

# The “Mass” Murderer

By Alor Sahoo

# Chapter 1: Aaron

I'm horizontal on my bed, which is in my room 113B, which is in the 113 suite, which is on the floor Dunster 1, which is in the dorm Dunster Eliot, which is on MIT campus. I bounce my stolen tennis ball against the popcorn ceiling, about a dozen or so times, with an emphasis on the "or so," since I stop counting. Each throw mercilessly stoness one of my several enemies, whose portraits are taped to the ceiling. On printer paper, of course, since we get free printing credits at [print.mit.edu](http://print.mit.edu). The bullseye is Katherine, my ex. She loves spreading rumors and she's stupid enough to get caught, which is the worst of both worlds.

Around her is the ring of freshman year weirdos—including a 20 year old freshman who semi-dated a 15 year old freshman, the younger sister of a friend. The outer rings are more distant "enemies," some of whom aren't exactly enemies, since I'm asymptotically indifferent towards them, but it's fun to inflate your "enemy" count. After all, I have to save my neural mesh for more critical matters. Rosemary claims I'm "psychologically torturing" myself by waking up to a dartboard of enemies that stare at me while I sleep. I call it "self improvement." When I want to goof off, I know that my enemies are watching. Like an elf on the shelf, but more sinister. Plus, when I'm mad, I can pelt them with tennis balls and hope that I voodoo-injure them in real life.

Still horizontal, I glance over at the big red folder of medical information sitting at my desk marked with dozens of sticky notes. Oh! The tennis ball misses my hand and hits the corner of my glasses, which fly off my face and crash onto the floor. I curse, hop out of bed, and pick them up. That's the sound of letting your guard down.

For the 4th time or so, with an emphasis on the "or so," since I've stopped counting, I sit at my desk and flop through all the generic cancer information. Just once more, for nostalgia, before I shred it in the Dunster Eliot library downstairs. This is written for an intellectually deficient audience, with a dose of legalisms: "talk to your doctor," "consult a specialist," it always implores.

Also, pictures of some old woman in a muumuu cradling her oxygen tank. Her helplessness pisses me off. She reminds me of my aunt. Maybe she'll end up on my ceiling.

I toss the pamphlet and folder aside. Here's what the no-nonsense, peer-reviewed meta-analyses all said: 80/20. 80-ish% chance I was functionally "cured." 20-ish% chance I'd relapse in the next 5 years, in which case I'd need chemo, which is almost always curative, though grueling. The best type of cancer to have. But still. Cancer. In my chair, I lean back and tease the angle of no return. The enemies on my ceiling enter my periphery. They certainly couldn't know. They'd regurgitate some well-wishes for my health before sinking their fangs into me. I'd destroy them all the same, but not without a fight. A Pyrrhic victory.

80/20 odds. There's a plan for both cases: positive and negative. Plans with backup plans that account for people's fuck ups, including my own. The plans are perfect because I'm imperfect and I know it. But when I'm imperfect, no one knows.

I set my alarm for tomorrow and close my eyes as my guardian devils smile from above.

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"They want to do more bloodwork. And another scan. They said the results are 'inconclusive,' which just means more waiting," I complain, while frying eggs in the 113 suite kitchen.

I lean back on the wooden table, waving around the silicone spatula aimlessly, but not before lowering the heat. The whites are finicky. Once they're done, I scoop them onto a plate and (try to) twist the stovetop knobs to OFF. Rosemary, who is on the couch perpendicular to the stove, leans forward, squints at my breakfast, and yawns.

"Well—," she starts, while straightening her posture. "That's good news, right? It's not negative, at least."

“No, no,” I say, “‘Medically negative’ means they don’t see anything, which is good. It’s flipped.”

“Oh,” she says, before leaping up to grab some hard-boiled eggs from the fridge.

We have too many eggs, since Rosemary recently swiped some from her horrible cousin, Katherine, whose family owns a chicken coop. More specifically, ex-cousin, since Rosemary informally excommunicated Katherine after she cheated on me. Apparently their chicken coop was struggling, which made the theft more satisfying, the same way that teasing a homeless person with a dollar bill is funnier than teasing a rich person the same way.

By the time I finish breakfast, Rosemary has gone to both my room (113B) to grab the jacket I borrowed and then her own room (113A) to change. Then she sits down on the red couch and scrolls on Instagram. Her outfit perplexes. Navy blue jacket, gray top, jet black jeans, clay earrings of hydrangeas, except the left one is blue and the right one is pink, her hair more curly on the left side than her right (she is a side sleeper, I infer.) The eyeliner is a bit thick on both sides, and the makeup isn’t smoothed out perfectly, reminding me of cheetah facepaint.

I make a face at her; she sneers back. I change from my pajamas into my default baggy blue jeans, light green shirt, and brown corduroy jacket. Standard. Neutral. Vaguely nature-themed. Sitting at the table, I start scrolling through my phone.

“Aaron!” Rosemary suddenly screeches.

Her knees almost collide with her ribs as she leaps up. Before I can react, her manicured hands—clear nail polish, nothing extravagant—snatch my phone. Rather quick reflexes for someone who took multiple shots last night (tequila, vodka, flu, Tdap booster.) She scrolls for a second before handing the phone back.

“Hinge?”

“You don’t know—”

“I do. That stupid loading animation, the spinny black thing on the white background. I saw the reflection in your glasses.”

Instinctively, I rip off my glasses, though now my dark under-eyes show. I wipe them on my shirt and put them back on.

“So what?”

“I bet you were stalking one of your random inactive matches...what do you call them? Your imaginationships?”

I wordlessly grab some water and slowly sip on it, occupying my mouth so I don't have to respond. God forbid a man likes to screenshot hot people and reverse image search them later. At this point, I have enough data to make a map of who-dated-who within a 5 mile radius from me, for the 19-25 age group. When I told Rosemary about this last week, she was instantly horrified.

“I'm invoking my 5th Amendment right to remain silent,” I say.

“Okay, Mr. Lawyer. Hurry up. We're late for orgo now.”

She retrieves a rather lesbian black messenger bag and hurries past me down a single flight of stairs to the ground floor. I follow.

“Took you long enough,” she says, dramatically stretching her arms behind her at an obtuse angle. She glances me up and down, from my battered gray sneakers to my wrinkle-free forehead.

“I knew you might've relapsed. Hinge-wise.”

“Whatever,” I mumble.

Outside of Dunster Eliot, I aim a punch at her right arm. I miss and stumble on the cracked cement. Second time, I make contact, which attracts a few glances from strays walking in both directions, though no one does anything, since we're not their problem, not part of their community, not part of their lives.

“Ow!” she dramatically yelps. “Domestic abuse!”

“Shut up,” I whisper-yell, as we continue walking on the cracked sidewalk.

“That’s what a domestic abuser would say.”

Scooters whiz past us. We shift over to the grass.

“You’re lesbian. Where’s the ‘domestic?’”

Rosemary just shrugs before immediately grabbing my left hand in her right, all couple-like, which disgusts me, but I feign tolerance as I see Jared walking towards us, identifiable by his lazy left eye—well, my left, his right eye—and dirt-yellow beanie caked in grime. He entered MIT as a 24 year old freshman and was rather shameless in his romantic ventures, making moves on (mostly) women of incompatible ages and sexualities. Rosemary—20 years old and lesbian—should not be on his list by both metrics, but that didn’t seem to dissuade him. Thankfully, he eyes our clasped hands, nods in acknowledgement, and passes us without a word.

Once we’re out of sight, she drops my hand. I wipe the sweat on my pants.

“I should’ve just scootered,” I complain as we wait at the Lobby 7 stoplight. “So I wouldn’t have to be your boyfriend shield.”

The crosswalk sign flashes white. I pass by Bad Acne Man. We exchange left-handed waves because two-handed waves are only for people you’re actually friends with, not acquaintances. And Bad Acne Man is nothing more than an acquaintance. Up the stairs and inside Lobby 7, Rosemary and I weave around tourists who whisper and gawk around—“why are ‘MASSACHVSETTS’ and ‘INSTITVTE’ spelled with a ‘V?’” I pass by that one racially ambiguous girl from Dunster Eliot and we both wave to each with both hands. She knows my name. I have no idea what hers is.

“Do you think we’ll run into Katherine?” Rosemary asks as we walk down the Infinite Corridor.

“Don’t say her name!” I whisper.

Eventually we're in Lobby 10. I move to the left side and look straight ahead, so that the clubs tabling to my right cannot seduce me into their ticket-buying or fundraising schemes. One club even has one of those ridiculous inflatable tube guys in the background. The 20 foot cylinder of neon pink polyester flops around with his bug eyes. No arms, so I assume he's a double amputee. Very diverse. His motor hums erratically.

“Hey. It's your ex, but my cousin. Ex-cousin. So I can say her name whenever I want.”

My legs are sore, so we pack into the elevator and go up 1 floor. Our lecture hall is 10-250. Everyone crowds around the frosted glass like a millennial at an in-person Black Friday sale, except the prize is front row seats to a sleepy professor who is only teaching because he's contractually obligated to and only cares about tenure and publishing in high-impact journals. They're all try-hards and want a relationship with him—most of them professional, except for the few weirdos secretly hoping to homewreck.

“Let's call her Egg,” she suggests. “Yes, Egg.”

I acquiesce. While the previous class finishes, we retreat down the hallway and take a left to find some free benches. As we wait, I pull out the credit/no credit prerequisite assignment due at the end of class today. Rosemary's eyes widen and her eyebrows morph into a unibrow and create a sinusoidal curve. She struggles to feign nonchalance, itching her right earlobe and playing with the pink hydrangea earring.

“What's up?” I ask, scooching forward on the cheap green plywood bench. “Do you want a gummy? Oh wait, you can't have any. Since they started randomly testing the athletes.”

She scowls and flicks my forehead with her manicured index finger.

“You're lucky. Don't rub it in,” she retorts coldly, leaning in for scary effect, though this is dampened by her short stature (even when we're both sitting.) All I see are flakes of dandruff in her bald spots. She crosses her arms over her leather jacket dramatically, careful to leave no crease.

“Lucky? Miss Park, you know I’m still suffering from...the Condition. Well, inconclusively. But still.”

“‘Miss’ isn’t very feminist. Try ‘Ms.’ instead.”

“Oh, my bad, Ms. Park,” I say, “Will Ms. Park do her own work, or copy a man’s?”

“Sure thing,” she says, with a fierce glare. “As you’ve learned, cheating does run in our family.”

I suppress a giggle. Wordlessly, she snatches the completed assignment that I’m dangling in front of her as bait. She pulls out a notebook from her book bag and rips out a page. She copies what I have, changing some stuff around to introduce some plausible deniability. Within a few minutes, she scrawls down enough molecules and bonds to get credit, though some of her structures, from what I can see, are either chemically impossible or worthy of a Nobel.

“There,” she says, relieved. “Now I’m done. You’re officially an ally to the cause.”

“What cause?”

“The feminist one.”

We’re Allies now. Before she gets another word in, the previous class exits, and the current class floods in. Rosemary and I pick a seat about 2/3rds of the way up the stairs, somewhere in the middle. A smelly man-child sits 2 seats to my right, adjacent to Rosemary. I do the classic “fake stretch” and identify a few minor enemies behind me.

Unfortunately, Katherine, alias Egg, sits 4 rows behind me. She’s wearing an oversized gray Vans hoodie, the kind that’s so big that when you stand up, it’s unclear if you’re wearing shorts. Her hair, it’s jet black and straight. And is she wearing the green Van Cleef flower necklace I got her? Unkempt, sure, but she’s not an eyesore, objectively.

I turn around before she notices. It pisses me off. Rosemary, you should steal more eggs, I transmit to her telepathically, though she doesn’t receive my message. Instead I draw a scene of a

cave troll sobbing as 2 thieves run away with baskets of eggs. When I show her my notebook, she starts laughing but disguises it as a cough before looking away. Soon enough, lecture concludes, and everyone tosses their problem sets into a messy pile in the front. The masses begin to disperse.

“Banana Lounge?” she mouths.

I nod. We make our way downstairs and walk down the rest of the Infinite Corridor, take a left, right, and then a left. We grab the titular bananas and make ourselves tea; chamomile for me, green tea for her, except she gives up when the kettle malfunctions, so she chugs her backup Red Bull instead. We sit down at one of the tables in the corner, near a poster of Banana Lounge fun facts.

“So,” Rosemary starts, drumming her fingers. “What’s up with Egg? Since we’re trying to burglarize her again?”

“Oh, nothing,” I insist, faux-nonchalantly. “Well, maybe. She joined my lab recently. I just need her off my game whatever way possible. So that I can be better than her. I already am, but a buffer would be nice. So that I get the good letter of recommendation for grad school.”

“There’s only 1 good letter? Is that the new quota?” Rosemary stupidly jests.

“Supply and demand. Not everyone can be good. And this is more for...insurance. In case, you know, stuff happens with the Condition.”

She nods silently. I have a few plans up my sleeves to remain #1, but I need to ease Rosemary into them. I can’t jump from “stealing eggs” to “cold, calculated sabotage.” Hate is something to be nurtured, flames fanned gently and gradually fueled. I’ve tried rushing this process; for example, whenever I’ve begged Rosemary to infiltrate Katherine’s inner circle and elicit tidbits of information—both for fun and for more serious reasons—she always refuses. She was “uncomfortable” prying into why Rosemary revenge-cheated on me. At Roxy’s. In broad daylight. I mean, if she was uncomfortable asking, how did she think I felt? All happy and swell?

I inquire once more.

“She’d open up to you,” I implore, folding my arms on the table and leaning in, angling my back so that I’m not staring at her scalp.

“How would I even do this? You always say this, but we’re barely family,” she says, turning around to toss the Red Bull into the recycling.

A dull thump. Swish, no ricochet.

“Well, maybe seduce her. Isn’t that what we both did freshman spring to pass—”

Rosemary shrieks—memory unlocked—and knocks over a cup of pens nearby. She flushes red, puts them back in, looks up past me, and her eyes widen. Without a word, she leaps out of her seat and hides behind a wall. She puts a finger to her lips. I roll my eyes.

“You don’t want to talk about Egg?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

Rosemary quietly shuffles out the other exit to the Banana Lounge.

Then I swivel around and see Katherine staring at me.

In her oversized white hoodie, Van Cleef necklace, the works. Her twitchy right eye seems seconds away from a full blown seizure, though this is not surprising, since her mind—her hodge-podge of neurons was always on the weaker end of the bell curve. I fight to not vomit up my fried egg breakfast.

## Chapter 2: Aaron

Katherine and I just stare at each other, unwillingly, as if we're both paralyzed neck down from some freak accident. After a few dramatic seconds, I spin around in my chair, bored. She's clutching several bananas in her left hand, squeezing so tight her fingertips are turning white.

"What were you saying, Aaron?" she asks.

"Huh?" I respond, my ears struggling to parse her plastic kazoo voice.

"You were talking about me. I heard my name and some laughing. So what do you have to say? Say it to my face," she demands.

"We were talking about Kathy Ran."

"Then why," she says, walking over to my table, staring me down, "is she called Egg? I heard that."

Without making eye contact with her—she'll turn me to stone—I pull up Kathy Ran's latest Instagram post, in which she's donating her hair to make wigs for cancer patients. I turn my screen to Katherine, who stares at Kathy's shiny, bald head and then gasps. She stumbles back and instinctively touches her own scalp, feeling her own bald spots and split ends.

