



EVERY
EXQUISITE
THING

Laura Steven



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I first pitched this reimagining of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I hadn't planned on writing something that dealt with body image and disordered eating so directly. I originally intended to use Penny's fear over her hair loss to tackle our collective obsession with beauty—and the way it's hailed as a young woman's most vital currency.

Yet the further I got into the story, the more I realized that for girls entering into a portrait bargain like this, a huge part of the appeal would be no longer having to restrict themselves to achieve a certain physique. To skirt around that fact felt cowardly, so I decided to tackle the issue head-on.

This is something I found terrifying, for a variety of reasons, but this story felt important enough for me to tuck that fear away—or at least to write alongside it.

That said, I oppose the culture of authors feeling obligated to disclose private information in order to defend themselves against scrutiny, especially when exploring thorny and inherently problematic issues. So I ask you to please trust that I write this story from a deeply personal place. It's the book I so badly needed when I was eighteen.

Finally, your mileage with body image may vary. I don't seek to represent every story, struggle or perspective—just Penny's.

Laura x



PROLOGUE

A full moon hung low over the mirrored surface of the lake, round and silver as a tenpence piece.

A darkened figure knelt on the shore, screaming like a wounded animal.

Blinking sleep from my eyes, I squinted through the arched window in my dorm room. With a sickening lurch, I recognized the spidery limbs and the short black hair.

Davina.

I don't know what made me run to her. We hated each other with a venom I'd never experienced before—our every exchange left puncture wounds—and yet there was something so existentially terrible in her cries. Something that called to me like a siren.

Stuffing my feet into sheepskin boots, I tossed a trench coat over my pajamas and hurtled out of the flat. The night air was so cold it felt solid, and the Great Lawn was slicked with dew as I sprinted down toward the lake. A low mist gathered in the Crosswoods beyond, swirling with moonlight to cast a spectral glow over the grounds. Everything smelled of frost and silt.

As I grew closer, Davina's howls ebbed to a low sob, and somehow that was worse.

Breathless, I skidded to a halt beside her. Her head was in her hands, narrow shoulders shaking violently inside her leather jacket. Her knees pressed into the wet lakeshore, and damp was spreading up her black jeans—she must have been freezing.

"Davina," I said, torn between softness and ferocity, the words coming out somewhere in between.

She stilled at the sound of my voice. "Leave me alone, Penny."

"No." I pulled my coat tighter around me, teeth chattering. "You're upset."

Her hands clasped her face with a kind of fierce desperation, as though trying to hold her features in place. "Just fuck off."

No.

Usually she would fight back, spar for spar, dodging and parrying with vicious words, but her ferocious spirit seemed to abandon her. Instead she began hyperventilating, rollicking gasps wracking her whole body as she tried to take in air.

Then she said something else, but it was so obscured by her labored wheezes that I didn't catch it.

"What?" I asked. I'd been crouching beside her but had to give in to my trembling muscles and lower my knees to the ground. The cold wet earth turned my silk pajamas into ice in an instant.

Slowly, silently, Davina lowered her hands from her face, turning to look at me.

My stomach heaved, and I fought the urge to cry out.

Her left eye was *gone*.

But there was no blood. The socket was simply welded shut, bisected by a ragged gash from the arch of her brow to the ridge of her cheekbone. Even in the silvery moonlight, it was clear the scar was a faded purple, as though the wound were weeks or even months old.

Impossible. I'd seen her only hours before.

Planting a palm on the ground, I stared at the earth and fought to keep from fainting. My vision blurred, shimmering like mist and silk and shadows.

"Oh my god," I whispered, bile stinging the back of my tongue.

I looked up at her again, dizzy and disoriented, the feeling of landing into a parallel world where everything was *wrong*.

Davina was shaking uncontrollably now. "It's real, then. Not a nightmare."

Pull it together, I told myself. *This isn't about you.*

Except it was.

