. If Josh and I left any footprints behind yesterday, they'd have been well covered by the time the police got there.

Inside my apartment, everything is back in its place and the radiator is hammering and clanking, pumping out heat; the police didn't find anything. But my heart is still a crime scene and I don't know how to make it better. So I've been up since 5 am, listening to Tom Waits' *Blue Valentine* and Nirvana's *Nevermind* in a constant rotation, trying to pick a mood, staring down at my phone and thinking should I text him or shouldn't I?

I know he said we shouldn't see each other again but *fuck it*.

It's not often you meet somebody who feels like home. Not often you meet someone you let all the way in. Not for me at least.

So I go to Hot-Josh and slowly type: *Hey, I was thinking...*

I delete it all and start again.

Hey...

Delete. Delete. Delete.

A flash: Josh's heartbeat under my ear as we're lying in my bed.

But then: *If things were different...*

But no, I have to try.

Slowly I type out: *Can we talk? X*

And then I press *Send* and take a deep breath and stare down at the screen. My head is light.

Typing bubbles.

Beep.

Hot-Josh: *No, Billie. There's nothing to talk about. X*

I look out the window and take another drag, tears burning my eyes as the world turns back to monochrome. And all I can do is stay there and be very still, smoking cigarettes and stroking Button and listening to records until the night comes.

But the next morning I go back into work.

And now here I am, sitting in silence, tapping data into its relative fields like the last forty-eight hours didn't even happen. My phone starts ringing from the desk beside me: *Heather is calling...*

There were a couple of rogue texts from her about Keiran and his supposed wife when I got back from the police station on Tuesday night. I'd scanned through them but didn't reply, just stripped off my clothes and headed through to the bathroom and into the shower. And as the water hit my face – just a tiny bit too hot for comfort – flashes of everything came hurling back at me. Keiran Astor: dead. Grange: dead. Rubin Hughes: dead. Aurora Hughes: dead. My eyes burned with tears and all I could do was stand there and sob and promise myself *never again*.

When I came out of the bathroom wrapped in my dressing gown, my hair in a towel, my mother's eyes followed me from the poster. And I did something I hadn't done in a very long time. I went over to my records, my hands trembling as I searched the spines, flipping through them until I found hers. Her first record. I pulled it from the cover, put it on the turntable and dropped the needle.

But now my phone keeps flashing with *Heather is calling* and I can't focus on anything else. Because have the police spoken to her? I need to know.

So I pick it up, press the green answer button and throw a 'sorry' look at Carla as I take it through to the kitchen. 'Hey,' I say. It's 9.45 am so the kitchen's empty – it's that space before early caffeine and mid-morning caffeine.

'Hi.' Heather's voice sounds weird.

'Are you okay?'

'No,' she says. 'Are you?'

'What?'

‘They interviewed you too, right – the police? About that doctor guy?’

‘Yes,’ I say, careful. I mentioned Heather in my interview – I told them that’s how I saw those videos, but I don’t want to get any more entangled.

‘Oh my god, Billie. Did they tell you what really happened?’

‘No, they just asked a load of questions. I think they were just trying to figure out whether his death was tied to the case.’

‘Well, it was, sort of. That guy, Toby, the one I was seeing?’

‘Yeah?’

My blood speeds up as I think of her picture still on his corkboard.

‘This morning the police came to work to ask me some questions. First they asked me about you, about whether I showed you those videos. That was fucking stressful enough.’ Her voice lowers to a whisper. ‘But then they showed me Toby’s picture and asked how I knew him.’

‘Huh?’ I say, feigning confusion.

‘It turns out his name wasn’t even Toby. It was Keiran. And he didn’t like me. He was only talking to me to find out information about that case.’

A silence rings down the line. *What do I say?*

‘The Grange–Delaney case,’ she continues. ‘Billie, it’s all so fucked up. The police said he killed Grange. That’s why he didn’t want me taking pictures. Why he was asking all those questions – he was fishing because he wanted to know what Grange had told us. Then they asked me about this girl called Jenna Rodriguez who died and whether Toby – sorry, Keiran – ever asked about her. She’s dead too. *And* he’s been to prison. Honestly, he’s sick as fuck. Why do I have such bad taste?’

‘Oh god, you poor thing. Are you okay?’

‘Not really. And they’ve hired a new girl now to replace you and she’s fucked. I hate sharing an office with her. She keeps asking me questions and she hums all the time. Shit, Hendy just walked past, I better get back to it.’

And then we hang up and I stare at my phone.