"You're horrible! She's Egg?"

"Yes, I'm a bad person with mean inside jokes, yada yada," I say. "What's new?"

Disgusted, she makes some throat-clearing sounds before huffing and puffing away. Once I'm sure Katherine is far away, I text Rosemary that it's all clear. Yes, it's actually safe to return. Yes, I saw Katherine exit the building. No, she didn't double back, she isn't smart enough for any of those games. Rosemary shuffles back in, her shoulders lurched upwards, clearly on-edge from the near-Katherine encounter.

"It's all good, I'll fill you in," I say, laughing. "Wanna grab lunch? Annoying exes make me hungry."

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As I divulge the recent fiasco over Chipotle, Rosemary laughs, though she's convinced that I got lucky. Which is false. Luck would mean that I couldn't reproduce this interaction, except I could, since Katherine is always pretty easy to gaslight. You just need to think quickly on your feet. But I don't argue the point.

We then (nominally) co-work together in iHQ (though Rosemary gets distracted with ordering groceries and skincare and gifts for her friend's birthday 3 months ago.) Then we take the T from Kendall/MIT to Central, to grab more groceries from HMart, since we want to "save money" and "eat healthier." Which is a lie, obviously, but it's fun to see how long we maintain the charade. On the way back to Dunster Eliot, we spot bunnies hopping around the field. They would be free, and they would provide protein, but Rosemary would object, in the standard anthropomorphizing way, since they're so "cute." Reminder to myself: troll her with links to one of those slaughterhouse documentaries.

As we approach Dunster Eliot, we hear her scream and see her blink and flash. She expels residents who shuffle outside like disgruntled prisoners. Who did it? Microwaving metal, boiled pasta that charred instead, matchbox left on the stove, an exothermic chemistry experiment gone wrong? As I approach the other Dunster 1 residents, I set forth the obvious alibi: we just came back from grocery shopping, so it couldn't have been us. Rosemary holds up her raw groceries as Exhibit #1. They accept without more inquiry.

Unfortunately, despite standing around in a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder, some random people start making conversation with Rosemary and I. She manages fine, but I find it hard to pretend to care about them. A short white girl with wet hair randomly chimes in:

"We smelled smoke, actually," Wet Girl says, glancing around nervously. "So it might be something more serious."

Before I make a snarky comment about how maybe the smoke was instead from incense or burning sage, I walk myself to the corner of the grassy area, with the maroon outdoor picnic tables. Rosemary sits down with her groceries on the tabletop, though she freezes like a possum. I glance behind me in the direction of her eyes, and I spot the yellow beanie. Jared, our resident 25 year old MIT sophomore lives in Dunster Eliot, on Eliot 3. He waves at us—probably just at Rosemary, actually. Before he makes his way over, I leap down from the table and meet him halfway, giving her time to escape.

He's just as gangly and unkempt as before, though he's now wearing one of those dark gray cargo pants with 10 pockets. I see the top of a brick-red wrench poking out from the one near his left ankle. With

that in mind, I stay outside the wrench attack radius. It's unclear if it's an emotional support wrench or a murdering wrench.

7 feet away, I wave at him with my right hand. He flashes a toothy grin back as the firetruck lights illuminate him. He looks like a Walmart Joker. Then we awkwardly shuffle close together and do the one-handed-clasp-turned-bro hug, during which I exhale to avoid his noxious odor. Mid-hug, I feel the metallic lump of his wrench against my shins. I shudder and back away into the safe zone.

"How've you been?" he asks.

"Great, great, man," I say, glancing around to make sure that there are enough eyes around me.

None of them are watching. Wonderful.

At this point, Rosemary has probably run off to another dorm, with her groceries in hand. Jared always had angry hissy fits in 5.111 (intro chemistry) when Rosemary would refuse to give him answers outright. Then he tried crying. Screaming. He settled on flirting as the tactic of choice. At that point, Rosemary had to swap her office hour shift with the tallest, buffest male TA. She didn't want to risk being anywhere near him.

"Well," Jared continues, unprompted, "I'm a third author on a manuscript that was just accepted to JACS. So excited for that."

He smiles, awaiting my reaction. I blankly stare at him, which he interprets as awe. I scrunch the grass under my shoes. Of course. His uncle is a now-washed-then-shiny venture capitalist in biotech. So he had plenty of connections. Maybe not enough to be a first author on anything important, sure. But enough for third. And third is better than nothing. Especially for a loser like him.

His cargo pants have black, oily slick streaks. I gesture at them and nod, my hands in my pockets.

"Lab accident?"

He looks down at his cargo pants and then back at me with his fucking swiss cheese grin.

"Nope!" he says, beaming. "Just doing an oil change on my Mercedes. Was going to clean it up, but... fire alarm."

He chuckles. I nod and force a smile, but then the smile becomes genuine. Oil, that's flammable. Plus, Jared's pants look like they are 100% cotton. And the fire trucks, they're already here. Perfect. I elbow past him with some excuse, past the Dunster 1 gang, and sit down inside the Head of House parking spot. There's a brick wall to my right, an EV to my left. No potential for someone to snoop, but just in case, I turn down my screen brightness and scroll to my Notes app list of revenge ideas.

There, #9, which Rosemary thought was incredibly insane:

*Light Katherine (or another enemy of equal standing) on fire for a substantial period of time.*

"You're genuinely going to go to jail for arson," she had said. "Also, she's not stupid. Whoever it is would just smother it immediately. No one is that stupid, unless they're impaired."

We bet \$100 on it. No expiration date.

I shuffle over to Carson, or maybe his name was Carl. I'm not too sure. He's sitting on the steps of the Dunster-side emergency exit, baseball cap over his eyebrows, hunched over in a green sweater.

"Hey, you've got a lighter?"

He exhales from his vape—not directly at me, obviously—and nods. He digs into his jeans and produces one of those cheap plastic lighters. He asks no follow-ups.

"Thanks," I say.

He nods and smiles.

The plan progresses. Jared, perhaps tracking Rosemary's scent like a stalking bloodhound, sits down at that same maroon picnic table, awaiting her return. He leans down like *The Thinker*, except instead of pondering philosophical dilemmas, he doomscrolls on his phone, probably thirsting over random compilations of risqué beach pictures, which I only know because he likes those reels on Instagram. And those likes are public to followers, which anyone who isn't a borderline millennial would know.

He's facing away from me. His jeans, they're so saggy that they brush against the ground.

I turn around and survey the scene. People still waiting outside, their arms crossed over each other because they forgot to grab a jacket on the way out. Some people are in pajamas, even though it's only 5:30

pm. The crowd is beginning to thin as people start tagging along with their friends to other dorms to wait it out.

I'm losing cover. I need to act fast.

Finally, I see Rosemary, who's on the opposite side of the sidewalk, surveying the scene from afar. She's tightly clutching her groceries to her chest, as if she's prepared to run for it. I catch her attention and raise the palm of my hand towards her and only bend my pinky finger. She nods in understanding. Per the mini-sign language I developed with Rosemary last year, "bent pinky" means the recipient should start watching the sender carefully, from afar, without recording anything.

I palm the lighter in my left hand. Right behind Jared. I kneel down and pretend to tie my left shoe. Light the bottom seam of his right pant leg. 25 seconds later, Jared feels something a bit too warm, and in fact perhaps a bit too hot. And he starts screaming. The flame jumps from pant leg to pant leg—even his socks aren't saved. He leaps and drops onto the grass, rolling around like a chinchilla, except the chinchilla is desperately trying to take off his shoes that are 1 size too small.

A crowd, now curious, gathers around the spectacle. Eventually, the wisps of smoke clear as he successfully smothers the fire. The result: charred socks, burnt Japanese selvedge denim. Some friends help him to the concrete steps. His eyes are twitching and his fists are balled in rage.

"That was 30,000 yen!" he complains.

While we all are generally good at math, no one knows what the fuck that is in dollars. Throughout this entire process, multiple people snap photos of him, his burnt jeans, and the smoky grass as evidence. At some point, I find Rosemary, who looks absolutely horrified and flummoxed.

"Good thing the firefighters are here," I whisper.

"What?" she asks.

"As in, they probably have medical supplies, like an ice pack. In case I burned his little ankles."

Rosemary did not find that funny at all.

"How did you—" she asks, slowly.

“Don’t make me incriminate myself, Ally,” I giggle. “Anyways, you owe me \$100. You promised, right?”

I show her the dare on my Notes app. She never really expected for me to follow through on that kind of promise, but I just did. She stares at me blankly, too stunned to speak.

The alarms stop, and the house manager walks over to us.

“All clear!” he says.

Then he glances at the scene of Jared shuffling over, itching his toasted ankles through his Japanese selvedge denim, whimpering for an ice pack. He rushes over. Unwilling to be caught in the middle, the crowd immediately disperses, all ready to spread rumors of Jared and his arsonist activities to their friends, classmates, really anyone that would listen, because this is objectively hilarious. I contemplate submitting anonymous confessions about this to the MIT Confessions Facebook page, just to keep the momentum going.

## Chapter 3: Katherine

Wow, I look sexy in this black jacket. Dad scoffed when he saw me pack it yesterday. He said I looked like I was part of an “upscale biker gang.” The leather is pristine, the pockets are massive, so it is better than most of the stuff I have, but maybe I should not be surprised, since I thrifted it from the men’s section. Men’s small is still a bit tight, though. Touching my fingertips to my shoulders is impossible, the leather bunches up. Ew, now I look like a T-rex. Someone outside yells. I yell back.

“Give me a fucking second! Sorry. A few minutes.”

I curl my hair with an iron, but it becomes too cylindrical, so I spritz some water and run my fingers through it, but only using my right hand since my left still has wet nail polish. Then I shake my head to test if my diamond stud earrings are secure. They are good. Now I sit on the edge of this random bed—the duvet is clean, but suspiciously off-white—and catch my breath. On my phone, I scroll through and read about four urgent emails, my eyes glazing over the bold, white subject lines. Then I watch all the funny memes my friends sent me. I accept the resulting serotonin rush.

Another impatient knock. I groan. This is the hell of having the only bathroom in this goddamn townhouse with a full-length mirror. Everyone—by which I mean all of my family members cooped up together in this un-airconditioned decrepit rental—wanted to check themselves out. As if they were going to some extremely upscale event, instead of a barebones babyshower. My immediate reaction is to video chat Aaron and show off my outfit while we complain about life together. My fingers’ muscle memory betrays me and starts typing his name into my contacts list. A. a. r. Wait, nothing is coming up. Because he has been blocked for the past three months. Because you stand on business and break up with the person who cheated on you.

I make do with the eye-level mirror. I get up, briefly glance at my reflection, and wipe off my purplish lip tint with a tissue. Mom warned that it would make me look cyanotic, a word I looked up afterward. She was right, though. I didn’t want to look sickly, I want to look powerful. Before my

dumbass “niece” breaks in, I gather my belongings, open the door, squeeze past her, and exit into the reception. Head up, back straight, lips now pink and full of life.

I head outside and sit to the left of Mom. She herself is also in leather—must be a genetic thing—with a faux fur shawl around her. Mom’s makeup really obscures the patchiness and rosacea. My future, if I am not careful. On my phone, I set a reminder to order more moisturizer and chemical sunscreen tomorrow. Then I zone out. This whole baby-shower-turned-family-reunion looks like a low-budget wedding. Wooden folding chairs that splinter everywhere and snag on everything. Generic blue and pink streamers from Amazon, which look weirdly pale and sun-bleached. And a wooden stage that is rivaled by my high school’s auditorium.

Not that this is surprising. Rosemary’s family is struggling, which is totally fine and nothing to be ashamed of. But in that case, why not just throw a pizza party? Or just stream the game with some wings and dip? I voice my complaints and suggestions in the family group chat. Dad, still nowhere to be found, texts back, annoyed at my lack of appreciation for “our family and its bonds.” Mom reads my message and laughs loudly.

“I agree,” she says. “But, whatever. Enjoy the food, grab some cute photos, and meet people. Let ‘em do what they want, Katherine.”

I sigh.

“Where’s Dad?”

Mom gestures at the empty seat to her right she is saving with her saggy brown bag.

“Bathroom. Probably here soon.”

Smart man. The hypocrite probably locked himself in the bathroom to while away the time.

The emcee shushes us and asks us to sit down. A few seconds go by. I see the bride and the groom walk up dramatically—well, mommy and baby daddy, who are not technically married yet, which I am not judgemental of, though I know others are. All the lumpy aunties and chunky uncles,

whose appearances I also do not judge, applaud as they bring out a ridiculously lavish cake.

Rosemary's sister, Jen, cuts a slice and dramatically holds it up in the air, with the inside facing the audience.

It is pink. A girl. Everyone clamors and claps. We turn around and sporadically hug everyone else, which is a bit strange because the fetus did not do anything yet. I stare ahead, not desiring a child, at all, but still feeling a bit of a sting. No babies, but maybe I should get a pet. Maybe a lizard. Or a rock, if I am feeling lazy. Then I could give it one of the ten girl baby names Aaron and I jokingly agreed on four months ago. I turn around to survey the rest of the attendees.

Unfortunately, Rosemary sits two rows behind me. We accidentally lock eyes. She smiles and itches one of her clay earrings before turning around to greet someone else. The talk is small. Uncles joking with kids. Aunties laughing with in-laws harmoniously. Uncles guffawing with kids they didn't know the names of. After the gender reveal, Mom wants to numb herself, hopefully in a feminist way, but maybe in a misogynistic way, so she starts fast-walking to the bar. She texts me to wait in the Italian buffet line and grab her a plate of "whatever looks good."

I do so, unfortunately situating myself right behind Rosemary. My gut instinct is to go to the back of the line, but I hold steadfast, since this buffet might run out, especially if her family skimped on catering. As we approach the front, I summon some non-liquid courage and tap her on the shoulder.

"Hey! How's the semester going?"

Rosemary slowly turns around, smoothing out her blue jacket before looking up. She stands up tall and straight, with black boots that augment her height. Her face emanates disgust, held back only by a social obligation to be courteous. I force a smile.

"Fine," she says, glaring. "Just listened to a bunch of loser grandpas complain that this fetus is a woman. So not great right now. And now there's you."

I force a smile and hold back an instinctual scream. That's not how you talk to someone you like. It is how you talk to someone you think cheated on your best friend. Even though he cheated first. With some loser five years older than him, and not just for free alcohol. But no, no, Aaron is the younger one, so he must've been victimized, even though he regularly bragged about his "substances situationship." I am the villain, even now.

Before I dooms spiral with more examples, I engage in some stale, high-level small talk, all while resisting the urge to stab her, and then myself, with the plastic cutlery handed to me by a waiter. I can't help her see the truth if she's too stupid. In line, we scoop random pastas onto our respective plates. I try to strike up a more real conversation again, hands full with 2 heaping plates.

"How's your dad doing, after the fire?"

Rosemary's eyes visibly twitch and I wince. Her dad was a volunteer firefighter who got caught in some one-in-a-million fire and had a bunch of second-degree burns. Asking her was surely a nice gesture, right?

"Fine," she says, with a saccharine smile before walking away to sit at a random table.