"I'm so sorry," I all but moaned. Blood thundered in my ears. "I'm so sorry."

She covered her face once more, and my heart broke for her. She started murmuring lowly, urgently, like a litany. "Not my eye. Please, not my eye, I— It can't be gone. No, no, *no*. I'll do anything."

My skin prickled with vicarious dread. "Does it hurt?"

A frantic sob. "I felt the blade, I— It doesn't make sense. There was no real knife to my face. How can— *Argghhhhhhh*." She

drove her fingers through her cropped black hair, grabbing desperate fistfuls of it.

“Were you awake?”

She shook her head fiercely. “The pain woke me up pretty quickly.”

“And you came here?” My stomach was gripped in a vice, threatening to empty at any moment.

“I don’t know why I was compelled to.” She dropped her bone-white hands into her lap and stared out to the eerily still water. The swans barely caused a ripple as they circled hypnotically. “It was like my feet dragged me of their own accord. I didn’t even scream, at first. I thought it was a dream.” Her whispering voice rose an octave. “It *has* to be a dream, Penny. It has to.” I’d never heard her sound so young.

A strange kind of protectiveness came over me. I grabbed her by the shoulders, looking at her straight on, not flinching at the sight of the wound even though I so badly wanted to. “We’re going to find who did this.”

But her trembling only intensified. She once again began praying to a faceless deity. “No, no, no, *please*, please don’t be real, please—”

“Davina . . .”

Then she let go, let the pain and anguish and fear roll out of her in visceral screams. She dug her fingers into the earth, dragging deep claw marks along the shore. “No, no, no, no . . .”

The ghostly swans on the lake watched with funereal ambivalence.

Fear gripped me by the ribs as I ran a finger over my own warning scar—carved as I slept by an invisible blade, a disembodied hand.

There were already three dead bodies in the Masked Painter's wake.

The message was clear: If we didn't find the killer soon, we would both be next.



CHAPTER ONE

Several weeks earlier

The spotlights shone white-gold from the back of the theater, rendering the row of casting directors in front of them headless.

I clutched a blank sheet of paper in my hands. A fake letter from Macbeth.

“What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly, / That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false / And yet wouldst wrongly win.”

My voice was a staccato rattle, fraught but also restrained, heated but controlled, like stoking a coal furnace. I imbued the Lady’s scornful lines with an undercurrent of jealousy, hunger, letting her need for power burn through the words. Ambition was not too difficult an emotion to access, given how much I wanted this lead.

And I knew in my bones I was going to get it.

I'd spent my whole life playing the part of Penny Paxton, daughter of an icon. Acting felt as natural to me as breathing. So if the old adage was true—that it took ten thousand hours to master a craft—then nobody could come close to me.

But god, I was nervous. I was so nervous that my vision blackened and starred, and I had to blink furiously to bring myself back into the room. Fear coiled around my stomach like a python crushing its prey, and I couldn't fight the feeling that I wanted to be somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

It was the first week of a three-year undergraduate program at Dorian Drama Academy. The auditions for the winter production of *Macbeth* were open, and my fellow first years sat along the front few rows, watching, enraptured, something like envy written on their faces. Everyone here was excellent—you had to be, to get into Dorian—but they could feel the palpable tension in the room. A crackle in the air, mingled with the scent of hairspray and dusty velvet chairs.

I just had to hope it was for my talent, not my name.

When I finished the audition piece, murmurs rippled through the small crowd. The stern-faced casting director puffed air through her lips. Fraser Li, the favorite for *Macbeth*, climbed to his feet and clapped rapturously. I fizzed with pride. None of the other auditions had garnered such a response—it was very much the *modus operandi* to pretend not to be impressed by your rivals.

I left stage right, and a blonde girl with bright red glasses was wringing her hands in the wings. She was up next, and

looked exactly how I felt inside: small, terrified. Detached from her peers. Alone in some fundamental way.

