



THE  
**FALL**  
OF  
**IRIS**  
**HENLEY**

**JENNIFER GRAHAM**



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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## DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU

It is so easy to ruin someone's life. To take away everything that matters to them. Their friends. Their family. Their reputation. Even their future.

All it takes is fourteen days. A few strokes of the keyboard. A storm of whispers. And just like that, it all crumbles.

Trust me. I know.

Because it happened to me. And if you're not careful, it could happen to you too.

DAY  
ONE

# CHAPTER 1

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 7:23 PM  
VARDA HIGH FOOTBALL FIELD

It's one of those nights I used to love. One of those nights with a packed stadium, where the football arcs like a rocket against the sky and the lights feel like a halo around all of us. Where everyone glows a little, even the kids in the stands, even the teachers and parents, all their faces painted green and gold.

Everyone glows a little. But we glow brightest of all.

“Get up!” I’m at the center of the line of cheerleaders, clapping between each sentence. “Get up!” We all move and shout in perfect sync so you can’t pick any one of our voices from the crowd. We have practiced this over and over, drilled the rhythms down so now it’s all a perfect muscle memory. “Let’s go!” *Clap clap.* “Let’s go!”

We are here to smile and laugh and look weightless. And we’re good at it. To my left and right, Hayden O’Hara and Molly Jun kneel down and I jump up to their palms. “Let’s go!” I shout, holding one fist up to the sky as they lift me up. A smile is just one more muscle memory, flashing across your face. “Let’s go!”

I'm only up there for a few seconds, but it's long enough to get a good look at the bleachers. Everyone I know is out there. All the people I've grown up with, the kids I've known since kindergarten. Varda is small, and there aren't too many people that come or go. And on a Friday night there's nowhere to be but here. There's Mr. Blanton, my Hank Williams-obsessed English teacher, sitting with his wife and kids; there's Miss Geneva, our school secretary, in one of her trademark rhinestone-studded denim jackets. There's Morgan Jennings and Lydia Haber-Jones, taking a break from the physics lab we have to write up this weekend, and Stephen Dawes from choir, and his girlfriend Lacy Smith. There's my mom sitting with some other cheer moms, most of them almost as made-up as we are. There's my sister Noelle with the marching band, sweating in the green-and-gold uniform. Even people without school-age kids come to our games—I recognize neighbors and shopkeepers and my old pediatrician. It's what you do in Varda.

It's what you do, even after bad things happen.

Then I'm flying. Falling, really, tumbling into my friends' arms. They catch me and I right myself in two beats, quick and clean. It's an easy trick, but it looks good, and it always gets a reaction from the crowd. They howl and whistle and clap as we do our toe touches. We step to the side to drink our water.

It's strange, how back to normal everything feels. This is the fourth game of the season. At the first game everyone cried or looked scared; no one really knew how to feel or what was okay to say. It was the first game without Rocky, and his absence took up so much space. But now it's October and everyone's eased into the new reality, the new shape of the team, the new plays and the new dynamics.

Or maybe they're all like me, and still baffled, still lost, but they're holding it all together outside. That automatic smile, the muscle memory that keeps us moving forward.

“This is embarrassing,” says Sophie Garcia, her eyes following our team as they move back up the field for the next play. “Sanders can’t hit the side of a barn, why is he still in the game?”

“Come on, paste that grin back on.” Hayden pokes Sophie’s cheek with a manicured fingertip. “If we can’t cheer on a bunch of losers, who can?”

My two best friends are a study in contrasts. Hayden is tall and curvy and loud. She’s exuberant but sometimes sloppy, the rare kind of cheerleader whose energy really is directed toward cheering on the team more than pulling off the stunts or making it to competitions. Sophie, on the other hand, is a flier like me, a sharp little wire of controlled energy. She’s small and dimpled and what most people would call “adorable.” She is also what some people would call “prickly,” but that’s just because she doesn’t take shit.

“Look, those dumbasses are going to try to take it up the center. I can’t even watch,” Sophie says, covering her eyes.