With a sigh, I return to my table, sit down, smooth out the white cloth napkin over my black jeans, and press my nails into my thighs, frustrated. It hurts, but it is a better alternative to faceplanting and screaming into the eggplant parmesan. Thankfully, before the spiral continues, Mom returns with a glass of champagne. Together, we start digging into our pasta. She takes off her coat and rubs her hands together, as if she is cold, but she is wearing a backless top. A bold choice for Boston, even with all those heat lamps around.

"Wow!" she exclaims, mouth full. "The yolks on these raviolo taste really good."

Which means a lot since Mom has her own coop of chickens back home. She is a bit of a "golden" yolk enthusiast. She even added marigold dust or something to her chicken feed, just to get more aesthetic yolks that photographed better.

“I wonder if they’re ours,” she whispers, laughing. “They’re the egg thieves, after all.”

For the first time, I smile, choking on my water. I wipe my mouth politely. Dad thought we were crazy, but Mom and I had noticed that we would sometimes be light on eggs whenever Rosemary’s family visited us. Either they stole, or the hens were so scared of them their egg production magically dropped. I swear, one time, Rosemary’s jacket pockets looked suspiciously lumpy. But what could you do? Ask your cousin to open their backpacks and purses to search for stolen eggs?

Mom and I finish the raviolo and move onto the tagliatele, though after that we get a bit bloated from all the carbs and our general lactose intolerance. That doesn’t stop us from getting seconds, once we digest and wash it down with some (powder, not fresh) lemonade.

After seconds, I need to lay down to digest before thirds, so I return to my musty room. Horizontal on the bed, I notice a cross in the corner, above a random dresser. I smile. I am not religious, not even remotely, but it reminded me of one of the tenets that Aaron and I promised to follow: when in doubt, don’t ask “what would Jesus do?” Ask “what would Katherine do?” Or “what would Aaron do?”

I mean, I was not Aaron. I am still not. He always had this deep-seated anger that he channeled into his weird, long-term masterplans. But I am me, and Rosemary hates me, and it is mostly because she is so stupid. The whole cheating thing. Sure, it is shocking, but when it is explained to you, it makes sense. Perfect sense. And when you are so willfully ignorant, at some point, you cannot claim you are blinded by whatever platonic bond you have with your best friend. You are just an idiot. But if this idiot is going to hate me anyways, I will give her a reason. So we can stop this stupid fake-nice routine and just hate each other, openly and properly.

Back outside, my pupils adjust to the light. I locate Rosemary: she is near the bar, sipping on something in a martini glass. She takes off her blue jacket, her only shield. The field is crowded. I

identify an uncle near her, with a glass of red wine. I order a club soda and spill a bit on my jacket. Then, in a characteristically clumsy fashion, club soda in hand, I stumble over a bit of the flooring and bump into the uncle. Who then stumbles forward, spilling his red wine all over Rosemary.

She shrieks. We all gasp. No one really knows who the culprit is.

“Oh my god,” I exclaim, dramatically staring at the water dripping from my jacket. “Who?”

She starts panicking. Her top is silk, it is delicate, yada yada. In the panic, she drops her own drink, and the martini glass shatters all over the floor, lodging itself in some auntie’s heel. Cue more cursing on her end. I slink back before anyone suspects me, grabbing a video of Rosemary’s meltdown for posterity. The perfect karma. I catch Dad staring at me, tipsy, but surely sober enough to follow along. I cannot tell if his stare is one of admiration or disgust or shock. Probably a combination of it all. I do not care.

## Chapter 4: Aaron

I impulsively check my phone. 9:03 am. Setting a timer for 18 minutes, I roll onto my right side, teetering dangerously on the edge of my twin mattress. Rosemary and I were supposed to meal-prepare some dinner this week—especially since she ran off with our groceries last week, post-fire alarm and post-jeans incineration. Which is weird, since we're suitemates. Then she no-showed at the jester-themed frat party across the river. That was really shitty of her because Imani is a really shitty DJ, even by drunk people's standards, so she really needed all the moral support she could get during her shift. I'm powerful, but I can only do so much alone on the dance floor.

Distracted, I glance up at my ceiling dartboard. My enemies are still stuck in a jail of painters tape. Rosemary is close to joining their lower ranks if she doesn't get her act together. Kidding. That's a joke. She's just in a phase, it's part of the cycle. Instead of manic and depressive, she alternates between chilling and sulking. And I'm still out \$100 she owes me, since I clearly burnt off a whole bit of Jared's jeans. I'm not desperate for funds right now, so I'll pause the debt collection until she's in a better mood.

I mean, I might be at fault, but only in the same way that a driver might be "at fault" for an accident but still not really pay for anything if they had really good insurance. And I have great insurance, socially, with Rosemary. My premiums are all the times I pay for dinner and "forget" that she didn't pay me back. So I'm really not quite sure why she's in a mood, nor do I particularly care. Did she personally buy Jared's jeans? Or was it something else silly that I did? Does she have some secretly unresolved fire trauma? Who knows? Who cares? She never told me, and has still yet to tell me, anything.

It might also have to do with the text I sent last week. Rosemary refused to tell me which "Sarah" she had a crush on, so I made a Facebook Messenger group chat with all the MIT Sarahs I could find and asked which one was "friends" with Rosemary. Most of them immediately left the chat, but someone, perhaps the correct Sarah, blew the whistle.

Once I get dressed, I head over to the Student Center and walk up to the 5th floor. The whole room is filled with a stressful buzz, like drone bees desperately trying to suck up to their queen (ironic, given incel culture,) except the queen is either a professor or job recruiter. Anyways, I find myself in a semi-private cubicle, adorned with torn up beige carpet. I put a sign outside that says “interview in progress” so that no one disturbs me.

Then, I take a deep breath and log into my HIPAA-compliant video conferencing platform on MIT’s insecure public WiFi. 7 minutes later, my oncologist joins at 9:45 am.

“Sorry, Aaron,” he says, after forgetting to verify my identity in 2 different ways.

“You were supposed to get a message,” he continues. “Your repeated bloodwork didn’t work. It hemolyzed. Basically it went bad when they drew it. So we don’t have any results. I’m sorry, you were supposed to have gotten a portal update to let you know.”

Fuck. That’s the 2nd time testing went wrong. I force a smile and make 2-3 minutes of small talk before logging off. Doctor probably wants to reclaim the remaining appointment time so he can make some coffee, scarf down a breakfast, and probably research something depressing, like palliative care for a withering grandma on immunotherapy.

“...ask them to check the blood after the draw, to be safe. Oh, and for some reason, your scan and repeat scan were both chest x-rays. For your case, those are too low-resolution. Too risky. You need a chest CT. I’ll add that order in as well. I’ll see you next time,” he says at the end, after a nonsensical anecdote involving his dog.

“You too, doc. Goodbye!”

I exit the chat, bite my sweater, and scream into it. The sound partly muffles, and even if it doesn’t, the “interview in progress” sign right outside suggests to onlookers that I probably just bombed a question. And when someone is crashing out over their career or academics, by default, you have to leave them alone. For better or for worse—mostly worse—that’s the golden rule here.

Except I'm not the one who failed. Some idiot phlebotomist didn't do their job properly, so my blood cells fucking exploded before the lab could run my sample. A delay like this—getting another blood draw, another scan, another appointment time, especially with my shitty insurance—injects more uncertainty into my timeline. I'm a 2nd semester sophomore. I have Ring Delivery. Finals. Research. Frankly, I'm too important for this. I lose about 50 minutes of productive time as a result of my crashout.

To make up for the lost time, I copy problem sets from a few “friends,” the random lonely-ish smart people that I extract answers from periodically. After I get my answers, I head back to Dunster Eliot to get ready for the party. I dress semi-formal: white Ralph Lauren pants, a belt, a blue dress shirt. Spray on some Santal Le Labo 33. I grab the birthday girl's gift: a book wrapped in butcher paper and twine. On the way to Oleana, the restaurant, I ask the Uber driver for honest advice on potential one-liners to reboot my friendship with Rosemary.

“They're all pretty bad,” he says, as I exit the Prius. “It sounds fake. Speak from the heart.”

I force a smile and thank him, before leaving a 3 star review and no tip.

Oleana's interior is underwhelming. The wooden furniture is austere. The coat rack exists, but it's crammed into a corner, way too close to the mahogany men's bathroom door. I check the time. 8:35 pm. The remaining patrons shuffle out, since Rosemary's parents are renting out the whole restaurant for her. How sweet of them. Since I'm fashionably early, I lock myself in a bathroom stall and scroll through my Hinge mindlessly for 10 minutes.

After my screentime break, I hear a few of Rosemary's friends trickle in. Rosemary, Sasha, Allen, Jessica, and some other muffled noises. When I exit the bathroom, I wave politely, showing off my demurely wrapped book to everyone. Rosemary's bony shoulders jump as we lock eyes, untucking her satin red dress shirt from her black dress pants. She recovers and flashes me a warm smile before click-clacking away from me, signalling she wants space. I don't care. It's hard to take

someone seriously when they dress like a stop sign out of *The Devil Wears Prada*. I approach the enclosed circle confidently.

“Here you go, Rosemary,” I say, interrupting whatever inane conversation she’s having.

“Hmm?”

She takes the present and unwraps it, tearing the twine and wrapping paper and throwing it onto the ground. One of her lackeys—Allen, I think—picks it up for her and tosses it.

“Is this—”

“Yes!”

Rosemary shrieks. In excitement, not fear. She shows the cover to everyone, which she finds engrossing. She pores over the inner sleeve of the dark blue hardcover like it’s some ancient text, though I’m fairly sure she’s just fantasizing about the author (who is very desired among lesbian communities, Reddit says.) She opens it up to the first page and gasps again. She flips around the cover to show us all.

“It’s signed? Oh my god, Aaron, you’re the best.”

“You know it,” I brag.

I shrug dramatically. She smiles back and hugs me.

It’s official: I’m forgiven. The damage has been undone.

Relieved, I wave my goodbyes and leave Rosemary to catch up with her gaggle of acquaintances. I scan the restaurant for my next move. In the other corner of the extremely long dining table, Darren is alone, drawing on his iPad—he’s doing a problem set? Here? Then there’s a few more scattered groups of people all shuffling about, most of whom I know through Rosemary. I vet the social media of the ones I don’t know to ensure they aren’t Katherine sympathizers. I make a few rounds; the conversations seem vaguely academic and moderately uninteresting. Briefly defeated

(the battle, not the war,) I sit down in a chair, but the rock-solid cushions on the chairs send chills up my tailbone.

Near the bathrooms and coat rack, I spot a tall man, next to the vaguely South Asian tapestry. He's alone. On his phone. Easy target. I head over. As I'm a few feet away, he glances up with a disarming smile. I'm spotted. He puts his phone into his left pant pocket and crosses his arms over his magenta dress shirt and smiles. I force myself to make eye contact. Dark brown eyes. Nothing crazy. But his cologne. I pause. Hints of jasmine and cedar. Diptyque Orpheon. A man of taste. More reason to connect.

"Hey," he starts.

I step back, noticing that he's taller than me. 6' 3". Which is strange and rather atypical. Rosemary says I'm always looking down on people, in more ways than one. It's almost never the opposite. Weird.

"I'm Aaron. You?"

"Ah, you're Aaron, I see."

"What does that mean?" I say.

"As in," he says slowly. "You're the one who gave Rosemary that really fancy book as a gift."

I laugh him off and bro-tap his left shoulder, applying a Rosemary-level of force.

"Also," he continues, leaning in to whisper. "I think our entire class knows of you. Didn't you shove that one guy to the ground during that one freshman orientation relay race?"

"Hey! Shh!" I hiss, instinctively cupping my hand over his mouth.

I freeze. He stares. I take away my hand, mortified. He laughs it off.

"Well, don't worry. I'm good with secrets. Though I do recall a video circulating somewhere, at some point. Though it's not like I screen recorded it, just in case."

He winks. I roll my eyes.

“What’s your name, by the way?” I ask.

We pause as some random man-friend of Rosemary’s leaves the men’s bathroom.

“Kavi. I know Rosemary from class stuff. We’ve taken a bunch of stuff together. Literature classes. Lots of trauma bonding.”

He then lists out a handful of mutual friends between me, him, and Rosemary. Though I don’t recall his name or face. Which is weird, unless he went into witness protection. As more people trickle in, Kavi and I sit ourselves at the end of the table, where Darren was previously working. Where’d he go? Probably home, to turn in his assignment.

As we wait for the server to take drink orders, Kavi and I engage in “small talk” for the next few minutes, before we run out of things to say. Before the silence takes hold, he leans in, furrowing his shockingly thick eyebrows (not unibrow.) The top button on his dress shirt pops off and he almost elbows an empty crystal glass off the table. I move it next to me to keep it safe.

“Can I tell you a secret?” he whispers.

“Sure,” I say nonchalantly.

“I already forgot your name, and I think I’m supposed to know it by now. I’m a bit drunk.”

He whips out a studded, metallic whiskey flask from his right pant pocket. I burst out giggling.

“Give me some,” I ask, already reaching for it under the table. “I need it.”

“Don’t spill any on that pristine floor of theirs. Or on yourself.”

Soon, they take our drinks and food, but since it’s family style, Rosemary orders a bunch of everything. This all-expenses-paid dinner is a blast, though mostly because I’m blasted. A few minutes later, some dip with pine nuts on it lands in front of Kavi; he pawns it off to me, claiming a nut allergy. More for me. Luckily, most of this is finger food, even if it’s not intended to be, which

doesn't matter, since I indiscriminately scoop up whatever looks good with my hands whenever a plate rotates past me. And since I'm sitting in the corner with Kavi, no one notices and judges.

Pretty quickly, table conversations break down spatially—with each little 2x2 grid of people talking amongst themselves almost exclusively. At some point, Kavi and I start weaving some story about an imaginary student physically eating their 5.111 final instead of turning it in. Once we catch onto each other's antics, we both popcorn increasingly absurd storylines to each other, expanding on the previous one. I love a good pathological lie. Rosemary, who is rotating around the table so she talks to everyone, joins halfway through our fairytale. She's mortified.

“When the hell did...this happen?” she asks.

“Our freshman fall!” I yell. “5.111? Intro chemistry? You literally took this class then.”

She looks to Kavi, who solemnly nods. His shirt is buttoned up, and his flask is stowed out of sight. He presents himself as believable, a voice of reason.

“Shit,” she whispers. “My memory is shit.”

Without another word, she heads to the bathroom, and after that, she sits back down with another group of friends. Then she orders us all dessert—baklava—at which point Kavi's nut allergy subsides, since he eats multiple pieces. Rosemary covers the bill, everyone hugs her, and then the crowds start to dissipate. Kavi and I are now a bit sober—fast male metabolism, the food, the time.

Somehow, we end up at Dunster Eliot, even though Kavi lives on East Campus. Kavi sprawls out on the green chair near the back entrance. I shove him, with more than a Rosemary-level of force. He winces and rotates away from me.

“Hey,” I declare. “Let's go somewhere.”

“Huh?” Kavi mumbles, rubbing his eyes as I wake him up from his slumber. He yawns and sits up, running his fingers through his wavy hair.

“Where?” he asks.

“Somewhere fun. Follow me.”