“You were amazing,” she whispered, clicking her knuckles. Heavy red curtains fell around us in stiff waves. “How do I follow that? Shit. I should have chosen a different soliloquy.”

Her self-consciousness yanked me back to my first-ever audition. I was ten years old, vying for the role of Mary in the primary school nativity play. By then I had started to understand my mother’s fame in a more real sense—the stares, the gasps, the way people literally fainted in her presence. I also understood the fact that she did not shower me with love the way the other parents did to their own kids. My young brain had drawn a wobbly line between the two realities, concluding that if I could follow in her footsteps, maybe I would finally earn her love.

Unfortunately, I could barely get the words out during the audition, and pure terror caused quite a serious accident in my daisy-print underwear. Rebecca Murray was cast instead. Mum didn’t even blink at the news. I’d thrown the underwear in the tampon bin at school, so she wouldn’t have to see what I’d done.

I never wanted anyone to feel how I’d felt back then—even if they were my competition.

“You’re here for a reason, okay? You’ve got this.” I reached out and squeezed the nervous girl’s shoulder, even though physical affection didn’t come naturally to me.

She was white as a sheet. “The words have totally left my

brain. I'm going to forget my lines, and everyone's going to think I'm a moron. Youth theater was one thing, but this . . . maybe I'm not cut out for . . .”

Sympathy twisted through me as she trailed off. Dorian was no amateur dramatics. The stakes were so much higher, the audiences so much more discerning, the pressure of being perceived so much more debilitating.

“Do you want me to wait in the wings?” I suggested quietly. “I'll mouth the words along with you. If you get stuck, just cast a dramatic look over at me, okay? Pretend it's a character choice to have her stare off into the middle distance every now and then.”

She blinked several times. “You'd do that?”

“Of course.” Perhaps it was foolish, but I couldn't fight the feeling that we were both just insecure little kids. And I had spent so long wishing that someone would do the same for me. A reassuring hand on the shoulder. Kindness and affection without ulterior motive.

“Thank you, Penny.”

She smiled gratefully, but I felt that familiar burst of heat, the intense prickling sensation that came from strangers knowing your name when you did not know theirs. A fundamental power imbalance. A scale tipped too far in one direction. The generational curse most would consider a gift.

Play the part. Pretend to be your mother. Nobody needs to know the real you.

“You're welcome,” I said, painting the sanguine mask onto

my face the same way I'd been doing for eighteen years. Smearing the persona over myself like red lipstick. "What's your name?"

Something shone in her eyes, as though she were dazzled by my mere presence. "Nairne."

I nodded. "I'll be right here."

As it happened, Nairne only needed one cue, and while her performance was good, it was too timid, too apologetic. We both exited the stage and took our seats in the front row. Even in the unforgiving leather of my Louboutins, I felt like I was walking on air.

The part was mine. It had to be. Because there was only one actor left to audition for Lady Macbeth, and she was horribly late.

Hadiya Lazar, the casting director, rose to her feet. A high-necked purple poncho draped over her arms in folds of expensive cashmere. "Well, if Ms Burns does not deign to join us, perhaps we should wrap things up here."

Professor Drever, the show's director, gritted his teeth. "Let's give her five more minutes."

Lazar scoffed. "If she does not respect our time, we do not respect—"

"Five. Minutes." Drever's jaw was clenched, and he stared rigidly down at his notes.

Shooting him a filthy look, Lazar cast her gaze around the rest of the students. "By all means, you're free to go."

But nobody moved. We all wanted to see how this would

play out. Would the final actor show up—and receive the tongue-lashing of the century? Or had she disappeared off the face of the earth, the pressure of Dorian already too much to handle?

I looked reverently around. This theater was what most people thought of when they heard the words Dorian Drama Academy. Fronted by a facade of towering stone columns, the neoclassical auditorium inside was all grand proscenium arches, gold-leaf boxes and tiers, and an ornate ceiling fresco depicting the wedding night from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was one of the few student theaters in the world that regularly attracted flocks of patrons, all eager to watch the budding talent of the future—and earn the bragging rights of *I saw them before they were famous*.