The ref blows his whistle. I cringe a little; I’ve never liked the crushing, slamming sound of bodies coming into contact. Rocky used to tease me about it. But the ball is aloft. It hangs there for a moment, and I watch, entranced, as it falls right into Billy Schultz’s hands.

Hayden is screaming right into my ear. “Run! Run!” All around, the crowd is going wild. I can’t make out what’s going on for a moment; there’s just a tangle of bodies, our own team in green and gold, and Deerfield’s in black and blue. And then I see Billy come out of the scrum, hurtling toward the end zone. And then there it is: a touchdown.

The band launches into the fight song, and we scramble into position. Our touchdown routine is always the same: a few dance moves, a few basket tosses, a pyramid at the end. I find my mark, my hips already finding the beat. The crowd is going

wild. And I think, between the light and the noise, between the laughter of my friends and the way the drumbeats bounce on my bones, maybe . . . maybe we are okay. Maybe *I* am okay.

Hayden and Molly move in to either side of me and then I'm flying, tumbling, landing in their arms again to thunderous applause. And then it's time to build the pyramid. I am top girl because I'm five foot one and because I'm strong. That's a thought that echoes: I am strong. I'm strong enough for all of this—for the pyramid, for the pressure. And then I have a split second where the world feels like it used to—big and beautiful and full of possibility.

Then I see them, there on the bleacher steps. The Koenigs. Rocky's mom and dad.

They're standing on the steps, dressed head to toe in green and gold, for all the world like they're just any other family. Mr. Koenig holds a giant sign that says PUMA PRIDE. Mrs. Koenig—Chrissy, she always told me to call her—is wearing Rocky's letterman jacket, even though it's got to be almost ninety degrees out. Her smile is sad and frail, but she claps with everyone else. I think, for a moment, that she meets my gaze, her smile quirking up a half centimeter more.

The world blurs again as I fall back to my friends' arms. I stagger over to the sidelines, forgetting to do any herkies or toe touches. I'll hear about that later, but right now I don't care. My stomach gives a low, acid jerk. I grab my water bottle and take a drink, the chill hitting my gut with another wrenching splash.

“Iris? What’s wrong?” Sophie slides in next to me, her eyes wide. “Did you get hurt?”

“No, I . . .” I can’t bring myself to say it. But by then, I don’t need to. Others are starting to notice.

“What the hell,” Hayden mutters, staring up into the stands. She’s not the only one. The whole squad’s started to notice.

Bella Zseleczky's mouth has fallen open in a small O of shock. Tammy Bates looks like she's ready to fly into the bleachers and give them a piece of her mind. And slowly, the rest of the crowd turns to see what's happening. The movement is subtle at first, a wind in the leaves, but as more and more people turn to look, a murmur wells up.

I close my eyes for a moment, then turn to look again. Mr. Koenig hesitates on the steps, looking like he's as likely to bolt for the exit as anything. But Mrs. Koenig? She ignores everyone. She pushes her way past Mr. Blanton and his family to get to an empty spot on the bleachers. After a moment, her husband follows.

“Why would they come here?” Hayden’s voice trembles softly. “They shouldn’t be here.”

There’s a wide radius around Rocky’s parents as they sit. It’s like they’re radioactive. It’s like they’re diseased and no one wants to catch it. And just like that, the illusion that we’re all okay, that we’re all moving on, goes up in smoke.

Because you can’t just show up like that. Not if your son is a murderer.

# CHAPTER 2

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 7:36 PM  
VARDA HIGH FOOTBALL FIELD

For a moment we all just stand there, each of us weighing the change, the sharp before and after—what we lost, what Rocky took from all of us. The anger and pain are palpable.

But I can't help it. My heart feels blistered with pity, rubbed raw by it, as I look up toward them, their resolute faces ravaged with grief. Mrs. Koenig has lost weight. Mr. Koenig, who's always been neat and well-groomed, has patches of stubble over his face. They've lost nearly everything that mattered to them, and even though, yes, they've got a lot of nerve to think they can come here, I can't help but feel for them too.