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With a bit of convincing, we end up on the roof of Dunster Eliot. It takes a while, not because of the logistics of getting onto the roof via unscrewing the window with the right drill bit, which I take care of, but because Kavi wants to leave and catch some ducks (likely geese instead) so that he could make Peking duck (which he isn't equipped to cook.) After some drunk negotiation, I take him to my suite, grab my overcoat from my room, force him to climb 5 flights of stairs since the elevators are broken, drag him back near the windows, open up said window, and shove his frame through it. Once he's outside on the roof, he spends a few seconds standing up, in awe, looking around.

For just a moment, we stand together and look at everything. I wince as his fingers dig into my left arm for support. In front, the lumpy, empty field that never really stood a chance with the army of students that traipse over it to and from class. Sometimes when it's closed off, it blossoms. Behind that, the spongey dorm with an eerie number of bright, polygonal windows. Above us, craning our heads, I spot some hazy clouds and helicopters.

Kavi starts saying something, but I shush him and pull him down onto the ground, so we're squatting face to face.

“Quiet,” I whisper, our knees now touching. “Or nightwatch will see us.”

He nods, understanding. Then he sprawls out on his back, as if he's going to take a nap on a bed of rotting leaves and damp metal. After a few seconds of him dramatically swinging his arms and legs, he sits up and stares at me. And I stare back. And then he bursts out laughing. And so do I. He suddenly leans over and covers my mouth with his palm. His forehead is awfully close to mine.

“Shhhh,” he says, sing-songy. “They might hear us, right?”

I stare. He smiles, lets go, and embraces me with an awkward side hug.

“You’re right,” I say, after a few seconds.

We pause again. I hate it, but I hate it more when people like Katherine always babble and fill up silence just for the sake of avoiding silence. Maybe awkward silence is the lesser of 2 evils.

“So,” I start, gently elbowing him, with much less than a Rosemary-level amount of force.

“You like whiskey?”

Kavi looks at me. In the dark, I can’t really make out most of his features, and illuminating him with my phone flashlight seems inappropriate. His face is unreadable, in a classical sense, especially since he has no wrinkles or acne or even noticeable hypo- or hyperpigmentation.

“Huh?”

“You know, in your flask earlier today. I didn’t peg you as the whiskey type.”

“Well, I’m not an old white guy. I guess I don’t fit the profile,” he says, folding his arms over each other.

His pointy shoulder blades and elbows stretch out the corners of his dress shirt.

“Well, yeah, no shit. I didn’t get that drunk at the party,” I say, poking him.

“I had extra, since I bought some for Rosemary. Speaking of, that was a real nice gift you gave her tonight,” he says. “My parents collect signed manuscripts. Their collection is so fucking expensive, but good for them, I guess. You know?”

I don’t know, except that perhaps Kavi’s family has money, which is nice to know, since I’m always on the lookout for ways to fund my retributive schemes. And insurance copays. I mean, who the hell collects manuscripts? And “manuscripts” specifically. That’s such a posh word.

“Oh yeah?” I ask, grinning back at him. “Like, old dusty stuff? You’ve got your own personal history museum then.”

He shakes his head.

“No, no. Contemporary. I think they got that same signed book you got Rosemary, actually. She showed me it a few hours ago sometime during dinner. *Scrutiny* by Aman Das. With the signature and everything. Hers looked...different, though.”

Ah. So they're “new money,” not “old money.” As long as it's some type of “money.”

“Weird. It was probably an auto-pen. Or a stamp. Maybe they have their assistants do it sometimes,” I suggest.

He moves his hair out of the way and stares at me, nodding slowly, perhaps half-convinced. I make a bit more small talk before suggesting that we play a drinking game. Kavi acquiesces, but we're out of alcohol, he says. With a grin, I crawl over to the false vent where Dunster 1 stores Tito's in a 3 year old Grey Goose bottle. Then we start with truth or drink, except that I pretend to drink during questions, and he actually drinks, which is funny because alcohol is a carcinogen.

Eventually, he passes out. Not enough to vomit and then choke on it, which would be rather gnarly (lots of paperwork, I'm sure,) but enough to get him all curled up in a strange pseudo-fetal position, sleeping peacefully. I check the weather report on my phone. Low 40s. He already has a jacket, but I gently drape him with the black overcoat that I have on. That's plenty. Besides, once the alcohol wears off, I'm sure he'll wake up before succumbing to frostbite. I saw he has some fancy black wool socks on, which will protect him even more.

I double check that he's alive by resting my head against the roof and ensuring that his chest is moving up and down. I pray (non-denominationally) that he forgets our conversation earlier about signature discrepancies. Rosemary needs to remain blissfully ignorant about my forgery, otherwise I've wasted all this time for nothing. The risk that Kavi could expose me is unacceptable.

I pace around him on the roof, running through some mental simulations to determine if I acted optimally. After 17 hasty laps around Kavi (still asleep,) I conclude that I did. Alcohol is simple, cheap. It's preferable to smacking him in the head with a pipe, pushing him off the roof,

begging him to keep a secret, or any other alternative. Especially since he's also tall and somewhat athletic. Besides, I couldn't get my hands on, or synthesize, any of the standard amnesia drugs.

The mundanity of blacking out also helps me avoid scrutiny. Lots of people black out at least once. And when they wake up, they're so dazed and traumatized they never drink that much again. So, in addition to helping him forget about the suspicious book signature, I'm doing Kavi a favor by proactively shocking him out of alcoholism. He said his dad is an alcoholic, so the genetic predisposition is probably there.

I kneel over his body, about to wake him up, but then I remember a psychology paper I read that claimed that the more shocked a drunk person is when they wake up, the less they remember from the previous night. So, just to be safe, I leave him on the roof, sprawled out like starfish, with an empty handle of vodka at his feet, in the Boston winter. Before I head back to my room, I double check that the window is locked from the inside. Perfect.

## Chapter 5: Aaron

“Hey! What the fuck?”

Disrupted by Kavi’s cacophonous cries, I take out my headphones, and turn around. I’m right outside the Student Center, near the entrance of our shitty, overpriced boba shop. Kavi stands about 10 feet away, fingers pointed accusingly. Down the steps and about 20 feet behind him is Rosemary, who I signal—pinky finger bent—before retreating away to a nearby bench. She pulls out a sketchbook and starts scribbling...something. I can’t tell quite what. As long as she gives me space to work my gaslighting neuroscience magic.

Before he can get a word in, I sit down on the steps outside, wrapping my arms around my legs as a steady stream of boba drinkers walk past. My 6’ frame now looks small, fetal, vulnerable. You simply can’t yell at someone like that without looking shitty. Kavi composes himself and sits down beside me. His black boots are crusted in salt. Black jeans desperately need a lint roll. Black quantitative finance quarter-zip. His glasses—I didn’t even realize he wore them—had hard water stains. Wow, that night on the roof seemed like it was kind of rough.

He leans in.

“What the hell,” he whispers, “was that?”

“What was what?”

He contorts his hands into claw-like shapes before taking a deep breath. Confrontation is clearly not his strong suit, unlike that custom-tailored gray one he flexed on Instagram last week.

“Y-you abandoned me on the fucking roof last night! Of your dorm!”

He leans in until he’s about 1 foot away from my face. His left eye is twitching uncontrollably, either from lack of sleep, stress, and/or caffeine. His cologne is that fancy minty one with a cedar undertone. I forget the name, but it burns my nostrils pleasantly.

“In case you were wondering,” he continues, snarling. “I woke up on your dorm’s roof! And when I realized I was on—not in, on—Dunster Eliot, I had to wave down a janitor! Who I then had to bribe with a \$100 bill to not report me!”

“You had \$100 on you?” I tease, mildly disappointed.

In my rush, I forgot to do a cavity search. When we were drinking, I remembered to drain his phone battery by maxing out the screen brightness and turning off auto-sleep. I remembered to take pictures of him, for posterity. I even tied his shoelaces together, to slow him down, and also because it seemed funny. But I forgot his wallet. At least this is more evidence that he’s loaded.

“I-yes. That’s not the point! You did this!”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. It wasn’t that cold; the emergency shelters in Boston didn’t even open. If the homeless didn’t need a home, neither did Kavi. He could stand to build some character, the same way rich parents send their bratty kids to volunteer at soup kitchens. Besides, the \$100 isn’t his money, it’s his parents’.

“Did you check your texts?” I respond, slowly and patronizingly.

“If you did,” I continue, as passersby flow around us, “then you’d see that I texted you that you were actively resisting me. You literally grabbed me by my ankles to stop me. Here, look at this.”

I pull up my gray sweatpants and reveal a dark purple splotch on my left ankle, which I got from a minor scooter accident yesterday (stupid dogs on non-retractable leashes.) Since I’m wearing ankle socks and sneakers, it’s quite visible. I also enhanced some of its features with a body marker. Kavi visibly recoils, scooting away. A few onlookers glance, concerned, before continuing about their business. Kavi’s face flushes visibly—which is quite impressive, since he’s pretty tan. He wipes his glasses on his shirt, as if he might be seeing things. I crush a crunchy leaf under my sneakers, awaiting a response.

“I didn’t—” he says, stuttering, “think I was that drunk.”

I roll my eyes.

“Anyways,” I continue. “You have my number. Feel free to share any extra thoughts there. I’m going to head home and get an ice pack for my ankle.”

I stand up from the steps, shoot him a deathly glare, and shuffle away, past Rosemary and towards Dunster Eliot. Since I can’t help myself, I glance back once. He’s still sitting on the steps, dazed, staring off into the gray cloudy sky, probably wondering about this brief, violent blackout drunk escapade of his. How could he—an upstanding citizen—let himself hurt an innocent good samaritan? I look away before chuckling.

Once I’m back in my room, I see a text from Kavi. He wants to take me to an apology dinner next week. On him. Somewhere “fancy.” I don’t respond with words, but respond with a singular thumbs up. Can’t be too excited from the get go. I have to play hard to get.

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“So, what is deuterated chloroform? Is that bad?” Kavi asks.

I stare back, in disbelief, as his bony, tendony hands approach the bottle, which has skulls and crossbones and other scary imagery.

“Don’t touch that.”

He puts up his hands in defeat. I restrain myself. He already moved our dinner reservation from 6:00 pm to 11:00 pm, since he’s “friends” with the owner. And since his love language was “quality time,” he decided to bother me in the lab as I desperately tried to improve the percent yield of my reaction.

It wasn’t going very well. Dr. D’Arbelof wanted to confirm that the numbers I got last time were replicable. The thing is, they’re almost definitely not, since the NMR machine was glitching before. If I admitted that, then I’d look stupid. And then Katherine, she might become the golden undergraduate of the lab and get the golden letter of recommendation, which simply couldn’t

happen. That gave me about a week to improve the procedure some other way. So that I stayed on top.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Kavi asks as I stare at my flask.

“You spill it and die. And then the police, they investigate me. Then I go to prison. Once I come out, I’ll try to exact revenge on your bloodline, but it won’t be as satisfying.”

He laughs. I don’t. He quiets down. To diagnose just how fucked I was, I run a quick test. I drop a bit of liquid from my flask onto a TLC plate and then dip the edge of the plate into some liquid solvent. If my last trial worked, I explain to Kavi, then we’ll see a single dot, maybe 2, on the plate. If I see nothing, or a bunch of dots, that represents side products and unreacted junk that I didn’t want.

I turn on the UV lamp. There are at least 10 dots.

I stop counting and scream a muffled scream into Kavi’s right shoulder.

“What are you doing again?” he asks.

I growl quietly and stare up at him. I’m only now noticing that he’s surprisingly clean shaven, even on his neck. And he’s wearing a fancy silver necklace, with a pendant in the shape of a writing quill. It’s real silver, or at least plated, since the blackened patina is rubbing off on his skin.

“You’ve literally only taken 5.111. Basic chem.”

“OK, well, a challenge for you. You used to TA, right?”

I shrug, frustrated.

“Basically,” I start, holding up the flask. “The top part, the orange oil, and the bottom part, the white salt bit, need to mix. But they aren’t. Because the bottom just...gets crusty and stuck.”

I demonstrate by uncorking the flask and poking it with a metal spatula. It barely gives.

“And before you say anything,” I continue, “I used magnetic stir bars. Shaker machine things. And no, I can’t add more liquid to help it mix better. The whole point of the reaction is that it’s dry.”

Kavi positions himself on the stool and folds his arms. He itches his elbows and nods at me, as if there's something useful going on in his head. I put down my flask and return the stare.

“What do you actually need to complete this? Like, ideally? Equipment-wise?”

“An ultrasonicator. That's what we're supposed to use, and it probably works better. But we don't have one. Hence this nonsense.”

He walks over and smiles.

“What if we bought one?”

“That's at least \$2,000 for a cheap one. \$6,000 for a good one,” I say.

He shrugs.

“I'll get it, then,” he says. “It's on me. And plus, it's not just for you, it's for the lab. For science, or whatever. My parents wouldn't mind in that case.”

“You can't just—” I start. “Unless it's maybe a directed donation to the lab. Or if you bought it and just left it here. And pretended it came from somewhere else. Like another lab.”

A brief pause.

“But only if you're sure. That's a lot of money,” I quickly add, curbing my eagerness.

This generosity is a pleasant surprise to me, based on my background search. His parents were in academia. His house, not too expensive. Beyond a few formal pictures in suits and ties, nothing too ostentatious on his Instagram. I forget that wealth isn't the same as generosity. Thank you, credit card debt.

“Yes, don't worry,” he says, with a smile. “Again, my parents love this stuff. Anyways, let's get that ordered, and move dinner back to 9. Let's go home, shower, go out in 30 or so?”

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“So,” Kavi asks, carefully scooping some truffle ravioli for himself. “Any exes I need to avoid on campus? And are they chill, or are they enemies?”

There it is. The loaded question is cleverly hidden under a layer of joke. Since he just bought (and rush-shipped) a fancy machine for my lab, he's all of a sudden entitled to my past. Not quite. Those details are for myself and sometimes Rosemary.

“Well,” I respond. “It’s a long story. Where do I start?”

First, I bore him with pretext and background about Katherine, claiming that he needs it to understand the story later on. He does not, in fact, need to know about her obsession with non-flouridated toothpaste. Then, halfway through some tangent, I leave for the bathroom, further disorienting him. Finally, I consider faking a cardiac event, but then I’d miss out on free food and land a fat ER bill instead. Kavi starts getting antsy and bounces his left knee, except he’s so tall and the table is so short that the kneecap vibrations jitter the cutlery.

“She’s a cheater,” I eventually conclude. “That’s all there is to it. We broke up after about 3 or so months, but I kind of hate her for it.”

He nods, thinking he worked hard to extract this answer out of me.

“Oh. Okay,” he says.

We finish dinner as normal. I learn about his life, but it’s nothing particularly meaningful. Just banter. His parents, who I’ve already done research on. His vacation to Puerto Rico the summer after his senior year of high school, which I already found on his dad’s Facebook timeline. And other useless details that I don’t care about. I just force a smile, nod, and occasionally order more calamari, because oh my god, it’s so fucking good with that garlic aioli. Soon enough we wrap up with tiramisu, and I claim (with fake sadness) that I have work that I have to get to. He covers the bill, naturally.