While we were waiting in tense silence for the final actor, my phone vibrated with a call in my pocket. *Mum* flashed on the screen, and with it came a pulse of conflicting emotion. I slipped up the aisle into the atrium of the theater to answer.

“Hi, Mum.”

“Darling, listen, can you send me the names of your new roommates? I’m going to have Ballantyne look into them. We must make sure they’re not moles.”

I took a deep, steady breath. Ballantyne was the private investigator my paranoid mother kept on retainer. She wouldn’t let anyone new into my life without a thorough background check, though it was not completely clear what she was afraid

of leaking. Hers was more of a vague, directionless paranoia, a fine mist rather than a sharp point.

“Okay.” A taut beat. I waited for her to ask, but of course she didn’t. “I just had my audition.”

“Oh, of course, darling!” The words were fond, but the tone was not. A common affectation of the upper class—the ability to sound emotive while remaining utterly detached. “How did it go?”

“Really well. Really, really well.” I couldn’t stop the beam spreading across my face. “I think I nailed it, Mum.”

“How wonderful! I’m so proud of you, darling.”

I stilled, those words I’d chased for so long casually tossed in my direction, but there was no warmth behind them. A simple stock phrase, proffered in the correct social situation.

“You are? Proud of me, I mean.” Maybe I could jostle loose some genuine emotion by forcing her to elaborate.

“Of course,” Mum said. “You know, I was cast as Lady Macbeth in first year myself.”

“Really?” The revelation was at once moving and anxiety-inducing—yet another benchmark for direct comparison.

A curious pause. “It’s a wonderful achievement, Penny.”

I swallowed hard. “Thanks. You know, I wasn’t sure whether you remem—”

“Listen, darling, I’ve got to dash. But congratulations! I can’t wait to come and watch.” The thought of my ultra-famous mother stalking back into these hallowed halls filled me with a dread I didn’t quite understand. “Send me those names, won’t you? Soon as you can.”

As we hung up, I tried to convince myself that the words I'd chased for so long were worth the effort. Worth crapping my pants in primary school, worth the debilitating stage fright, worth mimicking her every move since I was a child. And yet I felt more hollow than ever, as though the figure on the horizon I'd been chasing for a decade were nothing but a shadow.

Maybe it would've felt better to receive them over text, I reasoned. Then I wouldn't have to examine the porous words for tone and tenor. I could read them in my own voice. Stare at the screen until they sank in. *I'm so proud of you, darling.*

Just as I was preparing to go back into the auditorium, the rotating gold doors leading from the quad into the lobby swiveled and squeaked, spitting out one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen.

She was ghost-pale, with black pixie hair that stuck up in tufts. Her makeup was Parisian-bare, with just a slick of rose-pink lipstick and soft black mascara. Thinner than me, I noted—a score the demon in my mind always kept—and dressed entirely in black, but it was more biker chic than gothic. Leather jacket, tight jeans, cropped tank top exposing a strip of toned white stomach.

Attraction fluttered low in my belly, like the wings of a moth around a candle.

Seconds later, understanding clicked into place. She was the last student to audition for Lady Macbeth.

My rival.

And yet she was not rushing at all.

She drew closer, carrying with her the scent of fresh cigarette smoke and musky perfume. I couldn't tear my eyes away; it was as though she had her own magnetic field.

I was no stranger to raw charisma—my mother bled the stuff—but it was rare in people my age. I'd always believed it was something you grew into, something that became more powerful with time, like the dark matter of the universe expanding.

I waited for the girl to notice me, but she never did. The experience was entirely foreign. I was used to stares, to whispers, to feeling like a rare species in a city zoo, but the girl in the leather jacket didn't even look at me as she strolled calmly past, her footsteps unhurried, as though she weren't dangerously late to an audition that would define the next three years of her performing career.