It was Rocky's sister that found the bodies in mid-April. She was out for an early morning run. The Koenigs have a two-thousand-acre ranch, and she took to one of the winding trails in the thin dawn light. I sometimes picture her flying past cedar trees and prickly pears, opening the creaky fences and carefully closing them behind her. I know the trails well; Rocky and I used to wander there, sometimes on his chestnut gelding, sometimes on the exhaust-spewing old ATV. Twenty

minutes on foot from the main house there's a little cabin, half falling down, a single room where his grandparents lived when they first set up there on the ranch. It would've been easy for Kendra to run past it and pay it no mind. But that day she saw something that made her stop.

Vultures. Maybe ten, twelve of them, perched on the roof, on the fence, fluttering up as she ran toward them and then settling back where they'd been.

She said, later, that she figured it must be a cow, or maybe a deer. Something big enough to attract that kind of attention. But something made her stop. Something made her push the cabin door open and peer into the gloom. And when her eyes adjusted, that was when she saw them.

Rocky, flat on his back, blood curdling in his hair. And a few feet away . . .

"I thought it was Iris," she'd told the deputies on the scene. That was what the paper said, anyway. I haven't talked to her since it all happened. "Her face was covered with blood. I didn't really examine her features. I was just trying to wake them up."

But of course she couldn't.

And of course, it wasn't me.

It was Lynette Zeiger. My ex-best friend.

There wasn't a note, but according to the sheriff it was cut and dried. The gun belonged to Rocky. It'd been in his hand, though when Kendra tried to do CPR it fell away. But there weren't any other prints, and there wasn't any evidence anyone else had been there. No one had even known they were hooking up.

I don't remember much of the spring or early summer. I stumbled around like a zombie for weeks, barely able to see what was right in front of my face. But it wasn't just my loss. It tore our school apart. Not just our school—our town. The whole thing is something no one wants to touch.

And the Koenigs showing up, like they still have someone to cheer on in this game? It's making people remember things they don't want to.

I get to my feet and grab a pom. It takes a moment; the other girls are all whispering to each other, looking nervous. Sophie's the first to see me, and she scampers to my side. And then, one by one, we all take our places.

“We. Are. Varda!” I shout. A moment later, their voices join in with me. “We! Are! Varda!”

Slowly, the crowd starts to pull its attention back to us, back to the field. The Koenigs still hold a little island in the middle of the bleachers, but no one's staring at them anymore. Some people clap along with the chant. Sophie's eyes are shining with tears. Behind us the boys are huddled, and they break apart with a clap, ready for the next play.

It might be my imagination, but for a second, I think Mrs. Koenig meets my eyes again. I look away. Just because I don't think she deserves to be punished for what Rocky did doesn't mean I want to exchange glances.

“We! Are! Varda!” I shout. I imagine every word as a burst of speed carrying me that much farther away from Rocky's parents, from Rocky himself. Here I am in the glow of the stadium, shaking my pom-poms like someone who's never seen a hint of evil or tragedy.

Here I am, smiling like someone who has nothing to do with the act that nearly tore our town to pieces.

# CHAPTER 3

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 11:06 PM  
BILLY SCHULTZ'S RANCH

“My feet are a mess.” Sophie wiggles her bare toes, showing off tonight’s blisters. “This new routine is killing me.”

The post-game party is at Billy Schultz’s ranch, ten miles out from town. It’s not as sprawling or well-kept as the Koenig ranch, but it’s right on the river. There’s a bonfire raging in the clearing in front of the barn. One keg is already drained, and another is well on its way.

Hayden, Sophie, and I are sitting together on the splintering dock, far enough away from the crowd that we can see the stars overhead. The night’s still hot, but a cool breath of air comes off the water. I hug my knees, my own aches and pains starting to throb.

“Ew, get ’em away from me.” Hayden swats at Sophie’s toes. Sophie rubs her foot rapidly all over Hayden’s arm in revenge, then plunges her feet into the water. “Ahh. So much better.”

“The glamorous life of the cheerleader,” Hayden says.

“Sticking your stinky feet in river water. Who wouldn’t want this?”