Before we leave, I hand Kavi a 2D Lego mosaic of a chrysanthemum—he mentioned that this was his favorite flower once. As I hand it to him, he gasps. It’s not from a set, it’s handmade from random pieces. Not by me, but I paid someone on Etsy to do it. I spent \$120 on this, but it

was an investment. It's like conditioning a dog. Roll over? Get a dog treat? Buy expensive lab equipment? Get a cute plastic mosaic. Rinse and repeat.

“You made this? For me?” he asks, beaming.

I nod. He rotates the 160 x 160 grid from every angle, in shock. I figure that, for someone “upper middle class,” sappy personal gifts are optimal. He puts the mosaic down and embraces me with a rather tight hug. I awkwardly reciprocate and think about the extra hours of minimum wage research I'll have to fabricate to balance my credit card bill.

## Chapter 6: Katherine

It is eight o'clock right now. I have an hour and a half until the interview. Since I hate alarms, I instead set a twenty-eight minute timer and continue reading my book at the koi pond inside a Harvard chapel. *Scrutiny* by Aman Das. The content is quite gory and makes me feel queasy, like pizza with one Lactaid instead of three. Whenever I need a break, I stare at the koi fish jumping and mouthing at me, either hungry for my literature or my toes.

I am not much of a reader, honestly. Rosemary had dumped this book into the sorority communal junk pile, saying it got accidentally damaged, so I thought I would give it a read and get a glimpse into her mind. The water damage is truly extensive, including on the title page, where I was only able to catch the blurry remnants of an author signature. I flip back to the first page and try to make out the words again: "To my biggest fan, Rosemary."

"To my biggest fan, Rosemary," I say, before laughing uncontrollably for two minutes.

After losing interest half-way through the book, my fish brain turns to Instagram and starts salivating over friends posting poke bowls with edamame and carrots and spicy mayo and furikake seasoning. Now I am hungry. I head back to Harvard Square, T to Porter, grab poke there, post a cute picture, and then T back to Kendall/MIT. I check my story—fewer likes than I usually get.

I silently fast-walk to Next House. With about fifteen minutes to spare, I rush into the bathroom and flick on the light switch manually since the motion detectors are broken, but at least the light switches are bedazzled with plastic diamonds, which makes for a unique tactile and visual experience. I tie my hair up into a ponytail. After taking a few cute mirror selfies, I head back to my room and change my Zoom username from "Katherine" to my middle name, "Meryl." Then, I add a subtle pixelated filter so that my no-longer-cute face is obfuscated even more.

I stare at myself, on the video preview. I barely know who that girl is. This whole process of disguising myself is quite unintuitive. And probably overkill. But this whole charade is something that Aaron would do, and while that disgusts me because he is a liar and manipulator, that also

reassures me because he is such an excellent liar and manipulator. Which must mean what I am doing will probably work.

I take a deep breath: I am here to extract some information without a trace, no trace.

I join the Zoom room with my camera off. Kavi immediately joins. I turn my camera on.

“Hi Kavi—am I saying that right? Okay, great! I’m Meryl. I’m interviewing you for Safety and Assault Prevention Chair.”

He nods with a blank smile. His blurry face and blank background do not suggest anything unusual. He is wearing a blue collared shirt, but probably only shorts or underwear out of laziness. At some point, his lip pixels move and his irritating, grating voice says something.

Then he repeats himself. I pretend that I cannot hear him.

“Sorry,” I say. “My WiFi sucks. I’ll just turn off my video, if that’s alright. Might help.”

He nods and smiles. I turn off my video, freeing me from this horrid costume. I would simply perish if Aaron figured out that “Meryl” was interviewing his boyfriend. Luckily, Kavi seems somewhat unobservant, so I should be safe. My voice is also down an octave from a cold that I am battling, further shielding my true identity.

The first half of the interview goes pretty smoothly. I have to admit, he has some pretty decent ideas. Centralized blacklists. Mandatory QR codes for people to scan if they feel uncomfortable. Designated sober monitors at every event. None of which are crazy innovations for student safety, but still. Unfortunately, he does not know how to shut up, but I also do not want to be rude, so I take advantage of my lack of video and start doing laundry on my bed. Eventually, I sync into a productive rhythm of sorting and folding, using Kavi’s speaking cadence as my metronome.

“Yeah, totally,” I say, starting on another stack of t-shirts. “Can you get into more detail about how you’d implement...that?”

He responds. Eventually, I work through my laundry and all the normal interview questions. The latter is a formality, since the Safety and Assault Prevention Chair is almost always an upperclassmen anyways. Not officially. But he does not know that.

Now for the second phase of the plan.

“So,” I continue, interjecting while simultaneously ordering online groceries. “Our final question. We have to ask this for conflict of interest purposes. Since this role has to do with personal relationships, we have to ask if you’re involved with any frats. You...or anyone else you’re involved with.”

“I—” Kavi says, making a face. “Sure. I’m dating someone in Dunster Eliot. Aaron. I don’t know if you know him. But neither of us ever rushed, so it’s irrelevant.”

Aaron. Aaron. I flinch. Even though I asked the question and knew the answer, I did not like hearing that name, especially from his boyfriend. The man who single-handedly fractured my friend group with a single stupid out-of-context photo. This visual evidence of me “cheating” on him at Roxy’s was perfect for generating sympathy in situ. He probably shows it to random people all the time. Or maybe he unveiled our private texts, including my (then unmedicated) crash outs, in case his audience preferred written evidence. Or played the embarrassing voicemails I left during my rock bottom, in case his audience preferred auditory evidence.

All of it was absolutely embarrassing for me. Whining that Aaron cheated first did nothing. It did not help that the Roxy’s picture showed me smiling, flattered to be receiving a cheek kiss from some then-charismatic, now-irrelevant loser. It did not help that it was in the middle of the day, suggesting that alcohol had no role. It did not help that the individual and I were close friends at the time. It did not help that I profusely over-apologized over text and cried over voicemail, which makes me look guilty and villainous, even though I later confronted him about him cheating first.

I pity whomever he entangles, Kavi included. I mute and gather myself for a few seconds with one of those breathing exercises my psychiatrist tells me about. Then I unmute.

“Oh!” I say. “Yeah, I do. He’s in 5.13 right now, right?”

“Yeah! That’s Organic II, right? Orgo? I forget the numbers sometimes.”

“Yes. Cool, cool,” I say, nodding.

Now there’s an awkward silence. Fuck. Fuck.

I hoped that he would just start gushing about his boyfriend, but I forgot that a black box named “Meryl” does not exactly elicit smalltalk. Especially during an interview. Now the situation is weird and unrecoverable and I have nothing to say. My heart starts palpitating as I rack my brains for what I can say without revealing my identity. My neurons fail me.

Instead of abruptly exiting the meeting without saying goodbye, a tried-and-true tactic I have deployed during stressful job interviews, I glance at my copy—well, Rosemary’s copy—of *Scrutiny* by Aman Das. It is open to the damaged first page, with the smeared signature.

Wait, a signature, yes, that is what I need. Handwriting. I need a handwriting sample. From Kavi. Then I can use that to get back at Aaron, to fuck with him, make him pay. A new plan is brewing, and it is a bit insane. I just need to pull off this conversational pivot.

“So,” I say, “that’s pretty much the whole interview, unless you have any questions! We just need a quick written attestation from you. Just saying that you promise to follow all the bylaws, be impartial, and so on. You have to sign it by hand and send it to us..”

He looks confused, so I interrupt him before his little brain breaks.

“It’s just a page long, and it’s standard boilerplate stuff. Don’t worry, I’ll send it over.”

He shrugs, accepts his fate, and then we both exit the call.

I undo my ponytail, take a deep breath, and change my Zoom nickname back to “Katherine” before I forget. Then, I quickly type up a bullshit attestation, making sure that I cover as much of

the alphabet as possible, like “the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog,” except that I can’t really sneak in an “X” organically.

In my excitement, I almost email this to him from my actual MIT email, kathyyy@mit.edu, which would have been extremely stupid. Instead, I text Claire, my friend on the Fraternity-Sorority Council, explaining that we should make all the interviewees handwrite an attestation so that they take us seriously, blah blah blah. She immediately responds—being chronically online—with a thumbs up and great enthusiasm.

*People don't take this role seriously like ever! Yes send it over and ill send it to them all. And now that you mention it, ill also make a contract for the frats themselves, so that they can't throw if they don't get the semesterly safety training from them,* she types.

I like the message and giggle to myself, at objects in my room, to no one in particular. Ten minutes later, Kavi’s handwritten attestation is in the not-so-private Google Drive that Claire had set up. I click onto Kavi\_Attestation.pdf and read:

*I personally attest that, if elected to the Safety and Assault Prevention Chair role for the upcoming cycle, that I shall carry out this job impartially and fairly...*

Bingo. That is all I need. I send the pdf to my iPad and open it on my notetaking app. I grab my Apple Pencil and zoom in on each of the letters. I trace them, and retrace them, over and over again, like one of those kids from the old days who has to write some bullshit sentence over and over again as a punishment. Thirty minutes later, I nail his handwriting down, it is embedded into the hand muscles and tendons and nerves and whatever else of my left hand. And I will never forget it. I am slow to learn, but also slow to forget.

Now I hesitate. It is only ten o’clock, and right now, I do not have the willpower, the whimsy, to carry out the plan. I am too rational and conservative. Thankfully, a cheap solution exists.

My limoncello. I run to the fridge and grab the jar: it is cloudy, yellow, sweet, and finally ready. Five weeks ago, I steeped lemon rind (not pith, just rind) in Everclear. Yesterday, I added simple syrup. It is supposed to be saved for a special occasion, and this is that occasion. I pour myself a shot and it burns nicely. But I need a partner in crime. Instinctually, I text my degenerate friend and neighbor, Janelle. She is always down to randomly drink, even on a random Thursday evening. And unlike almost everyone else, she does not ever ask intrusive questions. She will just shut up, enjoy the free alcohol, and vibe. She got into Stanford for her PhD, so I cannot even judge.

Within minutes, she sees my message and opens up my door without knocking, donning blue jeans, flip flops, and a stained baggy tee. After a few pleasantries, we start taking shots, first to make sure it has not gone bad, which is impossible, since the alcohol percentage is so high, but just in case. Then we play Hot Seat, except we forget the rules and start taking shots after every question no matter what. We are menaces in the Next House lounge, staining the dull red armchair cushions when our shot glasses overflow.

An hour later, Janelle passes out in my room, even though her own room is ten feet away. She fell asleep while swiping on my post-breakup Hinge, and now my phone is clutched tightly to her chest. I dare not wake her. Instead, I grab a sticky note and channel my handwriting ability.

The first sticky note is too specific of a threat.

The second one is fine, but I mess up the “t,” so I redo it.

The third one is just perfect. I hold up my work of art to the ceiling, against the fluorescent lights. Then another shot of limoncello, because why not? Then I grab a jacket and leave for the D’Arbelof lab, leaving behind Janelle, who is now curled up on my floor with my laundry (clean but unfolded.)

In the lab, I put on gloves, find Aaron’s lab drawer, and open it up. I swear I hear a clicking noise, but it is probably not a gun, probably a dumb hinge that needs greasing. After a few seconds

of fumbling around, I drop the note in the drawer and close it. Instead of immediately leaving, I pause and look around the lab. All this glassware, all these powders, these solvents, so on. I gravitate towards a random small Erlenmeyer flask in our dish rack. I toss it up and down in my left hand like a baseball. Then I chuck it at the wall.

## Chapter 7: Aaron

I'm flummoxed. With a pair of tweezers, I carefully lift up the sticky note to eye level, then to the fluorescent lights, then under the UV lights, as if there's some invisible ink that might reveal itself at a specific wavelength. To document the scene, I take a bunch of pictures, including the note, especially the note, from all angles. I notice indentations in the surface of the sticky note, inkless scribbles from when the author probably tried writing over and over again in the same place with dried ink until it was forced out by sheer will. I read it again:

*I'm going to expose you. hope you go bald. fuck you. watch out.*

Vague, a bit garbled, but also weirdly specific. What did it mean? Did they know about the Condition? Or my upcoming appointment? Why else would they make a chemo joke? Or was it even a chemo joke? Instinctively, I run my fingers through my rather lush hair. My hairline has yet to recede. No bald spots, either. It was plausibly a chemo joke, then. But why a handwritten note? Instead of using newspaper clippings, like old-school murderers? Or an untraceable email, like the ones that the right-wing clubs use to advertise? Or even a typed up letter? Who knew? I pocket the sticky note for later.

Obviously, I have to find the perpetrator. Forget the sticky note—this whole lab is in disarray. Broken glass everywhere, random solvent spills, fume hood left open. Whoever did this has a specific agenda. Did knowledge of the Condition escape the Alliance, and if so, how?

I need to collect evidence first. Ever since Katherine joined our lab—I saw her name in our lab Slack one day—I took some security measures. She simply can't be trusted. I wanted to add a personal security camera, but that idea was promptly shut down by Dr. D'Arbelof, who said that the risk of intellectual property theft was too high. My next idea—which I didn't run by her—was Bobule.

I kneel onto the crusty, stained floor and open my lab drawer, in the middle row. I look at the underside and spot Bobule, taped with 4 pieces of duct tape. He's an accelerometer connected to

a battery source, whose sole purpose is detecting when my drawer is in movement. Then within a minute of any incident, he updates my spreadsheet with timestamps and stores a backup on a little USB stick, just in case. He's simple, discreet, and robust, except he makes occasional clicking sounds, which I'm working to fix.

Bobule detected my drawer opening and closing around 11:15 pm on Thursday. Last night. Peculiar. It couldn't have been cleaning staff, not that late. Before I jump to conclusions, though, I test Bobule out. I open and close the drawer. Open it slowly, close it slowly. Shake the drawer. Move the drawer very slowly. I check the spreadsheet again: everything registers correctly.

The first obvious guess is Katherine, who continues to despise me, despite cheating on me, on camera, in public. If I still had her location, I could potentially tie her to the crime scene, but she unshared it a while ago. However, one of our mutuals—I forget his name, but now he loves me and barely tolerates her—still does. In fact, after we broke up, I pestered him for Katherine's location so often that he caved in and wrote a program that scrapes Katherine's location data every 10 minutes and saves it into a spreadsheet I can access. Invasive, but convenient.

According to the spreadsheet, she was at Next House the entire time that night. At 11:10 pm. And then at 11:20 pm. So it couldn't have been her, unless she left her phone at home, which is stupid and unrealistic, especially since she's addicted to Instagram. And she's certainly not smart enough to spoof her location. Maybe she truly forgot it at home, but who knows?

To be safe, I message Dr. D'Arbelof with pictures of the mess in the lab, timestamped at 9:45 am, expressing an appropriate amount of shock. Before she bombards me with follow ups, I mute Slack, walk to the Kendall/MIT T stop, and T to Charles/MGH for my doctor's appointment at Mass General Brigham Cancer Institute, for my 3rd and hopefully final blood test, plus scans.

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In the waiting room, I grab the sticky note from my pockets and study it carefully, tracing and retracing each letter in my mind, over and over again. I eventually put it away and distract myself. Then I let myself brainstorm slurs for bad blood-draw-ers—I'm currently focused on vampire-themed ones—as an array of coughs echo through the waiting room. A reminder that I'm the healthiest cancer patient in this room. I avoid eye contact with the rest. If I angle my head the exact wrong way—north-east-east or so—an old granny with an Halloween orange dishcloth atop her head assaults my visual field. She stares at the fish tank. Adjacent to her is an old man sitting down, elbows resting on his walker, which has tennis balls at the bottom instead of actual rubber stoppers. I shudder and avert my eyes.