I followed her back into the theater, hypnotized, and slid into the second row back from the stage. The late girl was having a terse, low-toned conversation with the casting panel, and *everyone* had turned to watch.

"That's Davina Burns," muttered Nairne beside me. "I heard her entry audition brought grown men to tears."

After a few moments of chastising from the director—which seemed to roll off Davina like rain off an umbrella—she walked down the aisle toward the stage with the elegance of a ballerina, her feet barely grazing the red carpet. Climbing up the narrow stage steps, she shrugged her leather jacket off and tossed it into the wings.

And then she began.

The transformation into Lady Macbeth was immediate—and silent.

Her whole body snapped with tension. Her face was at once blank and haunted.

She cupped her empty hands together, as though clasping the bottom of a candle. I felt immediately silly for bringing a blank sheet of paper to use as a prop. A ridiculous amateur. A pantomime of a person.

Then she started to walk fearfully around the stage.

The sleepwalking scene right before Lady Macbeth's death.

Ghosts we could not see slipped over her face like swathes of silk. Her footsteps grew increasingly frantic.

The theater was crypt-quiet, the air taut with tension.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

I waited for Davina to speak, but she never did. My mind filled in the lines—*Out, damned spot! Out, I say!*—but it was almost like she didn't *need* to utter them. The emotions of the scene writhed through her entire body. Fear and shame and frantic remorse.

She pulled one hand off the invisible candle, staring blankly into her palm. Her breath hitched in her chest, horror dawning over her pixie features.

Here's the scent of blood still: all the / perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little / hand.

Goosebumps covered me from head to toe. The scene played out not in words but in *her*. I had never seen anything like it.

The silence in the auditorium swelled; metastasized. All the hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention.

Davina's ears palpably pricked up, as though suddenly hearing a knocking at the gate.

What's done cannot be undone.

And then the scene was over. She broke character immediately, jarringly, and it was disorienting, the way she slipped from one person back into herself, as though the character had been her true persona all along.

Nobody clapped. She did not bow.

Instead she aimed a sarcastic little thumbs-up toward the casting panel, scooped up her leather jacket and stalked out of the auditorium as soundlessly as she'd arrived.

A few moments after the door to the lobby closed, the spell was shattered. Murmurs rose like a tide, and the air dropped several degrees. The casting panel stared at the spot on the stage where Davina had stood, as though seeing her ghost, her after-image.

And I knew in my heart that I had just lost the lead.



CHAPTER TWO

A lock of copper hair circled the shower drain.

I froze, as though perfect stillness would undo it somehow.

It was thick as a rope, long as a tree branch, and it swirled and eddied in the water like seaweed on a tide.

I ran my fingers over my shampoo-lathered head in disbelief. Sure enough, there was a bare patch of scalp at the base of my skull where it had been coaxed free. A shudder rolled through me like a clap of thunder.

Over the summer I had lost a few strands—a thin ribbon from above my ear was the worst of it—but nothing like this. Nothing that made my cheeks burn with dread. Nothing that left me so quietly devastated.

My great-aunt had suffered from trypophobia. It was illogical, on the face of it, the way she recoiled from honeycombs and pomegranates as though in mortal danger. As a child I found it entertaining, this utter irrationality. What harm could clusters of small holes do to her? But as I grew older, the more I understood the fear was something ancient and evolutionary. It was in the sinister images those holes conjured up: tarantula eyes and black mold, poisonous snake scales and deathly diseases.

That was how looking at the cord of hair felt: as though my subconscious mind knew something dark and threatening lurked beneath the surface. Something viscerally frightening.

Shutting off the shower, I tried to quell the panic surging in my chest, but it was no use. The water drained, but the hair remained coiled around the plughole, lank and defeated. Grabbing it in a fistful of paper towels, I dumped it in the bin beneath the sink and covered it with a purple tampon wrapper, ashamed of the fact I was shedding in brutal clumps.