“It’s not so bad,” Sophie says. “This summer at dance camp I lost two whole toenails.”

“Truly disgusting,” Hayden says cheerfully. “Ballerinas are monsters.”

“Yeah, babe, I keep telling you that. You’ve seen *Black Swan*.”

I take a swig of my beer and listen to their patter. I can tell they’re doing their best to keep things normal, keep things light, after what happened at the game. I love them for that. I didn’t really want to come tonight—not after the Koenigs showed up—but they loaded me in Hayden’s Jeep and dragged me here anyway. I’m glad they did, even if I’m feeling wrong-footed and tired.

I’ve been friends with Sophie and Hayden since our freshman year, when the three of us were alternates for the varsity cheer team. That meant we spent most of our time learning the varsity moves and then warming the bench during the actual performances. Sophie came to cheer by way of dance, of course, and Hayden used to do gymnastics when she was younger. I was the only one who came to it cold. I only auditioned because Lynette forced me to do it with her. It was a surprise to me when I ended up liking it, when I ended up being good at it.

Not as good as Lynette had been. She was the only one of us that made varsity freshman year. But then, she was also the only one kicked off the team, after she failed a surprise drug test October of our junior year.

The end of her cheer career, and the end of our friendship, all in one day.

I shake my head, imagining that the action could knock the thoughts loose, like some kind of human Etch A Sketch. Out of force of habit I pick up my phone. It’s low on battery—constantly hovering at about 5 percent charge is my toxic

trait—but I flip through the usual apps. Pics of the party are already showing up on Sekrit, which almost everyone at school uses for gossip. It's an encrypted app, so a lot of people use it to hide their private messages from their parents and teachers. There are also "communities" in the app that let you post and reply to other people's posts, sort of like on Reddit. I scroll through for a second. There are pictures from the game. There's a thread about the Koenigs' appearance—that one has over a hundred comments already. Someone named "clown-sex" posted THE KEG IS HERE about twenty minutes ago and it now has almost three hundred likes, which is way more people than are actually at this party. I wonder who's sitting at home liking random posts from a party they aren't invited to on a Friday night.

Then I close the app and, with a quick glance at Hayden and Sophie to make sure they aren't watching too close, I open up my chat history. It's disappointing. There's nothing new from Jonah yet.

Jonah Bergman and I have flirted on and off at summer camp for the past three years, though it's never had a chance to go anywhere. The first summer, he had a girlfriend back in Houston. The second summer, I was with Rocky. This last summer, of course, I was still shell-shocked from everything that happened last spring. But we hung out as friends. We've been texting back and forth since camp, and while it's stayed mostly friendly, there's a sense that something could develop, given a little time.

I haven't told the girls. I'm not sure why. I guess I don't want to have to answer any questions about it yet. I like that it's a quiet, casual thing. I like that no one can put any pressure on it or ask me to define it. And even then—after being part of Varda's most high-profile couple, after having everyone in town find out every part of my business—the secrecy is a luxury.

Jonah's profile pic is a photo of him mid-laugh. One dark curl hanging in his left eye. A smile without reserve or hardness. And there's what he said to me last night: Good luck tomorrow with the new routine. I think for a moment about replying. What would I say? *Rocky's parents made a surprise appearance tonight, can you believe that?* No—we have already talked so much about Rocky and Lynette, and he's been nothing but understanding, but I don't need him thinking that I'm damaged goods, so broken everything in my life is governed by my worst day. I don't want to bring it back to Rocky every damn time. Instead, I attach one of my pregame selfies. High honey-blond ponytail, bright blush on the wings of my cheeks. False eyelashes a mile long. I add a filter to smooth things out—we use stage makeup, and so it looks a little caked-on close up. Then I add a note. We lost the game but at least I looked cute.

“What you doing?”

I'm so startled I scream and fumble my phone. Luckily it doesn't fall through the planks of the dock to the river below. I scoop it up, and in the light of the screen I see Bryce Sanders. This season's quarterback.

Rocky's replacement.

He leans toward me, his breath hot and beery, trying to get a glance at my phone. With one click I make it go dark. “Texting my mom.”