Rosemary asked one time if I wanted company at these appointments, whether in person or on video call. I declined. She does not need to suffer alongside me performatively. I want the only information she has about the Condition to be filtered through me. What if she overhears some dramatic medical news? It isn't worth it. Just to be safe, I paused location sharing on my phone, so that none of my friends could connect the dots.

Unfortunately, the WiFi here is shit, so I can't scroll on Instagram. Instead, I ruffle through my backpack for my history book on the 1979 Iranian Revolution. I was supposed to read this last weekend for class, when I was visiting home. But then my uncle saw it and started about how I should ditch the book entirely and just interview his parents about the “war.” His parents, who were die-hard Iranian monarchists. His parents, one of whom forgot she was married to her husband, and a husband who still thinks she is his dead-mother-resurrected. Which is Oedipally strange to conceptualize.

One of the final catalysts for the revolution was when the Shah—the non-democratically, US-installed dictator—escaped the country. He bounced around Europe and eventually ended up in the US. Turns out, he had cancer, and he went to the US in part to get treatment. On the other

hand, he retreated to his imperial backers, which pissed off the Iranian masses. The Iranian Shah himself died a year later. Sure, some people mourned, but after a year or so, no one gave a fuck about him, or his cancer. Though maybe he karmically earned his death, if you count his numerous human rights violations.

“Mirza-Mohanty?” a nurse calls out.

“That’s me,” I say, as I walk towards the phlebotomy chair.

## Chapter 8: Aaron

**Patient:** MIRZA-MOHANTY, AARON

**DOB:** I swear Rosemary ALMOST forgot last year...but have no hard proof.

**DOCUMENT NAME:** Oncology Clinic Note  
**DOCUMENT SUBJECT:** Oncology Office Visit Note

**SERVICE DATE/TIME:** I literally just went here...  
**PERFORM INFORMATION:** DOCTOR MD, THAT ONE

**Attending:** The Other One, MD  
**Referring:** Some Other Doctor, MD

### Chief Complaint

Follow up since my first 2 blood draws didn't work. And apparently I incorrectly got chest x-rays instead of a CT last time?

Fuck this.

### History of Present Illness

#### CANCER HISTORY:

20 year old MIT student...  
same old, same old,  
lawsuit-proof level of detail here.

#### INTERIM HISTORY:

Doing well.  
Lives in Cambridge, MA, for school (MIT!)  
Prefers surveillance, if recommended.

Review of Systems  
A 14 point ROS is performed and is negative except in HPI.

### Physical Exam

#### Vitals & Measurements

T: 35.7 °C (Temporal Artery) HR: 89 (Peripheral) RR: 15  
BP: 124/78 SpO2: 97%  
HT: 183 cm (I'm officially 6'! Katherine always thought it was just my shoes! I'll throw this in her face at an appropriate time.)  
WT: 71.9 kg (Dosing) BMI: 21.5  
ECOG Performance Score: 0

Gen: Well developed, well nourished adult in NAD  
HEENT: Atraumatic, normocephalic, sclerae anicteric, EOMI, MMM

Neck: Supple  
Pul: Non labored breathing  
CVS: Normal rate, good peripheral perfusion  
GI: Soft non-tender, non-distended  
GU: Deferred  
EXT: No peripheral edema  
Skin: No rash  
Neuro: A&Ox3 Non focal grossly intact  
Psych: Mood and affect were appropriate

#### ASSESSMENT:

1. Basically, it's kinda-sorta-bad-but-you-can't-complain-about-it-because-other-people-are-way-more-sick.
2. So suck it up.

#### DISCUSSION AND MEDICAL DECISION MAKING:

Discussed availability of 1 cycle of carboplatin AUC of 7 as adjuvant therapy, and given unusually high risk features, this is highly recommended. I opt to get **1 cycle of carboplatin chemotherapy**. This reduces relapse risk from about 25% to 4%, favoring adjuvant 1x carboplatin over surveillance (i.e. waiting

### Problem List/Past Medical History

This is the ~4th time they mentioned this. The doctors love a good copy and paste. Let me help them out: CANCER CANCER CANCER CANCER CANCER!

### Procedure/Surgical History

Damn, this is repeated too!

### Medications Ordered

In short: They got mad when I asked for oxy for no real reason.

### Oncology Drugs

Oxy doesn't count. I asked, again.

### Allergies

No Known Allergies  
No Known Medication Allergies

### Lab Results

#### Re-drawn today due to hemolysis of prior sample(s); all WNL

#### BMP

Sodium Lvl: 136 mmol/L (Today)  
Potassium Lvl: 4.3 mmol/L (Today)  
Chloride Lvl: 100 mmol/L (Today)  
CO2: 25 mmol/L (Today)  
BUN: 10 mg/dL (Today)  
Creatinine Lvl: 0.81 mg/dL (Today)  
Calcium Lvl: 9.6 mg/dL (Today)  
Glucose Level: 88 mg/dL (Today)

#### Liver Panel

Alk Phos: 108 units/L (Today)  
Total Protein: 7.5 g/dL (Today)  
Albumin Lvl: 4.6 g/dL (Today)  
AST: 24 units/L (Today)  
ALT: 15 units/L (Today)  
Bilirubin Total: 0.7 mg/dL (Today)

#### Thyroid Function Tests

T3 Free: 3.7 pg/mL (Today)  
TSH: 3.2 mIU/L (Today)

#### Tumor Markers

Good...for now. But it doesn't mean there's nothing there. Have the MIT scientists really not come up with better diagnostics? Where is my tuition going?

and periodically scanning for 5 years to make sure it hasn't come back.)

Even though it's "just" 1 cycle, side effects can last up to a **month**. So I might need to take some leave.

Potential excuses: a family member died. This is more believable than being generically "depressed." I'm worried that someone's going to delve into the obituaries and expose my lie, so I'll need to carefully work out the details. Maybe a dog is safer, if I was really emotionally attached to it? A very fancy dog that died an untimely death. Or some bougie wellness retreat with adaptogenic mushroom tea and sea moss smoothies and a 4 week no phone policy. That also works.

I'm worried for in-person follow-up scheduling. They're only ever available at 9 am. I cannot deal with that depressing waiting room that early in the morning. All those nearly-dead people suck the life out of me. Note to self: prepare to cry at the scheduler over the phone to get a better time.

**PLAN:**

1. More scans.
2. More bloodwork.
3. More unsharing my location so people don't ask questions.
4. If necessary, deploy a viable excuse while recovering.

I, Aaron, have no questions because I'm smart and can actually read peer-reviewed research papers and make logical decisions about my own health in conjunction with a doctor.

Even if they suck.

*Electronically Signed*

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*That One Doctor MD*

**ACCESSION(S) #:** 290-CT-28-MoreNumbers

**EXAMINATION(S):** CT Chest w/ Contrast

**EXAM DATE:** I. JUST. WENT. HERE.

**REASON FOR EXAM:** Document it ONE more time because we have to be EXTRA sure!

**ADDITIONAL CLINICAL HISTORY:**

**COMPARISON:** None available

**TECHNIQUE:** A digital scout radiograph was acquired. A multislice CT acquisition through the chest was obtained following intravenous contrast. 100 cc of Isovue 370 mg/cc was administered intravenously, without untoward reaction.

**FINDINGS/IMPRESSION:**

The thyroid gland is unremarkable. There is no evidence of supraclavicular or axillary adenopathy.

There is no evidence of mediastinal adenopathy.

No discrete lung nodules or masses identified.

There are no focal osseous lesions identified.

There is no pericardial or pleural effusion seen.

**IMPRESSION:**

1. No evidence of metastatic disease. But that doesn't mean I'm safe, does it?

Signed By: RADIOLOGIST MD, SOME

## Chapter 9: Katherine

“Hey, Katherine, you interviewed that Kavi guy, right?”

“Huh?”

I glance around the underground classroom. I was expecting to have some peace. The only times this classroom is full is when teary-eyed students show up on assignment deadlines to beg the teaching assistants for computer architecture lab answers. However, once people learn to cheat more effectively, the room becomes barren. And barren means peaceful. Except it is not barren, since the teaching assistants themselves, like Caroline, are obliged to show up, even if all she does is fabricate lore for the MIT gossip Instagram account. And not even well. There is an “Alex C.” in her stories who keeps on switching genders in a non-genderfluid way.

“For that fraternity-sorority safety thing,” she says. “Someone mentioned it last week.”

In her plastic chair, missing two of its four wheels, she scoots to make direct eye contact with me from across the table. I meet her bulging green eyes with a tense smile.

“Yeah, Claire was busy. So I filled in. It was just standard stuff,” I say.

I try to scooch the opposite direction to break eye contact and end the conversation. Unfortunately, before I am able to put on my headphones, Caroline stands up and leans over the table, in a manner that might be menacing if she was not around five feet flat.

“He didn’t get it, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“OK, good. Because I heard some weird shit about some disciplinary thing.”

“Like he cheated on something?” I say, fully closing my laptop. “Honestly, if that was disqualifying, almost no one—”

“No, no, not like that. More malicious. I heard he broke and entered into a lab or something. Like actual legally problematic shit,” Caroline says, tapping her fingers on the splintering tables.

She leans in, as if the ghosts or broken security cameras are listening.

“What?” I respond, standing up.

“Specifically, there’s some weird conspiracy theory that he sabotaged people’s research. Or stole a bunch of stuff to make meth. Or some other superdrug. Which sounds insane, but we are MIT, so it’s definitely possible.”

“Like...synthesizing roofies?”

Caroline laughs.

“Who knows? Anyways, certified weirdo. Glad he didn’t get it.”

Before I can pry, some guy with grass-stained pants, broken flip flops, but a Canada Goose puffer jacket shuffles in. Caroline proactively runs over like a good little teaching assistant, introducing herself with her saccharine “customer service” voice. It grates on my ears, but I know why she is going the extra mile. The professors occasionally send out quality control dummies to make sure the teaching assistants are kind and helpful, but not too helpful. I grudgingly wave goodbye to minimum wage Caroline and she waves back at me with her right hand before diving into her student’s shitty code.

Outside, I open up the “D’Arbelof Research Group” Slack and see a bunch of pings from this morning. Everyone is complaining about the state of the lab.

*This is all so horrible*, I message, in agreement.

*Looks like a raccoon or goose got in here or something*, someone laments.

I must admit, the pictures suggest that I left the lab in a bit more of a chaotic state than I recall. Flasks are knocked over. Some liquid solvents spilled on the floor. Some broken glassware, but none of the expensive stuff. And there is some miscellaneous white powder everywhere, but really, in a chemistry lab, when is there not? A small part of me feels guilty for trashing the lab in a fit of rage, but I have always said that the lab needs a bit more security. Especially with Aaron around. I

do not trust that man. Unfortunately, right after I joined, Dr. D'Arbelof announced on Slack we could not record anything in the lab because of the risk of intellectual property theft.

I bet she realizes how bad that decision was.

The most important thing is that no one is seriously suspecting foul play, like Caroline's tall tales suggest. All the damage looks random. Nothing extremely important was missing. The acids, the bases, the hyper-reactive, hyper-toxic compounds. All seemingly untouched. The only important thing missing was that fucking sticky note, which I hope Aaron took home and overanalyzed. I forget what I wrote, but I know it was something creepy and petty; maybe something about his receding hairline. Maybe something about the ugly acne scars on his face. Or how he is just an overall cesspool of a human. All of these are acceptable.

Hungry from all this thinking, I walk to Life Alive, the bougie vegan place in Kendall Square. Aaron passionately hates vegan and vegetarian restaurants, so it is a personal safe space for me. Once I am at the front of the line, I order the vegan ramen, which uses black salt and random spices to replicate egginess, but not very well. And a matcha, to go. No, I will absolutely not "round up" to donate to some intangible kids.

Walking back to campus with a matcha in hand, I scroll through the MIT Confessions Facebook group instead of paying attention to the electric scooters. Unsurprisingly, there are several recent posts from earlier today speculating about how "anonymous ppl" vandalized some lab on campus. A plurality of them claim that the perpetrator was acting in bad faith. A minority suggested that the human was merely drunk, that a raccoon or a goose was involved instead, or perhaps a drunk raccoon or goose. Or multiple geese. Or multiple people. Another post claimed this was all a conspiracy spread by administrators, in some convoluted test.

It seems that Caroline's so-called sources are in conflict. These "confessions" are all probably just targeted propaganda written by Aaron himself. Which means my plan is working. By

making his business public, he is setting the stage for a traumatic, humiliating, and not-so-private break up with Kavi. Eventually, I will expose him and get my revenge. But for now, I get to put my feet up and enjoy the show.

Aaron is so predictable. Planting fake confessions is such a classic Aaron move. One time, there was a post where someone claimed that I was an “amazing choreographer” for Dance Troupe, which made my day, until he drunkenly admitted that he submitted it so I would stop pouting. Also, post-breakup, there were a suspicious amount of confessions complaining about how some WMBR radio host was slandering her ex. Which I did, but only because word got back to me that he was telling everyone I was “emotionally abusive and unavailable” during our relationship.

None of these confessions mention Kavi by name, though. Which makes sense, posts singling out individual students are not allowed. I am guessing that Aaron resorted to word-of-mouth to get that rumor spread across his networks, eventually making its way to Caroline, among others.

The ice in my matcha has melted. I toss it. Since the benches are friendly, not hostile, I lean down on one and wedge my black leather backpack under the crook of my neck. For the hell of it, I grab my iPad and start writing the alphabet in Kavi’s handwriting. I still got it. I am really good. Though I feel a tad guilty, having framed Kavi, but this is justifiable under utilitarian principles. Facilitating their breakup is less harmful than letting them stay together and letting Kavi fall prey to Aaron’s machinations. That man actively harms the people he gets close to. In a way, I am doing God’s work here.

I put away my iPad and take out the organic chemistry problem set I had printed out last night. My tailbone aches, so I shift my hips and shoulders. I scrawl in arrows and move around electrons and bond carbon atoms together into pretty rings. It honestly is not too hard, though I

hear that Rosemary is struggling. If only her ego let her ask her cousin for help. I mean, I would ghost her regardless, but still.

About twenty minutes later, I draw the products of my last reaction and stare at them. One of the side products is ethanol. I laugh at myself, at no one in particular, and then start doodling a scene of a drunk raccoon trashing a chemistry lab. I rotate my body halfway through, so that I don't tan unevenly. After scrolling brainlessly on my phone for a bit, I walk home and text Janelle.

*Wanna go out tn?*

She immediately likes my message. We are on. We both love ethanol.

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“Katherine! Pregame or what?”

I am wearing my black corset and skirt and Doc Martens. Some musky cologne—not perfume—fully emo. The theme is “cowboys versus aliens,” though I seem to fit neither theme. Sensing my exclusion from the binary, Janelle grabs a black bedazzled cowboy hat from her room.

“For the theme,” she says, tossing it to me. “Since you have this monochrome...vibe.”

I nod and smile. The alcohol is throttling my brain to about half of its usual capacity, yet I am still mostly in control. This was not supposed to happen; I was supposed to go into lab tonight and check on my experiment, which coincidentally survived the mysterious rampage. But Janelle insisted I go out tonight instead.