Would it be contained to a single sorry patch? Or would I slowly shed it all until not even an eyelash remained?

Ten minutes of research into alopecia over the summer had told me there was no cure.

My single dorm was crypt-cold away from the steamy heat of the en-suite shower, and I crossed to the white-arched window to pull it shut. The campus grounds rolled away from Abernathy Hall like a bolt of emerald silk. At the foot of the lawn was a kidney-shaped lake patrolled by vicious swans, next to which was a small, rotting boathouse painted flaky white and sky blue. Beyond the glassy water lay a dense woodland of birch, holly and hawthorn, and above the canopy was the distant Edinburgh skyline, smudged by a low haze.

As I blotted my hair dry with a towel—flinching at the slightest follicle tug—a sense of fraudulence settled over me like the mist over the city. What if I didn't deserve to be here after all? What if I'd only got into Dorian because of my name and my beauty?

What would happen if I lost one of those things?

Davina had been officially cast as Lady Macbeth. The announcement went up a few days after the audition.

I was one of the three witches.

Throwing on a white Givenchy shirtdress in broderie anglaise and a cream cashmere sweater, I padded through to the communal kitchen I shared with three other drama students. It was a high-ceilinged room with tall, bright windows, bare white walls and Victorian tiles of black, cream and terracotta.

My roommates Catalina and Maisie sat on stools at the dark wood breakfast bar, but Fraser was nowhere to be seen. The space was already homely, thanks to Catalina. Her menagerie of green plants spilled from the windowsills onto the countertops, and Kilner jars of coffee and sugar were lined up next to a vintage tea kettle. An assortment of Gentileschi prints hung opposite the windows, cast in slatted daylight, and the row of bookcases were already overflowing—Murakami next to Agatha Christie, a *Lord of the Rings* special edition next to the complete Sherlock Holmes collection.

Catalina was brewing a cardamon-scented tea in a silver infuser, chatting about a textual analysis she'd needlessly performed on the fourth act of *Macbeth*. Maisie, by comparison, preferred to discuss other people.

“Apparently Davina Burns has been getting a little *too* friendly with Professor Drever,” Maisie said, slicking red polish on to her fingernails. Her blonde hair was French-plaited, and

she wore a matching white sweatshirt and jogger set with fluffy pink slippers.

Catalina blinked behind enormous tortoiseshell glasses, visibly bemused. She'd been discussing alternative interpretations of the love potion, and Maisie's tendency to derail conversations with childish rumors was jarring.

"Oh. I hadn't heard that." Her accent was underpinned with a subtle Spanish warmth.

She immediately went back to the textbook she was reading, but Maisie didn't take the hint. "She's been staying behind after class a *lot*, and Portia Bianchi said she saw her leaving the other night looking 'flushed.'" She threw exaggerated air quotes around the latter word, her tone a conspiratorial hush.

"No wonder she got *Lady Macbeth*," I grumbled. I didn't believe for a second this was the reason, but it made me feel a little better to imagine a world in which I was unjustly robbed of the role by a girl who couldn't even show up on time.

Too late, I realized I'd forgotten to slip into the polished Paxton persona. I forced a twinkle into my eye, a pep into my tone, a gentle arch into my back, and added, "I'm kidding. Her audition was flawless."

Maisie practically glowed with self-satisfaction—someone had given her the reaction she wanted. "I also heard that she got caught shoplifting when she was younger. But you didn't hear that from me."

I opened the cupboard and pulled out a rose-painted teacup. My roommates all had sentimental mugs—tacky photo-memories

and cheesy slogans from mums and uncles and old school friends—while I had a set of floral Emma Bridgewater's with zero personal meaning.

At the sight of Catalina's open packet of cookies, my stomach growled like a feral thing. But I never ate breakfast: a small test of willpower I made sure to win every morning. Over time these rules I set for myself had become more restrictive, more severe, like the ribbons of a corset constantly pulled ever tighter.