Behind him, Carter Mabry—Hayden's linebacker boyfriend—lurches toward us. “There you are!” he says. “Baby, come up to the bonfire, there's marshmallows.” He's slurring so badly it comes out more like “smarchmallows.”

“Hey, baby,” Hayden coos, her voice going suddenly soft. “I'll be up there in a minute. Just hanging with my girls.”

It's always kind of awkward to see the way Hayden's personality changes around her boyfriend. He's one of those guys that

reacts to every little inconvenience with rage, and she spends a lot of energy trying to soothe him.

I'm hoping he'll stagger back up to the fire to wait for her and take Bryce with him. Bryce has asked me out at least three times since freshman year. Luckily he's had the decency to not pursue me since Rocky died, but I've noticed his eyes on me at school recently—just like they're falling on me now.

"Man, Iris, you must be . . . so messed up tonight. Rocky's parents just showing up like their kid didn't blow some girl's head off," says Bryce.

Carter rounds on Bryce and for a moment there's fire in his eyes. The girls tense up next to me, but I just shrug. Carter's always on edge about Rocky. He was Rocky's best friend, and probably as hurt as anyone about what Rocky ended up doing. It's the one thing I have in common with him. We're both stuck going round and round, loving Rocky and hating Rocky, missing him, fearing him. Pitying Lynette and missing her and hating her too.

And feeling guilty for whatever part we may have had in all of it.

"Someone should've beat the shit out of them," Bryce says, shadow-punching the air, drunkenly oblivious to Carter's growing rage. One of Bryce's fists whistles unnervingly past my ear. "Bam, bam—"

"*Bam*," Carter says with a sudden smile, sucker punching Bryce in the stomach. Bryce goes down with a groan. For a second, I worry there's going to be a fight, but then Bryce and Carter both burst into laughter.

"That was weak, dude," Bryce says, gasping as Carter helps him back to his feet, both boys stumbling.

"Just doing a public service. These ladies were sick of hearing you talk," Carter says.

“Classy,” Sophie mutters. She loathes Carter, though she tries to keep it under wraps for Hayden’s sake.

“Whatever. You know I’m right. They knew what they were doing.” Bryce’s eyes fix on me for another moment before going out of focus again. “They should just sell the ranch and get out of here the way the Zeigers did. No one wants them around anymore.”

Hayden darts a quick glance at me, then stands up to put her arms around Carter’s neck before he has a chance to respond to Bryce. “How about you and Bryce head back up to the bonfire,” she murmurs. “And I’ll meet you *after* the party.”

I know this is for my sake. She and Sophie talked me into coming tonight, but when it became obvious I wasn’t ready for the crowd, they didn’t complain, just followed me down to the river. But all at once, I decide this is just as bad as not coming at all. “We’ll all go,” I say. “I want a smarchmollow.”

Sophie laughs loudly. Hayden looks at me, head cocked. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” I stand up and brush the dust off my bare legs. “I need to run up to the bathroom anyway. I’ll meet you guys over there in a few minutes. Get me another beer?”

“Sure,” Hayden says. She throws Sophie’s sneakers toward her. “Here, put those things away.”

I listen to them squabble behind me as I walk away. Hayden shrieks as Carter swoops her up in his arms, and Bryce is busy bragging about his one pass that traveled more than fifteen yards.

Carter, dumb and falling-down drunk as he is, is right. The river’s darkness may feel safe, anonymous, but it’s time to join that circle of light reaching out from the bonfire.

# CHAPTER 4

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 11:23 PM  
BILLY SCHULTZ'S RANCH

Inside the barn someone's set up a crappy old sound system, the bass vibrating so wildly I can't even tell what the song is. Ashlynn Duvall is playing beer pong with Javier Rodriguez and Preston Holmes. I hope they realize she's going to destroy them. A bunch of other people are sitting on a water-stained living-room set, shouting to be heard over the speakers. An ancient smell of horse lingers on the air. Billy's family built a newer barn closer to their house a few years ago, letting Billy and his brothers use this one as a kind of rec room ever since. There's no AC out here, but there are also no parents. So it's a trade-off.