“Please. If we're going fratting, the group needs more women than men,” she says.

The two guys—one is really tall, 6' 0", but probably 5'9", is sprawled out on the couch. Janelle cuts him off from alcohol and hands him water instead. He takes it as shots instead of sipping, so I am unsure if he is playing into it or just cannot tell the difference. Some red-head—rocking a pink rhinestone cowboy hat—is sitting in the corner, bored, doomscrolling on her phone.

“Where are we going?” the shorter man says, with an audacity unbecoming of his stature.

“Either Triple A or TPN,” Janelle says, with a disarming smile. “I’m texting some friends to see what’s better—oh wait, TPN got shut down. Triple A it is. Carson, you got the Uber? An XL, please.”

“Got it,” Carson the Short says.

I run to the bathroom—the Tito’s is running right through me. I laugh about Carson to the bathroom wall. He is not here as a friend, but as the designated driver, in that he calls Ubers and conveniently forgets to invoice us. He is happy to just be along for the ride. We are his escorts, but emotionally, not sexually. And the logic of the whole scheme just hit me. Janelle is more street-smart than I thought.

Once I am out of the bathroom, all—five?—of us head outside, holy shit, it is cold, I do not know why we are out so early. Can Mr. Short not read the estimated time of arrival? But eventually a beat up Tesla Cybertruck stops by. We shuffle in and act sober until we are dropped off outside of Triple A.

Outside of Triple A, Janelle, me, and the other girl stand in front. Carson the Short stands right behind me, since we are all the same height. Then the tall man stands to the right. The plan, Janelle had explained, is that they would see three women and one guy, and let us in. Then Carson would pop out from behind me and fast-walk in.

It works flawlessly. Once inside, we disperse, which seems a tad unsafe, though I am sure Janelle will hunt down Carson for the free Uber back. Where is she—oh, she is going to chug some jungle juice. The tall man we came with stumbles past the flashing lights towards the shitty DJ set—he cannot mix two songs to save his life—and he also disappears. I try to dance a bit, but I am limited to my arms and torso, since my sneaker soles stick to the miscellaneous gunk on the splintered wooden floor.

The third girl, the redhead with the pink cowboy hat disappears into some moshpit next to the live band upstairs. Live band? With a DJ downstairs? Well, both suck, so it does not matter. I head to the punchbowl of pee-yellow jungle juice, situated near the bathroom entrance, with stacks of half-full Red Solo cups nearby. Oh, some guy is just ladling some directly into his mouth. Fun. I muster some courage and ladle myself a cup. Building immunity and whatnot. I sip, then I chug. Extremely strong, but somewhat pleasant, like a poor man's limoncello. Mine is better. Probably because I am not (particularly) poor nor a man.

I fake-flirt with a few brothers to give me some beers—unopened, obviously—because I need to get drunker. But my brain yells at me, biochemically, to pee again. God. I shuffle over to the bathroom line, mostly short girls in knee high boots tapping away at their phones with broken screen protectors. The line clears quite quickly, though.

People get to the front, wrinkle their faces like a lemon, or like those really expensive Sumo oranges, which is oh-so annoying. God, I want to squeeze the juice out of their faces. I ask three of them what is wrong, if anything, and they all just shake their heads and shuffle to the upstairs bathroom. Now it is my turn to get traumatized by whatever poltergeist claimed the bathroom. The door is slightly ajar, so I peep in.

It is Kavi. Interviewed-recently-Kavi. He is sobbing his eyes out, but that is him. He is clearly an alien, not a cowboy, with his neon green shirt and cat ears with googly eyes painted on top. He briefly makes eye contact with me, in between deep hyperventilations, and he mumbles something. There is another girl in there—clearly a cowboy, with her navy blue jacket and suede cowboy hat—who is kneeling beside him, facing away from me, calming him down. No wonder no one went to the bathroom—his lanky legs are a tripping hazard for anyone who wanted to reach the singular stall behind him. Before he says anything, I duck out.

Intruding on a mental breakdown—the canonical MIT experience—is a cardinal sin. As a dubious ethical compromise, I eavesdrop from the outside, out of sight. Here is what I catch: Kavi is stressed about his relationship. Something about the silent treatment? He sobs too much to tell. Something about “escaping.” Unclear from where or from what. He mentions Aaron once or twice, but technically, it might be someone named Erin. The girl whispers that he will be OK, that not everyone thinks he is....a weevil? No, evil. Then more sobs. Sickening sobs. I feel the fake vegan ramen I ate slowly crawl its way up my throat. As if the children I did not donate to at Life Alive are punishing me for my intrusion. I try to wash it down with some water—oh, that is not water, that is jungle juice. I shuffle towards the bar and ask for some water. They oblige. I chug.

My stomach still feels queasy, so I try to will it into a peaceful state via the gut-brain axis, but my neurons fail. I run upstairs to the bathroom and throw up my entire lunch into the first open stall. No mental breakdowns here. I steal some fraternity brother’s mouthwash from a cubby and swish out my mouth.

A few minutes later, I leave the party alone, resist attempts of “assistance” from some male party attendees, and walk a block away. I call an Uber home and text the others that I left because I got tired. At least Carson the Short can now order a normal Uber instead of an Uber XL for the ride back.

## Chapter 10: Aaron

The 2nd week of Kavi's absence from MIT sparked more speculation than I expected, considering how quiet and unobtrusive he is. People here are routinely absent for a week or longer, especially during flu season, since they often lazily skip the flu shot. And no one wonders where they went. Maybe it's because Kavi is so tall. People must notice the absence of his long, lanky shadow under the fluorescent tube lights.

Here's the unsexy truth: Kavi is probably rebelling dramatically in NYC, sprawled out on the floor of some swanky hotel room in the Upper West Side. Or maybe he wants to "rediscover" himself, so he might instead be solo hiking in Acadia National Park. On the third hand, maybe he's just drinking himself to death in a shack downtown to escape the harsh reality of his MIT sophomore spring slump. Or maybe he's actually just dead. Who knows? If I had to bet, though, I'd say the stress of all the "breaking and entering into a lab" rumors were getting to him. Which is embarrassing, since I hadn't even confronted him about that before he vanished.

This was a disappointing result of my experiment. See, after I realized the handwriting on the sticky note matched his sappy handwritten cards, I launched an investigation. First, as a test, I planted a few vague confessions on the MIT Confession's Facebook page. Then, I discreetly spread some old-fashioned rumors, linking Kavi to the aforementioned lab break-in. That's all. No confrontation with Kavi, no yelling matches, nothing direct. If he did write that note, he is going to need to suffer in silence until he admits it. And then he is going to pay like hell, plus interest.

Funnily enough, there is now a new set of rumors concerning his disappearance, which are totally organic. After an obscene amount of alcohol, my sources tell me that someone named Caroline, a 6.191 TA, is the primary source. Impressive. I'll keep her skillset in mind for my future schemes. Apparently, her rumors claim that he's in a drug detox program, or on an involuntary psych hold, or stuck in jail and waiting to get bailed out, among a few other options. All just barely believable. Unfortunately, since he (probably) didn't pass away, admin won't send one of its sappy

eulogy emails, which means there is no closure, allowing MIT's most creative minds to riff off Caroline's rumors in some sick and twisted real-life game of Telephone.

Funnily enough, Kavi's pathetic retreat reminds me of Katherine after I systematically dismantled her support system post-breakup. But at this point, I don't want him, even if he's innocent. He failed the test. He cracked under pressure. I only date diamonds, winners. Someone who can navigate stressful social situations and come out on top as a winner. And right now, he's getting absolutely decimated in the court of public opinion by some random girl with too much time on her hands. I'm almost jealous of Caroline. Perhaps I'll recruit her to the Alliance.

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"It's probably just some mental health thing," Rosemary says, with the special sort of gentleness reserved for friends undergoing a breakup, even if that breakup was by default. Allies have to be nice to each other, especially when their bloodwork and scans suggest they need chemo, albeit just 1 shot of it.

We walk through all the possible avenues to get Kavi to respond to me. She assumes I'm talking about this in a spiral-y, sad boy kind of way, but I'm really doing it in a cold, calculating kind of way, to ensure no stone was left unturned. Calls. Texts. All social media. Emails. Nothing. Location sharing turned off. It was all normal 2 weeks ago, until it wasn't. Taken together, this is the ultimate ghosting. Oh well. Time to find another cute rich person to date. Maybe at a Harvard final club?

Rosemary, bless her heart, doesn't buy my "nonchalant" act, which isn't actually an act, but merely pragmatism. So, at her insistence, we go to Uncommon Ice Cream—an iconic ice cream shop with rotating flavors and a suspiciously cheap 6 scoop sampler. She's paying, it's her treat, she says, though she's inhaling most of the ice cream before I can even fucking try all the flavors. Her

steel bracelets dip into the ice cream soup and it takes my all to not shove her face into the puddle of strawberry basil sorbet. I pretend to be more sullen, just so she processes it her way and moves on.

“What?”

“I was saying, it might be a mental health thing.”

“Yeah,” I respond, flatly. “Probably. Anyways. I can’t believe it. Time to focus on me.”

“Yes! Take some time for yourself,” Rosemary responds, relieved.

A few days later, when I’m supposed to be angry, which is the 2nd stage of grief, per my research, I query her for more information. Rosemary, excited that I’m no longer in “denial,” suggests we meet at Life Alive and talk it over. But no, I’m absolutely not paying a premium for fucking vegetarian food. I veto and suggest Cava; she doesn’t object because she’s not allowed to, otherwise she’s a bad friend. I try to extract some information, but she just tells me useless shit about Kavi’s high school drama that she overheard. I don’t care. We walk to Bakey afterwards for pastries.

“Anything more contemporary?” I press.

“The only recent crumb of information I got,” Rosemary shares, after a slice of chocolate babka, “is that he interviewed for some role on the Fraternity-Sorority Council, I’m forgetting. He didn’t get it.”

“Who interviewed him?”

She pauses.

“Someone from some sorority, probably? Probably Claire again, she did it last year. And before you ask, it’s not Katherine. I mean, Egg. It’s not Egg. She’s too lazy,” she says.

“You think Claire did something, then?”

“No! She didn’t bully Kavi into hiding for 2 weeks!” she exclaims.

I nod, sipping on my matcha. I don't believe that Rosemary is telling the full truth, but I do believe that the truth is inconsequential regardless. And I have to let Rosemary get away with the small stuff so that she's honest about more important things. It keeps her little brain happy. We finish our respective drinks in an awkward silence, at which point she breaks the silence with some small talk, leaving the topic of Kavi behind.

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Dr. Lawyer sits across from me at her desk. She's actually a doctor, since she did a PhD, not just a JD. Her grimness cuts through her jowls, though this may be her resting bitch face. She wears a bright blood-red suit that would seduce a vampire to her varicose veins.

"So you understand what's happening here?" she asks, slowly.

I nod. My parents and I have gone over it 6 times already.

Kavi is gone. His parents reported him officially missing. Detectives are now taking voluntary interviews with anyone who might know something about a potential bully, emotional abuser, etc. This includes people he was friends with. Emphasis on the "was."

I snap back to attention and face Dr. Lawyer.

"Yes, I understand. Let's get this over with so...you know, I don't have them down my neck if I go on medical leave," I respond.

Dr. Lawyer—who was made aware of the Condition— nods.

"Most of the statistics suggest that this will resolve within a week at most anyways."

I shrug.

"Just thinking about the edge cases," I say.

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A week after our initial meeting, Dr. Lawyer enters the interrogation—sorry, conference room—and sits beside me. Her arrival disrupts my homeowner fantasy of reimagining this space as

my own. The camcorder adds security. That dusty window in front of me adds a voyeuristic touch. I wonder if they sublet. The furniture is brutalist, in need of paint, bordering hostile: the table in front of me had 4 or 5 clusters of dents, depending on how you count. The fluorescent tube lights above flicker.

“Aaron. Just to recap, you understand what’s happening here?”

I nod. “Yes, we’ll have gone over this 7 times already, including right now.”

“Remember,” she says while slapping a stained legal pad on the table. “If I cut you off, you go mute. No hand gestures, no nothing.”

I nod.

“I need a verbal,” she insists.

“Yes, I promise.”

A few minutes later, 2 detectives—1 man, 1 lady, both in charcoal gray suits—walk in and sit down across from us. Detective 2’s lips crack as she smiles. While the recording devices are set up, the briefcases put away, the laptops plopped down, I bounce my right leg between the concrete floor and the underside of the table. Not periodically, but sporadically.

Detective 1 starts the interview with the basic context. That Kavi is missing, the date, so on and so forth. Dr. Lawyer had warned me of this tactic—torture by boredom. I avoid saying his name out loud, since he’s like Voldemort, in my mind. Uttering it felt like a curse, a reminder of my shitty investment that just vanished into thin air when things got hard.

I dig my nails into my palms.fsd

“Just to be totally explicit,” Detective 2 chimes in, “Would you say that you were friends, as in good friends, with—”

“Yes,” I say, annoyed. “I would.”

“Let’s please keep questions specific and direct,” Dr. Lawyer interjects. “My client’s time is valuable.”

“Our condolences. We were just covering our bases,” Detective 2 says.

“You said previously that you also do chemistry research. Can you speak to what you’re working on, in technical terms?” Detective 1 asks, stifling a yawn.

I glance at Dr. Lawyer, who gestures at me and nods. So I stick to the script and give a high-level summary. I work in the D’Arbelof Lab, optimizing this or that class of chemical reactions that neither Detective knows about, though they do ask me to spell some of it out. I avoid mentioning how I work with methacrylate because they would think about crystal meth, even though meth- is just a prefix meaning “one carbon atom,” like in methane.

When asked about “suspicious activities,” I lie and report nothing.

“Did you work with, um,” Detective 2 says, scrolling through some notes. “Any organometallics in this lab? Or more broadly?”

“What’s the relevance of this?” Dr. Lawyer interjects.

“We just want background on anything that could be a lead,” she says.

“Yes, I did occasionally use organometallics in the lab.”

“We’ll circle back,” Detective 1 says. “Can you describe your other extracurriculars?”

I talk about creative writing—short stories and flash fiction, though, since I don’t have the attention span for a novel. I’m a bit of an indie hyperpop musician—494 monthly listeners. Puzzles, minus sudoku, which got boring after I coded up a sudoku solver for a class project. And so on. They ask generic follow-ups. It’s hard to read their smooth faces, which I swear are Botoxed, but this is quite unlikely given their pitiful salaries.

“Let’s just run through a few more categories of hobbies, and then we’ll get to clubs and be done. Are you into sports, running?” Detective 2 asks, after I had just explained my fondness for taking people’s money in virtual poker.

“Yes,” I say, “sometimes.”

“Around Cambridge, Boston?” she clarifies. “Like, Longfellow Bridge, the Esplanade?”

Dr. Lawyer narrows her eyes.

“Sorry, we’re uncomfortable with this line of questioning. We’re ending this voluntary interview,” Dr. Lawyer says, grabbing her legal pad and waving me up with her left hand.

Against the protests of the Detectives, I silently follow Dr. Lawyer out of the conference room. We exit the station and take an Uber to her sleek office. All glass panes. Once we’re sitting in her office, Dr. Lawyer grills me. No, I’m not withholding any information. No, I’m really not withholding any information.