You have to wait until midday to eat. If you can just make it to eleven, you can have another coffee. An apple at three. Diet Coke at four.

You can last a few more minutes. A few more hours.

My mum maintained her supermodel body without even trying, but for me it took significantly more effort. I reached instead for the ornate silver cafetière I'd bought in Paris during last year's fashion week.

"What did your mum say about you not being cast as Lady Macbeth?" Maisie asked. "I bet she was livid." She put on a pretentious accent, the exaggerated vowels scraping at me like the shrill metallic screech of sharpening knives. "'The dean will be receiving a letter any day now.'"

I laughed lightheartedly, but my heart sank. "Bold of you to assume my mother knows how to write."

In truth, I hadn't spoken to my mum since I'd sent her my roommates' names. I was afraid to tell her that I didn't get the lead, and more than a little humiliated. Not because she'd be

disappointed—ambivalence was far more her style—but because my pride couldn't take the admission of failure, especially after I'd told her the lead was all but mine. Especially after she'd told me she was proud of me. That it was a wonderful achievement. I couldn't bear to have those long-chased sentiments withdrawn.

“What's it like, having such a famous parent?” Maisie asked, screwing the lid back onto her polish and blowing at her clawed nails.

“It's all I know.” A careful, practiced answer. I adjusted the low messy bun at the nape of my neck. The bare skin beneath felt tender and exposed, as though a scab had just been torn from the top.

“She came to Dorian too, right? Back in the day?”

I nodded, spooning dark-roast coffee into the French press and topping it with water from the recently boiled kettle. “She dropped out after the first year, though.” I ran some quick mental calculations, trying to remember how much of my mother's messy history was public domain.

Pausing her forefinger over the paragraph she was reading, Catalina looked up, blinking twice in rapid succession and pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Why? That's so sad. Passing up an opportunity like this.” Her auburn curls fell to her shoulders, swept back from her olive face with a sage-green claw clip.

“She was scouted for modeling.” There were also the twin pillars of depression and addiction for her to contend with, but I couldn't say as much.

Maisie leaned forward on the breakfast bar, fixing her hazel eyes on me so intensely that I had to look away. “Do *you* know who your dad is?”

Ah, the gossip-rag subject *du jour*. My mother’s publicist had “accidentally” dropped a pseudo-hint to drum up excitement for Peggy Paxton’s upcoming memoir, *Life Between the Lines*. Ghostwritten, of course, but sure to be a bestseller. Everything my mum touched turned to gold. Every *Vogue* cover she graced, every record she sang on, every feature film she cameoed in.

Everything except me.

Keen to shut the topic down, I simply said, “Nope. And I don’t care.”

A well-trodden lie. Deep down, the question of my father had always gnawed at me. I’d spent most of my childhood fantasizing about a warm, jocular man who’d throw me over his broad shoulders and call me *kiddo*. A dad who’d teach me to tie my shoes and make mud pies and fix broken bike chains and roast the perfect chicken.

But my mother had always insisted it would do me more harm than good to know who he was—and why he didn’t want anything to do with us.

“Are we boring you, Catalina?” Maisie asked with a chuckle, but the laughter was brittle.

Catalina had started reading again, and sighed at the interruption. She looked up reluctantly. There was a rectangular bulge at the waistband of her vintage jeans—an insulin pump. She pulled her chunky taupe cardigan tighter around herself.

“Sorry. I’m just not into gossip, unless it’s a critical part of a Dungeons & Dragons campaign. Convincing the blacksmith to tell you who bought the magical sword, et cetera.”

I chuckled. I’d only lived with her for a week, but I’d never seen Catalina without either an open book in her hand or a rolled-up fantasy map under her arm. Some might find it rude, the way she was only ever half listening to you, the way her mind wandered mid-conversation as though she were chasing orcs that very second, but I found it endearing.