I wonder how long it will take before I forget Josh, before I stop expecting him to text me even though I know he won’t. It’s weird, isn’t it, how some people just matter? But I guess it makes sense – he’s the only person on this *Third Stone From The Sun* who knows my secret, aside from you. Still, at least I’ve done Step Five

now: a full confession. Even if it did make him do the one thing I really needed him *not* to do: leave.

So maybe Al was right – maybe I *am* too hard to love.

But I can't think about things like that.

And there is somebody who does want to hear from me. So I scroll through my messages and text Derek instead: *Still on for tonight?*

Because today is Thursday.

I have my meeting.

And I'm back on the wagon for good now.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER...

9.50 AM

I pull up the metal roller shutters with a *shhhhh* then put my key into the lock and twist. It clicks open and the little bell sounds out as I swing open the door. My fingertips trace the exposed brick inside for the light switch – *flick* – and the bulbs buzz to life as I flip the sign from ‘Closed’ to ‘Open’ and then me and Button head inside. I put her down on the counter, open her kitty box and she meows and steps out. I head behind the counter, drop my bag and her box on the floor, and look out through the window onto the street.

The sky is a perfect blue today, one of those autumnal days where everything sparkles in high definition. A day where things feel possible. My eyes graze the shop across the street; they’ve already put up Halloween decorations. I’m going to put mine up this weekend. I might even find Button a cute little outfit.

I turn around to the turntable behind me and take off the record from yesterday. It’s a high-energy indie band I saw play the other night. I try to do that – support local acts – wherever I can, but this morning is a Mazzy Star kind of morning. I put on *So Tonight That I Might See*, there’s a bit of crackle, and then *Fade into You* begins to play as I look around the room.

Most of the stock I carry is a combination of what I love (my mother’s collection is upstairs – not for sale) and what people ask for most. Everything is ordered alphabetically by the musician or band’s first name. I love the familiarity of that, like they’re friends and we’re all on a first-name basis. The plastic from their packaging glitters under yellow industrial light bulbs hanging from the ceilings; there’s a small office, storeroom, kitchenette, and bathroom out the back, and a pink neon cursive sign that reads *Wilhelmina’s*.

Because I turned twenty-five on March 7th, not long after it all went down, and so then I received my inheritance. At first I thought: law school. It seemed the

obvious choice. But I know myself and there was no way I'd be able to resist going back to my old ways. An alcoholic wouldn't work in a bar, right? So I did this instead.

I opened the record store my mother always wanted. We do vinyl, we do cassettes and we do CDs. Amazingly, I even turn a profit.

I don't have any staff yet – it's just me. Me and Button. I live upstairs now, so it's easy to bring her to work. Sometimes it's boring, sometimes I still sit on Reddit and think *what if*, but I go to my meetings and honestly, this is good, this little life I'm building. I can do this.

I turn on the computer and make sure everything is set up and ready, pulling up my inbox. That's when I hear my phone *beep-beep* from my bag.

I reach for it, running through who it might be – Sadie, Derek, Heather, Dad – but it's none of them.

It's Hot-Josh.

It reads: *So... I've been thinking about Button a lot. I miss her.*

The world stops spinning for a micro-second and something aches inside me. A flash of his eyes; the colour of a winter sea. His hair flopping over his forehead...

I tap through to it and my heart flutters weirdly as I read it again. And yes, I know I should play it cool, so I wait a moment, two moments, three, then I think *screw it* and type back: *She misses you too.*

The little bell on the door rings again and I look up thinking: *Is it him? Is he here? Is my life now a pop song?*

But it's not him.

It's a woman – late thirties, with blonde hair and cat-eye sunglasses. My first customer of the day.

'Hi,' I say, as she comes inside.

'Hi,' she replies as the little bell on the door rings again as the door closes and she heads over to the far wall.

'Let me know if you're looking for anything specific,' I say, then I turn back to my phone and bite down on my lower lip as I watch the typing bubbles start and stop and start again.

And then *beep-beep*.

Hot-Josh: *Should we grab a drink then? For Button?*

A jolt moves through me. Helium beneath my ribs. And I just grin down at my phone. Because I've wanted this for so damned long. And now it's happening.

But also, he *did* make me wait eight months. And I was very-very sad. So I type back: *Fine. For Button. I guess I'll just have to put up with you for her sake... When?*

And then I add a kiss, you know, just to soften it so he knows I'm joking.

The woman lingers near the dedicated Lilith Fair corner and then stops, puts her sunglasses on her head and starts flipping through records starting with 'F'. She's fine. Doesn't need help. So I turn back to my computer and scroll down through the emails that have come in overnight: online orders, queries, one from Sadie confirming dinner tonight; I'm supposed to be meeting her new boyfriend. Kyle *was* cheating on her, by the way. Always listen to your instincts.