She drums her hands for a bit before looking up at me.

“Longfellow Bridge, Aaron. That’s where...I’ve heard a few people get hurt there. Accidentally falling into the Charles, but it looks like foul play. If they’re going that direction, I’m very suspicious that this interview is less benign. They’re looking at you more criminally.”

“That’s not public information, is it? No one at MIT has mentioned it...”

“It’s not that public,” she says. “I only heard from...nevermind. Trust me.”

“Oh,” I respond.

Dr. Lawyer interlocks her fingers and leans in.

“I’m going to talk to you and your parents later. But keep your guard up. Don’t respond to anyone if they reach out about this. And tell me immediately if anyone pesters you about this.”

“Sure thing,” I say.

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Dr. Lawyer follows up, confirming she wants me to lay low. My parents agree. I don't really push it, but it's obvious they think of me as some incompetent who will talk his way into jail. They are the adults, the true adults, so they'll handle it, not me. When my parents tell me to "just move on from my friend's absence" in our home kitchen in Worcester, I laugh so loud that people at MIT probably hear it. The actually correct course of action is quite simple: pass the buck to someone else. Have the detectives chase them instead, even if it's a dead end. Then I don't ever have to look back.

I spend my Friday morning hunkering down on the 5th floor of the Student Center, mapping out my next move on their pristine whiteboards. I put a sign outside it that says "interview in progress" so that people leave me alone.

Obviously, I'm going to tell people "I don't know" when they ask me about Kavi—it's vague and keeps my hands clean. But who do I nudge the detectives towards? I spend some time reviewing the list of enemies on my Notes app. I scrawl all their names on the whiteboard. There's a few people on the chopping block, like Jared, but those entities don't know Kavi well enough for me to believably frame them as his bully. I cross them all out. The only other option includes the now-impeached president of our Undergraduate Association, though I think she already dropped out to do social media full-time, which makes her a very dangerous target. I cross her out, too. Rinse and repeat for the other candidates.

This whole process leaves only 1 option left, which is also the funniest: Katherine.

## Chapter 11: Aaron and Katherine

As I stand up to stretch, That Nurse yells out.

“Please stay seated until your infusion is finished! It’s just policy.”

I glare and sit back in the muted gray chemo chair. I need to shut up Infusion Buddy, a frail little thing who sat next to me for “socialization” purposes. For the past hour, I was forced to periodically nod along to her anecdotes, make eye contact, and wonder why the fuck the nurses paired us together. It must be some cost cutting measure by the admin at Mass General.

My strategy to preserve my sanity is to focus in on the wheezing metallic air vent, drowning out the heart monitor *beep beep beeps* and the nurse’s feet dragging and the aggravatingly slow clicks of wheelchairs and random loudspeaker PSAs. When I zone back in, Infusion Buddy is still going on about some nonsense.

I smile, nod, and when no one is looking, grab my takeout bag with my burrito. I might have forgotten my tear stick, but I instead have a little container of pickled jalapenos. I open it, dip my fingers in, take a deep breath, and rub jalapeno juice into my eyes.

Instant tears.

Then, in seconds, I rile up the room with nonsensical sobs from being overwhelmed by everyone and everything and all the noises and by it all converging at once and how I was only 20 and I didn’t deserve what was happening to me—

Then That Nurse moves me. I wave goodbye to Infusion Buddy, who would soon be dead anyways, once her son, who has power of attorney, stops pumping her with chemo. She’s a goner. Once I’m set up with my carboplatin baggy in a private room, I resume my burrito sans jalapeno. It’s too spicy otherwise.

I sit comfortably in the stale bed and survey the room. The color scheme is pathetic—light blue pastel walls with a jet black TV in one of the ceiling corners and either cob webs or web webs in the other. Yet I can’t afford to play interior design critic, not today. I got an extension for my

classes—all I had to do was hop onto a Zoom with MIT Student Support Services, and when they saw me with an IV in, they immediately capitulated. I was pleasantly surprised. All the documents were in order, but they just took me on my word. Weird. I didn't even need to name-drop the Condition.

Wait, kidding, my computational chemistry group project is due soon-ish. And if I used my extension, my partners—I forget their names, not important—would get suspicious. And that risks exposing me. So I work on that first. Once I finish typing my part of the project, I close my computer and start scrolling aimlessly through my Instagram. Apparently no one else is doing anything productive, either. Rosemary is in Montreal, clearing people in poker. Katherine's sorority big is hiking in Maine, but not really, because this was an old picture she had banked from a few weeks ago. Bad Acne Man is...at the club? At 12 pm? I respond to each meaningfully, which drains my phone and social battery. I sigh and put my phone away. Curating friendships and reaping their benefits is a constant game.

Which I'm great at, though I don't like having to do it. Because most people aren't that complex, they are simple, just a simple network of neurons, cells in their brain firing off signals in an emotional, though mostly predictable, way. And those people's neurons, they love being reaffirmed, especially when I tell them that, yes, their feelings are valid, that they should feel bad for themselves, that they should be sad at a situation or angry about something that other people don't understand. With some practice, you can also just engineer groups of people, like a conductor syncing up dozens of obedient musicians.

At some point, I pass out, but That Nurse prods me awake.

"You're done with your infusion," he says with a smile. "We need to watch you for an hour for any reactions, but you're free to leave the clinic. We're going to give you a saline IV bag to wash it all out."

“Done for everything?”

“No, just clinic,” he responds, checking his notes. “You are getting more bloodwork. Definitely grab lunch beforehand. Menu’s taped to the whiteboard.”

“OK. Can you grab me an extra pudding cup?” I ask.

That Nurse hesitates.

“None of my bloodwork is the kind you need to fast for.”

He smiles.

“Sure, I’ll grab that when I’m free. Also, check with the patient coordinator, you got a package today from some family! They apparently dropped it off in person, but had to rush off before they could say hi. Very sweet of them.”

“Oh. Sure.”

That Nurse leaves before I can obtain clarification. I walk to reception and grab my package. There are no names on the generic blue gift bag, which was a genuine surprise because the inner circle of my extended family—in other words, the ones I see annually, since they live in Maine, had already dropped in before and gave me gifts in person, or if they couldn’t, they had flooded my messages with well-wishes and let me vent, pseudo-therapist style. I check my phone again to see if I got a “Surprise!” text of any kind. I hadn’t, but I’m not one to turn down a pity gift, not if someone’s neurons were telling them to give me something. This must be from some of my far-off relatives, the third-cousins-twice-removed-in-laws and others. I rip open the package.

First, I get fuzzy socks that I couldn’t wear because my feet were strangely sensitive after chemo (not in a ticklish way, in a pin-and-needles way.) I put those aside. Second, I picked up a knitting kit, which I think I saw on the clearance aisle at some chain a while back. Still, it’s cute, except that my fingers were always twitchy and restless (even pre-chemo) so I probably wouldn’t have fun with that. I set that aside, on top of the socks. The last gift is an adult coloring book, which

I could technically use, but staying inside lines is boring. I love crossing lines. Anyone who knows me knows that. I put it next to the socks and sewing kit.

I pick up the card, a generic “Get Well Soon!” that was meant for broken arms and legs, not the Condition. I open it up, and I see about a third of the space is filled, which is funny because the people who did sign wrote really tiny, expecting that a bunch of other people would sign. Not the case. I read through them, and they are sweet, but so are snow cones, and I don’t like snow cones. I don’t recognize some of the names at all, and not because of “chemo brain,” I just don’t. Funnily enough, the ones that wrote the most, spewing hope and well wishes were the ones I knew the least. One of my weirdo great-uncles signed the card too, which pissed me off. I closed the card, took a picture, and tossed it into the trash. Yet I post it to the extended family groupchat, expressing thanks because that’s how you maintain your reputation, by thanking people for trying even when they barely did.

I forget that my extended family knew about the Condition, since my parents blabbed. Thankfully, they’re far away, old, and relatively offline. I take comfort in knowing that if I ever need a kidney, bone marrow, or a liver, then I have a lot of prospects I can potentially pick organs from. I’m biracial, so perfect organ matches are harder to come by.

I sit back in my bed once more and theorize about how this card-signing and gift-giving went. My distant aunt probably organized everything, distributing the card to people in a group chat, a big one. Then people got busy with work and breakups and breakdowns and drama, but between all of that, they signed the card with a random message with the communal black pen. Then they pooled together a few bucks for the other gifts and moved on with life. That’s weird. How everyone went through the motions without actually thinking about me. Perhaps it’s easier this way, to churn out cards and gifts in between your busy schedules so that you can feel warm and fuzzy.

I get out of my hospital bed and started pacing in my room, shoes squeaking. Once some blood is flowing, I sit back down and start drafting up a more detailed, heartwarming follow-up thank you text to send. Thank you for the socks, I love the silly design. Thank you for the sewing kit, I love to craft. Thank you for the coloring book, it's so cute. Thank you, thank you, thank you, I say over and over with exclamation points, smiling emojis. I send it and wait. Within minutes, people like the message. They feel validated. Their guilt, alleviated.

“Aaron,” says That Nurse. “You got a guest, is that fine?”

“Sure.”

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My therapist says if I want to, I should.

My therapist says if I want to, I should.

I did not want to, in the traditional sense—in fact, I did not really want therapy in the first place, but my psychiatrist insisted on it if she wrote me a Lexpro script. A verbal promise. And yesterday, I got therapized during an emergency session to go visit Aaron. I regret it now.

Two days ago, Rosemary stole my limoncello. It was in the sorority fridge and labeled. Though maybe I should not be surprised, given the whole egg stealing debacle that I have yet to confront her about, and probably never will. My mom said not too, that it was not worth it, and I relented because those are her eggs. But this was my own shit. I was pissed.

As soon as I noticed, I first screamed into a random musty pillow and then searched for the perpetrator. Within a few minutes, I found her sprawled on a couch on the second floor, clearly incapacitated from the incredibly strong concoction that she just chugged. I inspect the bottle on the floor, near her feet. Nearly empty. She looks so peaceful, sleeping in that same fuckass blue navy leather jacket she takes everywhere. I wanted to slap her and slice her jacket apart with a red hot knife. That limoncello was for Janelle and I.

However, this presented an opportunity. My footsteps woke her up, and she started making small talk, and then the talk turned not-so-small. She barely let me get a word in, and at some point I was so amused that I forgot I was mad at her. Then the conversation shifts to Aaron. I tensed up, visibly—but Rosemary did not recognize me. She was suspicious, though.

“Who are you, again?” she asked, focusing her eyes on me.

“Meryl,” I said, quickly.

Relieved, she spilled it all, or at least most of it: Aaron was going to the hospital for some impatient...something. At Mass General Brigham’s Cancer Institute. For what? What did he have? What was he getting? She would not say. I was so perplexed, but I did not want to ask basic questions that would expose my Meryl persona.

“I’m just...worried,” she said, slowly, profoundly, with a lopsided smile.

I nodded and agreed. I lulled her to sleep and snuck back downstairs with my empty limoncello bottle. Out of curiosity, I took a few sips. It tasted fucking great. The alcohol probably killed any of her disgusting saliva bacteria, a neat bonus.

There is a decent chance that Aaron will just shoo me away as soon as I show up. But at least I will get to see his face as he learns that there is a leaker among his little circle of loser confidants. And who knows? Maybe we can reconcile.

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“He’s ready to see you,” a nurse tells me.

I am led to a private room—how did he get a private room? Anyways, I compose myself for a minute before walking in. He just stares. I start messing with my purple cardigan, buying myself time before I need to use my words to communicate.

“I can leave—” I start.

“No,” he cuts in, matter-of-fact. “Don’t. You’re here for a reason.”

“I just heard about it. Rosemary got drunk and talked about...this. Figured I should visit you at the very least.”

“Okay,” he responds, with surprising neutrality.

Weird how he did not follow up. Maybe he already figured it out. Or he is just putting on a poker face. Wordlessly, I hand him a box of chocolate—not the sappy romantic ones, but the actual good truffle ones in the bougie rectangular boxes. When we were dating, food was our white flag of surrender and resignation, in the classic “immigrant parent silently apologizes with cut fruit” way. He puts his laptop to the side and takes a whiff of the spicy cocoa powder. He admires the gold trimmed box and the fancy bow before gently setting it aside.

“Thanks for remembering our chocolate phase,” he says.

I nod and hover near the door.

“Try some,” I implore.

“Can’t. Mouth sores,” he says, which seems like a lie, though I cannot verify that.

“My bad. There’s more,” I say, reaching into my pants pockets and handing him a letter. “I just wanted to formally apologize for some of the things that I did before. I made some mistakes. A lot of mistakes.”

I walk over to his bedside and place it beside the socks and other crap.

“By mistakes, you mean the radio show you slandered me on? After sharing spit at Roxy’s? Was that worth it to you?”

I flinch.

“Yes, that’s part of it. Most of it. I know I said shitty things, and I didn’t use your name, but still. Also, sorry, did we skip over how you and Jared micro-cheated first?”

He leans forward in the bed, glaring.

“You know it,” I continue, weirdly empowered. “You were holding hands last year all the time being sneaky. And that age gap? It barely passes the half plus seven rule.”

“Half of 24 is 12, and 12 plus 7 is 19. Maybe drop out and redo elementary school. Also, who do you think brought us all that alcohol? For free?”

We stare at each other awkwardly. He finally breaks the silence.

“So is our final conclusion that I needed to be sick in a hospital in a pathetic little gown before you felt comfortable enough to offload your guilt and walk away? Guess what? Not happening.”

I cannot be the one to cry because I am not the one getting a chemotherapy infusion.

“I—yes, I said that. I’m not proud of...all of the stuff in my end,” I manage.

At this point, he is sitting upright, inching to the far side of the bed. I clench my fists, mostly out of stress, partly because I am preparing to throw a metaphorical punch.

“Since you’re here,” he says “I might as well tell you that some detectives might want to reach out to you soon. About a certain someone at MIT who might be...absent.”

I stare back.

“Wait, Kavi? Your boyfriend? I’m a suspect now?”

He grins. I move closer to him, my hands clenching the bed railing. I start hyperventilating.

“Just saying. You should get very familiar with how subpoenas work. Especially for all your shitty little gossip groupchats. I’m sure there’s a lot for them there. Have fun!”

This has to be a bluff. Surely a bluff. Right? I step back towards the lumpy off-white, slightly blue wall. I gradually unclench my hands, since the optics of punching a cancer patient are poor in almost all scenarios.

“You seriously think I made your rich bimbo disappear?”

“I don’t know and I almost don’t care,” he says, crossing his arms. “I’m tired. I’m fucking tired. So have fun. It’s out of my hands now.”

“You’re horrible,” I whisper.

“What’s new?” he says, giggling. “It’s not like you’re recording this or anything. You’re not smart enough to think about things like this.”

“Fuck you,” I say, grabbing my chocolate from the night stand.

“You know, you’re lucky by some standard. You got the good cancer, you know.”

“You don’t know the first thing. Get out!” he yells.

“Whatever. You’re going to Hell!”

“Fine! See you there!”

The patients and nurses outside are stunned silent. And before anyone asks any questions, I fast-walk, jog, then run out of there. I am going to need a lot more limoncello.