“Oh, come on,” Maisie said, leaning forward on the counter. “Not one part of you wants to know who Penny’s dad is? What if it’s someone really famous?”

“Not really.”

The whole exchange was making my skin crawl—the heat of Maisie’s gaze, the unbearable sensation of being perceived, of being talked about like a newspaper headline instead of a person—so I dropped my teaspoon into the white Belfast sink with a clatter. “See you both in the voice seminar?”

As I walked away with my coffee, I heard Maisie stage-whisper, “Do you think it’s true that she was dragged along on massive benders with her mum when she was, like, four years old?”

Memories flitted through me unbidden. Crystal-studded lighters held beneath silver teaspoons, spider-thin limbs tangled on chesterfield sofas, rows of white powder lined up like playground chalk tallies. I blinked the images furiously away.

Even though my roommates were all attending the same

seminar, I finished my coffee and walked across campus by myself. My own company was the only company I could honestly say I enjoyed. It was the great paradox of my existence—I wanted to be loved, but I also wanted to be left alone. A dichotomy I could never quite reconcile.

It was late September, and the heat of the summer had faded to an orange ember. The wych elms clustered in the quad had been kissed yellow at the tips, and the air was tinged with woodsmoke and clove. The fountain at the center of the courtyard babbled merrily, streams of water arcing from the mouths of rough-hewn stone swans, and a group of students lounged around it, talking in absurd Austen accents.

Flicking one end of my tartan scarf over my shoulder, I cut through the tall, red-bricked Drummond Building to get to Kern.

The entrance hall of Drummond was lined with portraits of the school's founders: four exaggerated busts painted in rich, jewel-toned oils. Unlike the old cliché, their eyes didn't follow you around the room, but rather my eyes had no choice but to follow *them*, so magnetic was their lure.

As I was exiting the rotating doors, something snagged my attention in the back alley behind Kern: a dark green estate car, with two people in the front seats bowing their heads together.

Professor Drever was one of them; salt-and-pepper hair, a coarse beard, a tweed jacket and navy-blue tie. His middle-aged eyes were crinkled, and there were permanent commas etched around his mouth.

Davina was the other.

Black pixie-cropped hair, paper-white skin, leather jacket, ballerina limbs.

I remembered what Maisie had said back in the kitchen: *She's been staying behind after class a lot.*

Some strange instinct told me to back into the building and watch from a distance. Suspicion burned in me, along with something altogether shameful and self-serving.

Indignance bucked like a steed in my chest.

What if the role really *had* been mine to lose?

I remembered how Lazar wanted to end the auditions without Davina, only for Drever to insist they wait five more minutes.

As they sat in the car, Davina was hard-faced, fixing Drever with her idiosyncratic glare. He shook his head, one hand clasped over the top of the steering wheel, staring unseeingly ahead.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Neither spoke. Neither moved an inch. Still, I had the curious sensation of intruding on a private moment—something at once charged and vulnerable.

I don't know what made me pull out my phone and open the camera. I don't know what made me press record. I don't know what I was expecting to see, or what I was intending to do with it.

Yet when Davina leaned in and kissed Drever on the stoic cheek, I caught it all.

The kiss was almost nothing; a feathery brush. But it *looked* like something.

Just as I took a step forward to get a clearer shot, Davina drew away from Drever, opened the car door and stepped her long legs out. She slammed it shut without a backward glance at the professor, and when her gaze lifted from the pavement her eyes fixed on me.

My stomach lurched as violently as it had watching my hair circle the drain.

From the look on Davina's face—equal parts fearful and furious—she knew *exactly* why my phone was cradled in my outstretched hand.

She stormed over to where I stood rooted to the cobbled pavement, her features morphing from malignance into faux amity. Behind her, Drever reversed out of the alley and back onto the narrow road that looped around campus.

Davina stopped a few feet away from me, curling her red-slicked lips into a crooked smile.

“Penny, isn't it?”