There's a line at the bathroom, of course, and it's almost entirely girls. The boys just pee in the bushes. It's okay. I don't really have to go. I just want to take a minute behind the closed door to fix the makeup I feel sweating down my cheeks and to make sure I'm ready to face the crowd at the bonfire.

I lean against the wall and close my eyes, letting the thrum of the bass and the sound of conversation wash over me. The party feels strangely far away tonight, even when I'm in the middle of it. It would be easy to blame the Koenigs, to say that their appearance at the game is what has me so off-kilter. But it wouldn't be true. The truth is, Rocky and Lynette are never really that far from my mind.

Bryce's words keep running through my mind. *Rocky's parents just showing up like their kid didn't blow some girl's head off.* Caustic and glib, obviously—but it's also not lost on me that he didn't say Lynette's name, even though he'd been in school with her since elementary school, just like the rest of us.

He's not the only one. Mostly, no one brings up Rocky or Lynette—but there are people that think Lynette did something to “make” him do it. They said she'd manipulated him into a pact of some kind or that she'd gotten him hooked on drugs. A few people even blamed me. What kind of girlfriend doesn't know her boyfriend is cheating on her? What kind of girlfriend doesn't stop it? What kind of girlfriend is boring or bitchy enough to drive her boyfriend to another woman?

Sophie always gets mad about it. She says questions like that are shitty and misogynist, and she's probably right. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't ask them sometimes too. Not that I think either Lynette or I were to blame—just that I wonder how the boy I knew turned into a boy that could do something like that. Or had he been a secret monster all along? Had I been blind to it, or had he been that good at hiding it?

In the bathroom I do my best to clean up, dabbing at the sweaty smears under my eyes, putting on a fresh coat of lipstick. I run my fingers through my hair and knot it at the top of my head. There. Look at Iris Henley, pretty (not pretty enough to keep her boyfriend on a tight leash), and popular (popular

enough to weather the fallout after his crime), and put together (on the outside, at least). I move my head right and left in the mirror, making sure I look fine from all angles. Then I take a deep breath and head back out there.

It takes me a few seconds to feel the way something in the air has shifted, and it takes a few more to realize what. The line outside the girl's room is quiet, watching me. A few push themselves against the wall as I walk past, like they are recoiling. My face goes warm. Is there lipstick on my teeth, toilet paper on my shoe? I do a quick scan of my body, but nothing's out of place. *Assholes*, I think. They were talking about me while I was in there. Maybe telling some dumb freshman the story of who I am, what my boyfriend did.

Outside the barn a strange energy's taken over. People looking at their phones, faces lit up, eerie in the glow. People hurrying across the clearing to talk to a friend. I can't hear what anyone's saying under the thrum of the music. Something's probably making the rounds on Sekrit. I fumble my phone out of my purse but it's totally out of battery now.

Hayden and Sophie are both at the bonfire, heads together, whispering urgently. When I see their faces, I know. Something *is* making the rounds. Something they want to keep from me.

Sophie's the first one to speak. She looks up with a shaky smile and shoves her phone quickly into her pocket. "There you are. Hey, the keg's totally empty, so we were thinking we should just get out of here. Hayden says she's sober enough to drive. We could go to Buc-ee's . . ."

Her voice trails off as I snatch the phone right out of Hayden's hand. Sekrit is right there on her screen, open to a fresh post. Time stamp: 11:27. Probably the moment I locked the bathroom door behind me.

U/ROCKYTRUTHER2001

## IRIS HENLEY IS A MURDERER

Throwaway account for obvious reasons.

Iris has been going along with the official story but do not trust her. She knew Rocky was cheating. She wanted to catch him red-handed. When she got there she took the gun out of his truck. Maybe all she wanted was to scare him—but she lost it when she found out it was Lynette. She shot them both and made it look like a murder-suicide.

I didn't speak up because I thought the cops would run tests and figure it out but they haven't and now I'm scared that she is going to get away with it.

Do not trust her.

She is a liar.

She is a murderer.

She will do it again if she gets a chance.