Beep-beep.

I reach for my phone. *Ha! That's big of you. Saturday? X*

The woman is coming over to the counter now and I think maybe she's been in here before, because there's something familiar about her – the curve of her cheek, or... I don't know. Something. And I'm about to make small talk and commend her on her taste, whatever it is, but then my phone beeps again and I can't help it, I look down.

Hot-Josh: *PS. Can't wait to see you. X*

A warmth floods through me but the woman lets out a big sigh like she wants my full attention, so I grin up at her. She places Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and *Tusk* on the counter and I'm about to scan them when a chill runs through me.

Because she's reaching into her bag to find her card and there, on her wrist, is a tattoo of a bright red heart.

It can't be.

'It's in here somewhere,' she says.

My heartrate speeds up.

'Here it is,' she says, pulling out her wallet and smiling up at me.

What do I do? WHAT THE FUCK DO I DO?

And then I hear my own voice say: 'Would you like forty per cent off?' It comes out of nowhere; it's not planned, I promise.

She looks up at me, surprised.

‘You just need to join our mailing list and add us on Instagram,’ I say, shrugging like I don’t give a shit either way but that little flame inside me just ignited and I do give a shit, I really give a shit. And, no, we don’t really have a mailing list. I made it up because I need to know.

‘I don’t do Instagram,’ she says. ‘But Twitter?’

‘Sure,’ I say.

I watch as she taps through to the app and I’m holding my breath thinking: *Don’t be rash. Maybe it’s not her. Maybe lots of people have that tattoo.* And then she taps her screen and my own phone, still sitting on the counter, lights up with a notification from Twitter.

@therealbeltturner just followed you.

I clutch onto the countertop, dizziness washing over me.

It’s her. It’s really her.

After all this time. All this wondering. All the imagining what I would say if she was there in front of me, here we are. And I’m not saying anything at all. She looks different in real life, without the filters. She looks different but she *feels* the same.

I pull up a Word document because, you know, I’m supposed to have a mailing list, and say ‘Is Bel short for Belinda?’ I ask it innocently, fingers poised to type as I shoot her a smile.

‘Gabiella,’ she says, replying to a text now.

That’s why I couldn’t find her. I looked under everything else. Belinda. Bella. Isabella.

‘Postcode?’ I ask.

‘11204,’ she says, stabbing at her screen.

‘Date of birth?’

She looks up at me, frowning.

‘It’s for birthday discounts – you don’t have to.’

‘September 14th.’

Her phone starts to ring and she holds up a finger signalling for me to wait, so I do.

‘I don’t fucking care what they want – they’re idiots anyway,’ she says to whoever is on the other end. ‘Look, I’ll be back soon, I’m busy, but just deal with

it. No! I don't care! Hayley, I will fucking fire you. Fix it.' And then she hangs up and looks back to me.

'And best contact?' I ask, my mouth dry. *Please give me something I can use.*

'You can message me on Twitter. I don't give out my number,' she says.

'Sure,' I reply, minimising the window just in case she moves slightly to her left and catches a view of the screen.

And I don't want to let her leave with Stevie and Lindsey and co because they deserve better but I ring them up anyway, smile, put her records in a paper bag and listen as the door jingles and she disappears from view. I turn back to my screen and glance down through the information thinking *I'm not doing this anymore*. I think of Josh and his message. I think of Derek and AA and Keiran Astor's body. I think of Grange and Jane Delaney. And then I pull up a browser, type in *G-a-b-r-i-e-l-l-a T-u-r-n-e-r*, and enter her postcode.

The screen flashes white for a moment and I'm just looking, I'm not doing, and hey, everyone is allowed to fantasise... because what if she's done it again? What if she's sent other *why don't you just kill yourself* messages? What if she's still hurting people? What if someone else dies? I mean, she didn't sound very nice on the phone.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...

But then there they are: the results.

She has a textile business, it seems. Not far from here.

And *holy shit* – there's her address.

Her full address.

And as I stare at the screen, that little flame inside me burns brighter and brighter and brighter and my blood is electric and the world has turned to technicolour and all I can think is: *Uh-oh*.

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Pip xx

More from the Author



[The Strangers We Know](#)

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Pip Drysdale is a bestselling author of *The Sunday Girl*, *The Strangers We Know* and *The Paris Affair*. She grew up between Africa and Australia, became an adult between New York and London, lives on a steady diet of coffee, dreams and literature, and loves music, balconies, pretty clothes and moving cities. Before becoming a novelist she spent time as a musician and an actress. Her books have been published in multiple territories, she has been shortlisted for The Ned Kelly Award and *The Strangers We Know* is being developed for television. Pip presently lives in Sydney.

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